Conflicting Relations in Christine Angot's *Un amour impossible* [*An impossible love*]

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Abstract

As a force that both sets apart and drives together, impelling a relationship even as it impedes it, conflict pervades Christine Angot's œuvre. The incestuous abuse that she figures so compulsively seems to encapsulate the violence of this double bind, and in narrative terms, its 'victor or vanquished' outcome. In several of her polemical works, which both invite and unsettle an autobiographical reading, the narrator 'Christine' compulsively articulates the harrowing details of her abuse. Her speaking out has the effect of suppressing her mother's perspective, and the latter supplants the father as the focus of Christine's hostility. Angot's 2015 publication, *Un amour impossible*, by contrast, marks an attempt to accommodate the mother's side of the story. By unpicking the narrative dynamics of the text, this article evaluates the success of this endeavour, and considers how the conflicting relations Angot portrays cut through illusions of balance and concord in relational life-writing.

Keywords: conflict; relations; trauma; narrative; agency; life-writing

As a force that both sets apart and drives together, impelling a relationship even as it impedes it, conflict pervades Christine Angot's œuvre. The violence of this double bind is at the core of her compulsive figuring of a trauma that at once imposes relations and destroys familial ties. Angot's numerous and highly polemical works, which both invite and unsettle an autobiographical reading, are connected by an obsessive return to the incestuous abuse of their narrator, Christine. Figured in Angot's first published work, *Vu du ciel* (1990), the incest narrative recurs throughout her œuvre and *L'Inceste* (1999) and *Une semaine de vacances* (2012) recount Christine's own abuse in detail. Born of a clash between social classes, she becomes the site at which conflict destructively culminates, in the father's repeated rape of his daughter during her adolescence. His incestuous abuse collapses the positions of mother and daughter by acknowledging neither: a paradoxical process of merging together Rachel and Christine while undercutting the bond between them. These violated family ties ricochet

across Angot's texts, where mother rivals father as the target of Christine's hostility. Giving voice to her experiences in writing becomes a retaliation against the secret she was forced to share, by the unspeakable nature of Pierre's acts, but more painfully still, by Rachel's blindness to his abuse. Critics are united in reading Angot's work as dominated by this drive to speak out, to annihilate the separation between the public and private spheres through a torrent of traumatic revelations that refuse to submit to the silence ensconced in the incest taboo.[i] From these traumatic revelations emerges a consuming focus on the 'je'—most notably in *L'Inceste*, where Angot pummels the reader with the extreme, horrifying detail of Christine's first-person account—and on the 'il', especially in *Une semaine de vacances*, where, as Shirley Jordan remarks, Christine 'vacates the subject position' and instead records the abuse 'as if from outside the self' (2019: 13). Notable in its absence, then, is the perspective of the mother. While Rachel claims to have known nothing of Pierre's abuse, Angot has repeatedly portrayed her mother as having turned a blind eye to what was taking place. This accusation in Angot's previous works made her mother into the principal, and always voiceless, target of blame.

Angot's 2015 work *Un amour impossible*, at least on the face of it, takes a different tack. In this text, she recognises that these existing accounts have occluded Rachel's side of the story and attempts to shift the point of view on the incest narrative with which her readers are so familiar. Praised by reviewers, this shift played a significant role in the strongly positive reception of this text compared to that of Angot's previous works, and its successful realisation has since been reinforced by Catherine Corsini's 2018 film adaptation. In this article, I propose that despite this perceived success, Angot is in fact drawing attention in *Un amour impossible* to the limitations of any such shift, and that the text's importance lies precisely in its failure to marry two perspectives that are so deeply conflicted. If we turn to trauma studies, many theorists take their cue from Sigmund Freud in their conceptualisations of trauma, and draw on

the etymology of the word, derived from the Greek meaning 'wound'. Cathy Caruth conceives of trauma as a gap in one's experience when she takes up Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit* in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), and Dominick LaCapra describes it in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* as creating holes in one's existence (2001: 41). Evidently, these wounds, holes, and gaps play as powerful a part in articulating trauma as they do in living through it. As Caruth writes of Marguerite Duras's *Hiroshima, mon amour*, '[t]he traumatic histories of the two lovers can emerge, that is, only in their relation to each other and only in the way in which this relation creates, precisely, a gap within the mutual understanding of their address' (1999: 42). The gap widens dramatically, we must assume, when it is not two different histories that are recounted, but the same, 'shared' trauma, so to speak, that has destroyed the relationships between the speakers; this is the case, as we know, in *Un amour impossible*.

