

Christine Angot's *autofictions*: literature and/or reality?

From her very first novel, *Vu du ciel*, which was published in 1990, Christine Angot has established herself firmly as a writer who has made it her mission to explore and expose relentlessly the thin line between reality and fiction.¹ The last quarter of the twentieth century, in French literature, will probably be remembered, among other things, as the period in which a new genre – that of *autofiction* – emerged and flourished. It has become a privileged mode of writing for many writers who have adopted and adapted it to very different and personal poetic visions and approaches to writing. Many literary theorists have long claimed that the meeting point between fiction and autobiography, which so strongly shapes contemporary self-representational aesthetics, is a fundamental area of women's writing. Christine Angot's works, however, have seldom been labelled or viewed in these terms by the French literary establishment. Instead critics have spent much time focusing upon what they see as the very 'poor' and pale use of the imaginary in her texts, often in sharp contrast to the convoluted and complex formal structures of the texts themselves. Indicative of this tendency is the way in which Pierre Marcelle concludes his review of *Sujet Angot* in *Libération*:²

S'il y a quelque chose qui trouble, dans *Sujet Angot*, c'est la complexité de l'élaboration formelle au service d'une 'histoire' si autobiographique. Tant d'imagination au service de si peu d'imagination en quelque sorte.³

(If there is something puzzling about *Sujet Angot*, it is the complexity of the formal elaboration employed for such an autobiographical 'story'. So much imagination serving so little imagination, in a way.)

Complexity of formal elaboration is indeed a trademark of many of Angot's works, and the imaginary counterpart is both schematic and repetitive:

Angot writes about nothing but herself. She repeatedly makes allusions to incest, to the horror of giving birth, and to the difficulties encountered by a character who is a writer, a mother and a lover. Angot's work also consistently reveals the tensions between her public life and her need for privacy: her personal life, it would seem, is made bearable only by being exposed to the public. And yet all these highly personal concerns are presented in her texts as fictional. Angot claims that the Christine we read about is a character and not a real person, and moreover that this character/narrator is prone to telling lies. It is precisely this tension between subject matter that seems to be autobiographical and the element of doubt with which Angot confuses her reader that makes her use of *autofiction* both provocative and enriching. For Angot this is the very function of literature:

Les écrivains ne devraient jamais cesser d'écrire leur vie en fait. Avec le doute qui plane. Sur la vérité. Que Proust ait créé cette Albertine, c'est génial, car on se demande tout le temps. Prendre le temps de dormir et de revivre. Mais que l'écriture soit vraiment celle de la vie. Paisible, fictive, peut-être, mais qu'elle ne lâche jamais ce fil par lequel vous pouvez voir la vie. Venir, vibrer. Même une vie ratée. Le corps en train de vibrer, voilà ce qu'il faudrait raconter. Jusqu'à ce que l'écriture elle-même soit cette vie.⁴

(Writers should in fact never stop writing about their lives. With a hovering doubt. As to the truth. Proust created Albertine and it is brilliant because one always wonders. Taking time to sleep and to live again. But writing must be the writing of life. Peaceful, fictitious, maybe, but it must never let go of the thread which allows you to see life. Surfacing, vibrating. Even a rotten life. The body living, vibrating, this is what must be told. Until writing itself becomes this life.)

Let us take a detailed look at how, since the early 1990s, Angot has indeed engineered her writing 'to become life itself'. She started writing in the mid 1980s and, after many rejections, published what was to become her first novel, *Vu du ciel*, in 1990. Since then she has published prolifically, and there has been a direct correlation between her increased notoriety and her now disarmingly regular annual output. Angot's corpus also presents a number of intriguing characteristics. First, she establishes a strong sense of continuity between each text. This is most apparent in her treatment of subject matter. All of her texts, with the exception of her second novel, *Not to be* (1991), revolve obsessively around a narrator/writer called Christine Angot.⁵ This continuity between texts is temporal also: each focuses on the Christine Angot character at a given time in her life, which corresponds

exactly to the temporality of the text itself and to the gaps between texts. The element of continuity is further emphasised by the metatextual dimension of each text and by numerous references made to previously published texts. This is most striking in *Quitter la ville*, which focuses on Angot's life after the publication of *L'Inceste* and offers the writer's response to its reception.⁶

