Abstract

ECHOES OF ANTIGONE IN CONTEMPORARY WOMEN'S WRITING IN FRENCH
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From The Ashes of Love : Defying Antigone in Christine Angot's *La Peur du lendemain*

Par Valérie Lebrun (Université du Québec à Montréal/CCWW-IMLR)

Antigone is exhausted. More than two millennia have passed since she looped death around her neck, and yet, she is still there, trapped in rewritings which create others in her image. Of course, there is a vanishing point in her story which calls for and compels this repetition – a tragic point around which certain literary works gravitate, not only featuring voices of protest but also – by means of soliloquy – blurring the attraction of love on the necessity of writing. In France, we must indeed refer to the rich and complex corpus of Hélène Cixous, Marguerite Duras and Camille Laurens.

This paper does not focus primarily on the figure of Antigone herself. Rather, it searches for a position *after* her, relative not so much to her legacy but to the aftermath of a love which drives and overtakes those women who, in their writing, resist the ease of compromise. It is in this way that I approach *La Peur du lendemain* by Christine Angot, herself an emblematic figure of a literary imaginary that is at once tragic and contemporary.

However, my intention is not to impose the full weight of Antigone on Angot's narrator. Rather, I will show how Angot's singular work responds to Antigone's gesture by exceeding it, rendering the meeting between love and death not a horizon but rather an intrinsic condition of the project of writing. Finally, I will briefly introduce the notion of *filles d'Antigone* which is at the centre of my research and which offers the possibility of rethinking differently the structure of a tragic filiation that is at the heart of contemporary women's writing in French.

I'm not going to take stock of rewritings of Antigone today. I won't present her story, or its context, or even offer a summary. I'm not going to say who Antigone is or name her sister and brothers. I won't say she is Queen Jocasta's daughter and even less that she is Œdipus's daughter. I won't talk about incest. And I won't take up a position in regard to her choices, whether she was right or wrong. No I won't attempt to overturn history and try to imagine what could have been if…

If Antigone had accepted at the last moment to ally herself with her sister. If she'd compromised. If she'd run away, or worst, married Haemon. If she'd waited a few more minutes before tying her scarf too tightly around her neck. Or if Antigone had simply never existed.

In fact, let's forget everything about Antigone. We need to start over. Start again from where the thread might have been cut. Not at the point where Antigone ceased to speak but rather at the moment when she was about to do so for the very first time.

When there was nothing other than the fear that everything could stop once and for all.

Christine Angot writes in *The Fear of Tomorrow*[1] that *"*I'm not seeking to know myself, and I don't see the point. What I do know about, however, is the functioning of violence." (*FT*, 71) Angot asks *how to do* things in writing: "How to explain ? How to tell? How to tell *you*?" (*FT*, 73) Right away, she observes and positions herself: "The functioning of violence, yes, I know it well, and my position within it, yes, I know it well, the position I occupy is quite particular." (FT, 71)

Like in a minefield, Angot's text brings up questions to confine the traps and vanishing points of writing. That is to say that the questions she repeats, as opposed to the answers that "often come up months later" (FT, 82), always seek to destabilize the reading. Through monologues and detours from one book to another — and sometimes by going back and forth from one time to another — Angot's writing might appear to oppose itself to any order that's not essentially its own. However, if you look closer at it, you can see it's not quite the case.

While certainly contesting, Angot's voice doesn't seek a truth that would simply oppose itself. It rather tends to shed light on doubts and uncertainties that threaten the balance between right and wrong, between good and bad or foremost, between reality and fiction. That is to say, if for Angot "truth is always in sentences" (FT, 112), one must be ready as a reader to walk with her "the paths that don't appear logical at first" (FT, 74) because in the end, truth for Angot is never self-evident. Instead, it relies on the power of

[1] From now on, references to this novel will appear in the text as follow: (*FT*, page)

imagination, of the ability to reinvent language and of course to play with the sweet and sour backhand of loving words. Is she not the one who claims that "there is only one erotic thing: lying" (FT, 90)?

Angot asks questions for which she does not expect answers. Similarly to Antigone, she anticipates, she goes before the law. While pressured by a certain urgency, she knows to resist. Thus, if one says of her work that it spares no one — and especially not herself — should we not see that Angot's absolute resistance operates exactly where narration manages to maintain its constant control over the rhythm of reading? That is to say that in spite of all mechanisms that contribute to the drive, impulse, force of narration and allow the narrative voice to constantly elevate itself… Angot never lets go.