A second characteristic of Angot's work is the way in which it deals with and blurs the notion of established genres. Labels such as 'roman' (novel) or 'théâtre' (theatre) preface some of her texts, but they may disappear in later editions.⁷ At times the presence or absence of such labels may seem inappropriate. *Léonore, toujours*, for instance, proclaims itself a 'roman' despite the fact that not only is it presented as a diary but also the textual writer/narrator 'Christine' herself criticises the novelistic genre.⁸ *Vu du ciel* and *Not to be* could both be categorised as 'théâtre'; while, from *L'Inceste*, Angot's texts carry no generic appellation at all. Angot's intriguing use of such generic categorisation is clearly significant. In a sense her texts have more in common with one another than with the pragmatics of any of the genres with which she labels them. The theatrical element is present in all of them, through the *mise en scène* (staging) of 'Christine' the protagonist, through the language which is always strongly vocal and through the structure of the texts which is often close to that of a stream of consciousness. Angot's writing displays a directness, a sense of urgency and a corporeal vocalicity which suggest that it is eminently transferable to the stage. Similarly, although perhaps on more slippery grounds, one could argue that all of her texts do share characteristics that are conventionally attached to the novel. More important than such similarities, however, is that Angot clearly invites us to rethink these categories that are so central to notions of literature.

A third important characteristic of Angot's corpus, which is closely related to the question of genre, is the way in which she makes use of fiction. The fictionality of her first two texts is evident. *Vu du ciel* is a rather curious text which juxtaposes segments narrated by 'Christine' (who is not yet a writer but a law student in Reims) and others narrated by Severine Nivet, a child who, in real life, was raped and murdered in Reims and who, in Angot's novel, becomes a guardian angel. *Not to be*, the only text from which 'Christine' is totally absent, is the delirious first-person monologue of a man lying prostrate on a hospital bed. Angot's third 'novel', *Léonore, toujours*, is a key text which marks a step away from the type of fictional writing employed thus far. This text is the diary of 'Christine', a writer who

says she can no longer write since giving birth to her baby daughter Léonore. The banal but horrifically sudden death of Léonore at the end of *Léonore, toujours* (the baby falls off a chair) defies belief, and shocks, given the apparently autobiographical nature of this text. Subsequently, the death is affirmed to be fiction as future texts make reference to Léonore growing up. From this point on, we cannot tell whether 'Christine', the protagonist, of Angot's texts is a fictional or 'real life' entity.

After *Léonore, toujours*, Angot's texts could be described as *autofictions* in which the insistence on the fictional element is purely metatextual and by means of which she cultivates a diffuse element of doubt around the apparently autobiographical events narrated. Indeed, the distinction between literature and life is one which Angot repeatedly sets out to undermine. Her texts are resolutely set against a backdrop of media activity from which writing cannot be sheltered.⁹ One of the great merits of Angot's works is the way they question, albeit indirectly, the nature of literature in an age in which intimacy, privacy and personal histories are so relentlessly mediated and exploited, and real lives are packaged, performed and televised for a mass audience.

In order to do justice to Angot's works, and to appreciate the web she weaves between life, truth and literature, it is important not to overlook the particular modalities of a textual production that is an autobiographical quest and, at the same time, plays with fiction. Referring to Angot's texts as *autofiction* is problematic, however, and the author herself would strongly refute such a label. My reason for describing her works in this generic way is that this permits a discussion of her disruption of, and formal literary experimentation with, the autobiographical pact as defined by Philippe Lejeune, as well as enabling her literary production to be addressed from the perspective of remodelling self-representational aesthetics.¹⁰ But what exactly is *autofiction*? What is at stake behind this term and how does it illuminate Angot's work?