Like Antigone who dares to ask the King not only if he wanted more than her death, but why he was taking so long to kill her in the first place, Christine Angot writes that "you must never, ever, ever, relax your attention." (FT, 105) That's why I want to consider this grip on control with the used words of passion and desire rather than those of tenacity or madness: to see how, in the porous space that links them together, words of love are reinvented. And to see how, on a greater scale, tragic language resurfaces with girls who take upon literature to fight for love… and against it.

There have been countless discussions about Antigone's insanity, or at the very least, of an excessiveness that has been understood and analysed as hysteria. Few people

have been interested in what escapes from her insanity. In other words, of what ended up remaining of Antigone's death… far beyond her gesture… far beyond transgression and above all… far beyond her self-sacrifice. I am especially referring to death as a scar in feminine language in which love is both an object and a subject. In *The Fear of Tomorrow*, Angot talks about her « point de départ »… her point of departure. She writes: "I'm returning to my point of departure. This fear precedes incest, it comes much earlier." (FT, 78) Then yes. There is obviously the power of Antigone's gesture… her conviction… her urgency… her paradox… a rupture with one hand, and some tragic alliance on the other, but above all there is death everywhere. In that case, one might talk of the pure fulfillment of a tragic fate.

But it seems relevant to me to question and refuse tragedy as an answer — and mostly as a final purpose — for every girl who choses to raise her voice to say *no*. I mean it for Angot but also for other writers who, like Angot, do not only pervert tragic imagination but who also blurred both its origin and its horizon through the establishment of *another* romantic love apparatus. These writers I call « les filles d'Antigone » — *Antigone's girls* and not daughters — because they not only inscribe themselves within this impossible filiation but also because they investigate what the use of tragic imagination achieves when it imposes itself in writing not as an answer in the storyline… but as the ultimate fate or promise for female characters in literature as a whole.

Christine Angot writes: "I often hear people say : I've had enough of incest, well I'll stop. My subject is and has always been love anyway. Always." (FT, 95) Thus, I believe that it is exactly where we should look — in the blind spot of tragedy. It's precisely there that Angot understands love through what cannot be explained: through what remains unanswered or what defies laws but like death, happens anyways, every time. But let's be clear. I don't mean it as some despite-myself-sadness but rather as some against-all-odds conviction and desire.

This is how I feel about Christine Angot's writing, especially in *The Fear of Tomorrow*. There's a battle with language (and not a struggle) when for instance she writes that she "tries to reverse the process of violence" (FT, 82) and then, when she says that she "does not ask for our mercy but demands that we recognize our instinct to kill." (FT, 81) Or even more when she specifies that finally "it is the opposite that she is asking." (FT, 81) As if the other way from violence or death was nothing less but the way of love.

However, to talk of reversal in Angot's texts is as clumsy as envisioning a turnaround in Antigone's voice or gesture. In both cases, there is a final confrontation… an impossibility to ever go back. In fact, there is this recognition of what gives an impulse to tragedy as well as a direction and maybe… but not really… some kind of meaning.

In the voice of tragic girls, this sort of finality might be understood as *already there*: as fateful or at least spectral like the fear or anxiety that defines the beginning of every love

story. In light of a certain love imagination and of Angot and Antigone's gestures — whether it leads to writing or burial – is revealed a predilection for risk taking.

I'm talking about the risk of being scared — of scaring others — but without ever letting fear take the lead. It is especially this predilection for risk that takes root both for Angot and for Antigone on their position "on tightrope, on a pivot, between love and hate." Because as Angot puts it herself: "It's good to be right on there [on this right spot] to talk about it." (FT, 89)

Thus, whether it's good or bad doesn't really matter. For Angot, the mere idea of *talking about it* always aims further. As a tactic, it seeks to do everything and to say everything but always with the conviction of doing it all and saying it all. Otherwise, as Angot wonders numerous times in almost every text: « À quoi ça sert? »… What's the purpose? What's the purpose of leaving things half-expressed? Why whisper and ponder one's words when one of the greatest threats to literature is to leave things silent? Why should one write if it's not to reveal the constant threat that everything could suddenly cease before it can actually start for good? What's the point to continue if it's not to face the fear of never finding "anything again anymore" (FT, 74)?

In the second part of *The Fear of Tomorrow*, after addressing her "fear of being killed" and talking about writing as the only means she found to protect herself, Christine Angot cuts it: "Now, the second step. Love." (FT, 87) The manner in which she gets there — half way between a sigh and will as if her passage to love was as painful as it was impossible to avoid — is quite eloquent. Such a posture enables reflection not only on the position of love in Angot's work but most importantly on how love as an event condemned to be repeated (as well of its fears and recurrent failures) gives direction to her writing.

Furthermore in her essay entitled « Sujet: l'amour » published in 1999 in a French magazine called *L'Infini*, Christine Angot writes: "The love story is a retrospective of my own films, with names, titles, voices, phone calls, anecdotes […] not forgetting the repressed, the unauthorized dreams, all the impossible loves that we try not to try out." She then specifies that "in romantic films, it is always the dreamed presences that come almost always at the right moment in almost dreamed conditions, almost, in ideal conditions, almost." In doing so with her own writing, Angot reaches this breaking point where one might as well say for tragedies: "It ends terribly but… before that… it was great."[2]

This idea of tragic love is not new. All of the images that love reveals are not either. In fact, what can be said of the words that tell its beginning and its end? The words we all use at some point to cry it… invent it… to praise it or on the contrary to perform its autopsy, erect a mausoleum or dig its tomb always deeper? These words are without a

[2] Christine Angot, « Sujet : l'amour », Revue *L'Infini*, no 68, Winter 1999, pp. 25-29.

doubt even less so. Thus, it is around this point that *mes filles d'Antigone* meet because all of this doesn't matter. It doesn't matter because love stories never answer to the logic of newness, nor to the strategy of originality. Yes… it might be a new woman. Another man. Their voices might be different though the colour of their hair or eyes isn't always… but love stories are made in such a way that they make it seem as if they are always new. As if the beginning of love would always bonds with the refusal and the impossibility of some kind of *déjà-vu*…

In the foreground, we have the narrator of *The Fear of Tomorrow* who asks: "Why write if not in the name of love?" (FT, 90) Behind her as an echo there is Antigone lined up with those who love and not those who hate as she claims it in Sophocle's play. While it is a common claim to say that the line between love and hate is permeable, I would argue that in the work of Angot frontiers are meant to be displaced… pushed back… or even to be doubled… superimposed in order to make writing a space of vertigo.

This being said — contrarily to Antigone — Christine Angot as a narrator and a writer rejects limits circumscribed by family affiliation: "I will never say my family. Why not join a political party while I'm at it, why not join the National Front, while I'm at it, no, so I won't join a family either, we must be consistent." (FT, 77) Angot supports this idea that "my own nest, I try, is the fortification of writing, I try. It arouses. It's perverse. It makes some people crave for me." (FT, 93)

The distance imposed by both Antigone and Angot, each in their own way – by imposing with their hands their respective limits – answers a moving and ambivalent force: that of proximity. For Angot, proximity is the weak point of writing:

> The mere gesture of writing, the fact that my hand writes already poses a death threat to my writing hand, a violent death threat, sought-after, that writes, the flesh even in the process of writing, the words written, already that in itself it's already food, that I'm not responsible for, that I do not seek at all, it all happens automatically as soon as my hand writes. (FT, 93)

Angot goes on: "As soon as you see my picture, it's evident that I'm a target, a little rabbit. That we sometimes mistake for a vampire, a devourer, while I'm actually a target with a defensive strategy." (FT, 93) This long excerpt seems to communicate clearly how proximity is organized, thought and laid out in Angot's work. It's a proximity that never truly exists but that rather translates to the rhythm of her contradictions the constant movement, shift and putting things in perspective that injects in language a tragic and loving impulse.

Before concluding, it's absolutely necessary to go back to the excerpt of *The Fear of Tomorrow* in which Christine, the narrator, meets Marie-Christine, her psychologist friend. It seems to me that it is in this exact moment that literally everything falls into place. Angot writes: "Conversation is dry, but we must continue." (FT, 86) She tells Marie-Christine. She "tells her everything." The "fear that it ceases, the fear to be killed — if all the guys in the world held hands — it'd be disastrous." (FT, 76) And at the very end, while the narrator fears the lack of answers or worse, "a comment such as: interesting, or

fantastical, but of course, of course", Marie-Christine admits in an unexpected manner "the instinct to kill that there has always been in her family." Straight away, Angot writes: "For me, the fear of being killed, for her the instinct to kill, we were near the bone. Everyone in position." (FT, 87)