The term *autofiction* first appeared in 1977 on the back cover of *Fils* by Serge Doubrovsky. It is no coincidence that this occurred around the time when Lejeune's theories of autobiography were in full bloom and beginning to be disseminated. *Autofiction*, for Doubrovsky, is a form of writing in which autobiographical and fictional elements are intertwined in a creative activity linked to psychoanalytical experience. *Autofiction* is now often used to refer to texts which, like Angot's works, hover somewhere between autobiography and fiction, although the definition of the term remains critically problematic. Interestingly, the issues at stake are precisely those which form

the core of Angot's literary production; that is, the parameters of the relationship between life, truth and fiction within literature.

The debate around the term *autofiction* has arisen primarily because the parameters within which it operates are articulated around the antithetical opposition of reality–truth versus fiction on the one hand, and yet, on the other, are extratextual. To define *autofiction* as either a fictional autobiography or as the first-person narration of events belonging to the fictional life of an author/character who shares a name with the author, clearly leads to difficulties. Doubrovsky's definition is a common starting point, yet it would seem to imply, then, that almost all first-person narratives are *autofictions*, including Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, Camus's *L'Etranger* and even Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Attempts to clarify the term according to the relative fictionality of the text are unhelpful, and efforts to define the truthfulness of *autofictions* in relation to autobiography, or their fictionality in relation to first-person narratives, are bound to produce convenient results or redundant conclusions. As Michael Riffaterre has shown in *Fictional Truth*, notions of truth and fictionality in literature are extremely complex and at times highly paradoxical.¹¹ Riffaterre underlines how in many narratives the notion of truth – that is, verisimilitude, which is nothing but a linguistic perception – is in fact produced by the very mechanisms of fictionality. Paul John Eakin also reminds us that, when talking about autobiography, what we call fact and fiction are 'rather slippery variables in an intricate process of self discovery'.¹² The main problem with many definitions of *autofiction* is that they dispense with the literary process in their efforts to define a genre on the basis of the truthfulness of biographical information which lies outside the text. This is precisely a mode of reading which Angot's use of *autofiction* teases and ridicules.

If it is to be considered a genre, *autofiction* must rely on formal distinctions found within the text or have a grammar of its own which determines the particular modalities of its reading. While much of the argument among critics revolves around which of these two alternatives is most appropriate, many seem to have forgotten the difficulty with which previous generations of critics arrived at a distinction between autobiography and first-person narrative. Thus the definition of *autofiction* which strikes me as most promising is that put forward by the author Marie Darrieussecq, who makes a pragmatic distinction between first-person narrative, third-person narrative and autobiography. In an essay ironically entitled '*L'autofiction, un genre pas sérieux*', Darrieussecq comes to the conclusion that, unlike

third-person narrative which represents a double act of illocution – one being an assertion of the type ‘I decree fictionally that. . .’, and the other being a request of the type ‘imagine that. . .’ – and unlike first-person narratives which are simple acts of illocution in which the assertion is not accompanied by any request – first-person narratives do not in anyway attempt to declare or disguise their fictionality – and again unlike autobiographies, which are double acts of illocution differing from third-person narratives in that the request that they entail could be formulated as ‘believe me when I say that’ (here we find the notion of the ‘autobiographical pact’ formulated by Lejeune), *autofictions* present a double act of illocution which is itself double. It is a double request which could be formulated as both ‘believe me when I say. . .’ *and*, at the same time, ‘don’t believe me when I say. . .’.¹³ *Autofiction* is fundamentally and willingly ambiguous in that it borrows discursive strategies from first-person narrative and autobiography at the same time.

Autofictions never allow the reader to identify the real from the fictional at the level of enunciation. Angot makes extensive use of this impossibility in her writing: the reader can never really know whether the incest story that weaves through her œuvre is true, or whether Leonore really does exist and, if she does, whether she lives or dies. The advantage of Darrieussecq’s definition is that it allows a distinction between *autofiction* as a hybrid and in-between genre, and, on the one hand, autobiographies containing elements of fiction and, on the other hand, first-person narratives containing autobiographical elements. Thus *autofiction* acquires an autonomous status which is free from any convoluted process of verification with external facts and which does clearly indicate a specific – uncertain – mode of reading.

The definition of *autofiction* in terms of willed ambiguity is useful as a means of designating a corpus of texts, and it is most suited to Angot’s works, but are we in fact dealing with a genre as such? *Autofictions* are perhaps more of a mode than a genre, in the way and for reasons that are not dissimilar to those that led Todorov, and many others in his wake, to make use of the term in relation to the fantastic.¹⁴ In both cases the defining element is pragmatic: in the fantastic it has to do with hesitation as a mode of reading; in the case of *autofiction* it also has to do, as we have seen, with a degree of undecidability. Both the fantastic and *autofiction* function as border or frontier genres which borrow elements from other related genres, and *autofictions* are not necessarily limited to borrowings from autobiography. Indeed, other confessional and intimate modes of writing

may equally be employed, as is the case in Angot's works: diaries, letters, monologues, streams of consciousness. *Autofictions* are also potentially subversive in a similar way to fantastic literature, as Rosemary Jackson identifies.¹⁵ Darrieussecq outlines an important feature of this subversive element: 'L'important est de constater à quel point l'*autofiction* met en cause la pratique "naïve" de l'autobiographie, en avertissant que l'écriture factuelle à la première personne ne saurait se garder de la fiction' (p. 379) (The important thing to note here is that *autofiction* undermines a 'naïve' practice of autobiography as it reminds us that factual first-person writing cannot do away with fiction). It is in this sense that to define *autofiction* and to identify texts as such can be legitimate and useful. Whether or not autofictional texts should be categorised as '*autofiction*' or as 'novel' is of little consequence. What is important is that, by not being labelled autobiographies and yet resembling them, they play upon and disrupt the 'autobiographical pact'.

Of course, the disruption of autobiography's pact with the reader is not new. It rests upon an established tradition both within autobiographical writing and within the philosophical and critical sphere, a fact which has been brought to the fore and analysed by many critics and which has been the focal point of much of the debate surrounding autobiography after Lejeune. As Paul John Eakin notes in *Fictions in Autobiography*: 'the self that is at the centre of all autobiographical narrative is necessarily a fictive structure' (p. 25). Indeed, the genealogy of *autofiction* is broad and well documented: from the crisis of the notion of selfhood in modern times, to notions of the death of the subject and the author, to postmodern claims of absence and privation – all of which are paralleled by the loss of confidence in the referential power of language to tell the crumbling reality of the self in a text.

Whichever way one chooses to trace the fact that writing an autobiography can no longer be a naïve practice, it is undeniable that *autofiction* has grown in reaction to this and as a resilient attempt to deal with notions of self and subjectivity in writing in an age of multiple crisis. There is, however, one genealogical approach to *autofiction* which calls for a more detailed analysis here, since it is highly relevant to the works of Angot: namely the feminist claim that women's writings, along with the writings of other previously silenced minority groups, have been greatly influential in breaking down and reshaping the practice of writing autobiography. In her introductory essay to *Redefining Autobiography in Twentieth-Century Women's Fiction*, Janice Morgan argues that the notion of the death of the

subject/author, which has condemned autobiography to a short life, is the product of the arrogance of the white, male, 'happy few' and that it has been seriously challenged by the reshaping of the body politic through discourses of civil rights, feminism and post-colonialism which have reclaimed the importance of the question 'who am I?'.¹⁶ What is more, many of the features of contemporary self-representational poetics – fragmentation, discontinuity, duality and self-conscious textuality – have been a recurrent feature of women's autobiographical writings for quite some time. Here both the postulation of female selfhood as fundamentally relational – 'concerned with various levels and intensities of connection *to* rather than separation *from*' (p. 15) – and the sense of the woman writer as plural – wife, mother, writer, divided by a conflict between private and public roles – are of particular importance in determining an entry into discourse which 'bears the peculiar, conflicting stresses of this dual experience' (p. 15). Many of these elements are fundamental to contemporary French *autofictions* and, in particular, to the way in which Angot makes use of the zone between autobiography and fiction. They also account for the potential of the intricate mechanisms at work within *autofictions*, as Angot constantly plays with, challenges, tests and wilfully confuses the reader with her insistence on the notion of fictionality.