Those who are familiar with most of Angot's books will understand that Marie-Christine's influence as a character exceeds the expected neutrality of a psychologist. In Angot's work, especially in *L'Inceste*, Marie-Christine does not merely receive or welcome the other's words. She makes the reverse heard — as an echo — or even as a double. She provokes just like Antigone the truth by threatening a certain balance. Thus, instead of being a simple mirror facing the other, she is a shard in the reflection: she becomes a breach in the narration that allows the reader to see the blind spot of the tragedy. Angot even writes that she "would have been unable to drop by Marie-Christine's place to just say hi after understanding she was herself a target." (FT, 86) Despite the violent struggle she's dealing with, there is obviously in Angot's text an unexpected and unpredictable expectation towards the other: that of the "good gesture" instead of the right answer — as she writes — through which "a moment of rest" (FT, 98) might happen. This is why I think that despite her use of monologue, Angot's narrative is never truly sealed. Her *defensive strategy* holds precisely because she knows that "eroticism — just like love — is a gesture of peace with weapons within reach" (FT, 104) and even more that "what is erotic is someone who — through a simple gesture — is the symbol of everything you didn't want, and thus the symbol of all the obstacles you jumped over to meet them." (FT, 109)

The Fear of Tomorrow finds its balance on the horizon of affinity between the self and the other rather than on an alliance that would reveal a closing, an imprisonment or a pact between two characters. If Christine Angot writes that "the event, is perhaps, perhaps, I say perhaps, I don't know, I don't know love, is perhaps when it is said, such an event pleases me, such an event and the war is over", she adds right away that with "such an event, the horizon is torn." (FT, 104) It seems to me that what is revealed through the movement and the openness that is implied in her project – and in Antigone's gesture as well – is always first and foremost an acceptance of violence and the potential event of rupture that love as an event provokes. It is precisely an acceptance of this risk: that after the event of love, nothing will ever be the same, or at least it won't be like it used to be before. Rather, it seems to me that it is exactly this threat that nourishes the loving language — or the words of love — of these tragic girls I call *les filles d'Antigone*. To me, this violent and passionate language defies the authority of Antigone's death over protesting voice of girls in literature but mostly, it allows to think their excessiveness beyond a certain kind of madness.

To conclude, I will remind you that to justify her decision to honour the dead body of her brother, Antigone explains to the King that if it had been her husband, she would have been allowed to remarry: that if it had been the dead body of her son, it would have been just as conceivable to give birth to another baby. But with both of her parents dead, it remained impossible for her to avoid her brother's death. Therefore, death as an entrave or

even an obstruction forces Antigone to face something absolute about true love: something that is born out of grief and sorrow but that exceeds her own pain.

Her helplessness before the impossibility of repeating, starting over and reinventing is ultimately what kills Antigone. In fact, the death of her brother doesn't obstruct reality. It causes a rupture in Antigone's conception of love as a truth. Her gesture, while refusing anyone's help, doesn't simply testify of her revolt and her pain of losing a loved one. Through it, Antigone is making an effort to reach a point of no return and seal, once and for all, the definitive and tragic end of a love story.

Angot — like Antigone — refuses to compromise. However, unlike Antigone, Angot makes an effort to talk about the fears, the restlessness, the detours, the contradictions, the punches, the failures, the reverses and the impulse that her writing hand relentlessly has to confront while it hangs on to love. It seems to me that while this grip is certainly evident in *The Fear of Tomorrow*, there is with Angot, as well as for most of the body of work that I am studying, the possibility of a deviation. That is to say, in spite of the fact that at the very end of *The Fear of Tomorrow,* Angot mentions her fear "that love leaves, the fear that once gone, it never comes back. The fear of not feeling it, of never feeling it again, the fear of not feeling at all anymore" (FT, 96), she quotes someone else to "say something banal, however in such concrete terms that this time finally, there won't be any doubts, none, no doubt, none, not the least." (FT, 112) For Angot, it is through the

loving words of another that the truth can finally occur. She even asks: "Why do I cite this sentence among so many, in so many love letters in the world?"

> Because, as she explains, there is — in New York or elsewhere, it doesn't matter, but bring me with you. Because there is: why is this significant. It had to be written anyway. It had to come out of the hand, this, anyway. It had to be felt in the heart and brought out by the hand. There had to be love in the heart to bring these two words out by the hand.

It is precisely there that Angot exceeds Antigone's gesture: in this indefinite fissure that her writing digs and extends until death isn't the one and only horizon. A fissure that does not only capture death as a bound but as a renewed *dispositif* through which contemporary literature could finally displace the tragic destiny of girls who decide to speak and fight in the name of love.