Angot's *L'Inceste* and *Quitter la ville* deal with recognisable elements from the life and work of the author in a far more direct manner than her earlier work. It is as though she has become the protagonist of a TV show of her daily life. The early use of fiction seems to have been a necessary step towards a more freely autobiographical discourse and more liberated use of the first-person pronoun, as the incest narrative has proliferated. The wall between fiction and reality is then perhaps more of an artist's looking glass than a formal opaque division – a looking-glass which may be necessary as a means of finding a voice in the face of trauma.

The publication of *Normalement* followed by *La Peur du lendemain* in 2001 as the text following *Quitter la ville* in itself is not indicative of a new direction in Angot's writing, since both texts were written and previously published before *Quitter la ville*. Rather, they must be considered as indicative of a publishing decision. However, although they undeniably disrupt the autofictional corpus that had come to a climax with *Quitter la ville*, they may not signal the end of it as such. *Normalement* is a fragmented and poetic expression of pain and anger with strong echoes of Marguerite Duras. It was written originally for the theatre under the title *Arrête, arrêtons, arrêtez*. The performance Angot has so relentlessly constructed

throughout her œuvre comes to an abrupt end as she evokes time and again 'la souffrance de ne pas être entendu' (p. 11) (the pain of not being heard (or understood)). She seems to be withdrawing from the game:

Pardon? J'ai bien entendu? J'ai cru entendre pourquoi. J'ai cru entendre 'c'est autobiographique ou quoi?' Si on te demande, tu diras que tu sais pas. Qu'est-ce que c'est que cette manie? Il en va d'un artiste et de sa vie privée comme d'une accouchée et de son enfant. Le lien entre les deux est secret. Vous pouvez regarder l'enfant, mais ne soulevez pas la chemise de sa mère pour voir si elle est tachée de sang. Qu'est-ce qu'on peut imaginer de plus indélicat? Qu'est-ce que c'est que ça? (pp. 31–2)

(Excuse me? Have I heard correctly? I thought I heard why. I thought I heard 'is it autobiographical or what?'. If they ask you, you'll say you don't know. What is this obsession? An artist and her private life are like a woman and her newly born child. The link between them is secret. You can look at the child, but don't lift the mother's gown to see if she is blood-stained. Could you imagine anything more offensive? What is this?)

Normalement evokes a theme which is already present in many of Angot's texts and which, given their nature, can seem highly paradoxical: the need for privacy, the need for intimacy. This writer who relentlessly exposes herself to her reader – revealing the most intimate details of her life, teasing the reader with her crudest fantasies – is also a writer who repeatedly asks to be left alone and not to be judged while claiming not to be understood and not wanting to be understood. Angot is constantly flaunting her secrets while endeavouring to protect them, at once inviting and forbidding the reader to lift the gown and see the blood. This dynamic is most striking in a text such as *Interview* which juxtaposes a harrowing interrogation by a journalist who is voraciously curious about the most gruesome details of the writer's private life with pages narrating the birth of Léonore. The text skilfully places the reader in the awkward position of a voyeur who shares the journalist's craving for intimate revelations. This phenomenon is also at work on an intertextual level between *L'Inceste* and *Quitter la ville*: the latter text reclaims a need for privacy which had been endangered by revelations made in the former. Although the need for privacy is frequently expressed in Angot's texts, *Normalement* is the first text in which it triumphs over the ambiguous mechanism present in earlier works: there are no revelations here about the author's life.

In contrast, *La Peur du lendemain* is more familiar in style and immediacy yet it may actually redefine Angot's subject matter. If *Normalement*

can be seen as a text which interrupts a dynamic process that had long been established in Angot's writing, this second text may initiate a new approach to writing, one which is still, at the time of going to press, to be defined. If *Normalement* marks an end, as the original title of the play strongly suggests (*Arrête, arrêtons, arrêtez* (Stop, let us stop, stop)), *La Peur du lendemain* (Fear of the next day) looks somewhat apprehensively ahead. 'Christine', the character, narrator or writer, appears to adopt a new stance: 'Je ne cherche pas à me connaître et je ne vois pas l'importance' (p. 71) (I'm not interested in self-knowledge and I don't see that it matters). There is a shift away from narrating or even the simple, spare 'marking' of *Léonore, toujours*, towards a more inquisitive form of writing. Instead of being about her life, her role as a writer, or as a mother or lover, it questions the very subject matter of her writing. It is in this sense that *La Peur du lendemain* seems to mark a turning point. The Angot who was once so determined about the function and nature of what writing should be about (becoming life) now appears to be calling the whole enterprise into question. It is ironical to read Angot interrogating herself about her subject when the 'subject' of so many of her texts is herself. But perhaps *La Peur du lendemain* is not after all so much a turning point as a text which offers new light on the nature of Angot's literary endeavours, and the denial of the quest for self-knowledge represents yet another attempt to reclaim ownership of her work.

While Angot apparently lays bare her writing or working tools, the reader is implicitly invited to reflect upon the themes of her work and, at the same time, to call into question the mechanisms of her *autofictions*. Ultimately we might ask whether the closing words of *La Peur du lendemain* in fact characterise *autofictions* of the 1990s in general: 'Car ce qui est positif un jour peut être négatif le lendemain. Ce qu'on croit un jour peut être une tromperie le lendemain, les pièges sont posés' (p. 113) (For what is positive one day may be negative the next. What you believe (in) one day may prove to be an illusion the next, the traps have been set).

Notes

- 1 Christine Angot, *Vu du ciel* (Paris: L'Arpenteur Gallimard, 1990).
- 2 Christine Angot, *Sujet Angot* (Paris: Fayard, 1998).
- 3 Pierre Marcelle, 'Je, faute de mieux', *Libération* (26 August 1998).
- 4 Christine Angot, *Interview* (Paris: Fayard, 1995), p. 24.
- 5 Christine Angot, *Not to be* (Paris: L'Arpenteur Gallimard, 1991).

- 6 Christine Angot, *Quitter la ville* (Paris: Stock, 2000); *L'Inceste* (Paris: Stock, 1999).
- 7 *L'Usage de la vie* (Paris: Fayard, 1998) is described as 'théâtre', but no longer designated as such in the 1999 reprint by Mille et une Nuits; *La Peur du lendemain* was first published by *Elle* in 2000 as a 'nouvelle' (short story), but is no longer referred to as such in the edition, *Normalement* followed by *La Peur du lendemain* (Paris: Stock, 2001).
- 8 Christine Angot, *Léonore, toujours* (Paris: L'Arpenteur Gallimard, 1994).
- 9 The importance of the media is made explicit in texts such as *Interview* or through Angot's regular references to the press and to television within her work. Its influence is also evident in the ways she herself uses the media, be it through her appearance on TV shows such as 'Bouillon de Culture', or in newspapers such as *Libération* where she published her father's obituary.
- 10 Philippe Lejeune, *Je est un autre: L'autobiographie, de la littérature aux médias* (Paris: Seuil, 1980).
- 11 Michael Riffaterre, *Fictional Truth* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).
- 12 Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 15.
- 13 Marie Darrieussecq, 'L'autofiction, un genre pas sérieux', in *Poétique*, 107 (1996), 369-80.
- 14 Tzvetan Todorov, *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* (Paris: Seuil, 1970).
- 15 Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Methuen, 1981).
- 16 Janice Morgan and Colette T. Hall (eds), *Redefining Autobiography in Twentieth-Century Women's Fiction* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1991).