As Angot stages this desired yet frustrated attempt to relay the story from the mother's viewpoint, she invites us to rethink the implications of the label 'relational' as it is currently applied to works of life-writing, and especially to those which respond to trauma. Since the 1990s, it has gone without saying in autobiography studies that one's identity is defined in relation rather than in opposition to others, and that any one life-story is made up of multiple others, shaped by all the lives with which it intersects. Susan Stanford Friedman's pioneering work 'Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice' dispelled the illusion that the autobiographical self is individual and autonomous (1988: 38-42), and Nancy K. Miller and Paul John Eakin extended Friedman's theory in the 1990s to encompass male- as well as female-authored autobiography (Miller 1994; Eakin 1999). The most immediate link between life-stories is, of course, a genealogical one; as Adriana Cavarero observes in *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, the beginning of one's life-story is accessible only through the narration of others, most often one's family members (2000: 39). Yet the inevitable tensions between perspectives in these shared stories, the gaps in understanding and the breaks

in communication that are magnified by trauma, are given insufficient space in accounts of relationality to date.[ii] Angot's re-staging of the story of the abuse in *Un amour impossible* foregrounds these well-known narrative dynamics, but with a specific view to their destructive repercussions. By situating the beginning of the story in the period prior to Christine's own birth, Angot highlights the lack of agency that she holds over the outcome of the events she will relay. Subverting salacious expectations of an account of frustrated incestuous pleasure, the 'impossible love' of the title refers first and foremost to the so-called misalliance between Rachel and Pierre. This change of frame resists the reduction of incest to the status of 'family problem'; the links extend outwards in Christine's account to the social, cultural, and historical narratives that surround and shape the family history when she embeds the conflict in a much more deeply rooted clash between classes. At the end of the text, Christine purports to explain the devastating unfolding of events to her mother, claiming that Pierre's incestuous rape was driven by his desire to reassert his social distinction from and domination of her mother, via his refusal to recognise Christine as his daughter. Her analysis is strongly inflected by Pierre Bourdieu's theory that supposedly individual stories are in fact determined by the social structures in which they originate, structures which are transmitted from one generation to the next.

Christine's explanation, as we will see, is vital to understanding and to problematising the narrative dynamics of *Un amour impossible*. In the first half of the text, although Christine's narrative voice remains the vehicle for its telling, the story is focalised around the mother's perspective. Unlike in previous works, the harrowing details of the incestuous rape are absent. Rather, the knowledge seems to act as a narrative hinge which splits the text into two: pre and post traumatic revelation. As Rachel is shocked into silence, Christine's perspective takes centre-stage. Speaking out in the text is thus counterbalanced with silencing: the narrative process incorporates the way in which the terrible secret censored Christine's voice as

protagonist, and how she had in turn stifled her mother's perspective, eliding Rachel's version of the story from previous works. This narrative shift is underplayed, or overlooked entirely, in reviews of the text that welcome the privileging of Rachel's point of view (see, for example, Claire Devarrieux [2015: n.p.] and Laurence Houot [2015: n.p.]), as well as by Corsini, who acknowledges that 'C'est vrai que le film est, plus que dans le roman, du point de vue de la mère' (Raymond 2018: n.p.). The omission is no accident: such a shift interferes with the positive picture these interpretations paint of Christine's coming to terms with her mother's perspective and of the restoration of their relationship, free from the grips of the father, by the end of the story. Certainly, the second part of the text explores the painful attempt at some kind of reconciliation between their points of view, at moving beyond the retaliatory approach that has characterised articulating the abuse and its effects to this point. But its conclusion is far more complex than Corsini's soft, golden lighting and forgiving clasping of hands in the film's final café scene suggest. The painful breakdown in relations corresponds to a fundamental conflict in relating, I will demonstrate, in which the deep divisions between perspectives on the same terrible story preclude any harmonious version or collaborative storytelling. For the remainder of this article, I will unpick the narrative dynamics of the text in the light of Christine's 'conclusion', and thus shed light on the questions Angot puts to conceptions of 'relational' life-writing in the wake of trauma. Focusing on the entrenched antagonism Angot exposes between accounts that supposedly coalesce, I will consider the extent to which *Un amour impossible* succeeds in changing the frame of the so-called family story. Do we move beyond Christine's sightlines in this account of the acute breakdown in family relationships? Or does Angot instead puncture the possibility of a coexistence between conflicting versions in testifying to this kind of trauma?

Narrative power and incestuous impulses

Un amour impossible begins in the mode of a distinctly conventional family narrative: Christine recounts the relationship forming between Rachel and Pierre that would lead to her own birth. From the opening line, 'Mon père et ma mère se sont rencontrés à Châteauroux' (Angot 2015: 7) [My father and mother met at Châteauroux],[iii] she writes Pierre back into the family story from which he had aggressively endeavoured to extricate himself. Using deictics to bind Pierre to Christine through his parental status, Angot also consolidates his socially taboo tie to Rachel in the 'et' ['and'] that joins them together. She reinstates the relations that he had doubly denied as he sought to maintain the separation between social classes, a stratification that Christine interprets in the text's closing metacommentary as the real impetus behind his incestuous abuse. The chasm between Pierre's bourgeois background and Rachel's Jewish, working class origins is evident from the outset. Whilst they meet in the same canteen, she is a typist, one of several jobs since she started work at seventeen, whereas the temporary translation job that he undertakes is his first role following years of study. At first, their relationship seems set to bridge this gap, paving a path for Rachel into Pierre's middle-class 'world': 'Elle découvrait un monde' (10) [She discovered a new world]. Christine's return to the same image at the end of the text states quite the contrary. She explains to her mother that relations were in fact what enabled this separation: Rachel's social situation provided a necessary counterpoint to consolidate Pierre's superiority. Read in this light, opposition becomes the vehicle for constructing the barriers by which bourgeois exclusivity is maintained:

> Le but était de te faire perdre. Vous pouviez avoir une relation, mais à condition de respecter certaines règles, qui garantissaient que tu n'infiltrerais pas son monde. Qu'il y aurait des limites. La séparation de vos deux mondes devait être établie, et la supériorité du sien devait être maintenue, bien au-dessus. Il ne fallait pas qu'il y ait de fusion. (205)

> [The aim was to make you lose. You could have a relationship, but only on the condition that you respected certain rules, which ensured that you would not get inside his world. That there would be boundaries. The separation between your two worlds had to be established, and the superiority of his had to be maintained, far above yours. No merging was permitted between them.]

Through the impenetrable limits that he lays down between them, Pierre's relationship with Rachel secures the adversarial dynamics on which class boundaries are based. Pitting one against another on vastly asymmetrical social terrain allows Pierre to orchestrate an inevitable outcome. Christine conveys his predetermined victory using the analogy of the 'champion du monde qui remet son titre en jeu, mais qui sait que le match est truqué, que l'adversaire sera disqualifié' (207). ['world champion who accepts the challenge for his title, but in the knowledge that the match is fixed, that his opponent will be disqualified']. In textual terms, Rachel's role in dictating their romantic narrative is written out even before the story has begun.

Angot embeds this extreme power imbalance in the narrative form. Much of the first part of Rachel and Pierre's relationship is told through staged conversations, with the spotlight on the latter's domination. As well as quelling Rachel's replies by framing his assertions (about love, class, behaviour, and language) as absolute, he seeks to control her expression, insisting on the connection between speaking 'correctly' and one's social status (23). Allowing Pierre to hold forth in this way in the text serves to expose his ignorance, extreme misogyny, and potential anti-Semitism to the reader; it undercuts from the start the illusion of the brilliant intellectual that he, Rachel, and Christine all contribute to creating. Once Pierre has left for Paris and Rachel realises that she is pregnant, oral communication is replaced by an epistolary exchange, and the formal rhetoric reinforces his social dominance and narrative power. Rachel's attempt to cultivate a relationship between Pierre and Christine, so that their daughter can bear his name, becomes the principal focus of these letters, yet we only see Pierre's replies; the content of Rachel's letters is described rather than transposed

into the text. This structural choice reflects the contrast between their levels of attachment—Rachel's passionate guarding of his letters is very unlikely to be reciprocated—but also the agency Pierre holds in dictating the family's relationships.

According to Christine, therefore, her parents' misalliance simply lays the foundations for the bourgeoisie to reinforce its supremacy. The catalyst for her father's abuse comes when the oppositional structure that this requires is jeopardised, by the social recognition of these relations. For as long as Pierre has no legal tie to Christine and she is 'née de père inconnu' [father unknown], having a child merely widens the chasm between his and Rachel's positions in society. Yet once Rachel has persuaded Pierre to give their daughter his name, Christine is identified legally as part of his social stratus, and the divide between milieux is fractured. Incest is the tool through which he revokes this recognition, by violently supplanting familial with sexual relations:

> C'était la négation automatique [de la reconnaissance]. Changement de point de vue. L'interdit fondamental, là, c'est plus celui des relations sexuelles entre ascendants et descendants, mais celui de la mésalliance. Comme ça il y avait toujours d'un côté toi, et de l'autre lui (210-11).
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> It was an automatic negation [of Pierre's recognition of Christine]. A change of perspective. The taboo, in this case, is no longer a matter of sexual relations between ascendants and descendants, but of misalliance. That way there was always you on one side, and him on the other.

In this view, the impetus behind the incestuous actions is to restore social worlds to their state of opposition in the misalliance: a relationship premised on the split of those involved into superior and inferior 'sides'. Throughout the text, Pierre is associated with the importance of (paternal) legacy: the emphasis he places on the relationship with his father, and criticism of Rachel's lack thereof, stands in stark contrast to the virtual absence of references to his mother. In dialogue with Rachel, his exaggerated recourse to his father's qualities becomes a comical conversational cycle, which mirrors the cyclical understanding of generational structures set out in the text. Father and son are bound together in their shared bourgeois

lifestyle: 'De père en fils on y avait souvent été médecins, on y était curieux du monde, on y avait la passion des huîtres' (8) [For generations, fathers and sons alike had often been doctors, were curious about the world, and had a penchant for oysters] Generational repetition becomes a vehicle for embedding class structures, where individual subject positions are compressed into the collective, and somewhat impersonal, 'on' [used in this case in a way that corresponds to the English 'one']. Such perpetuation is portrayed as a male, middle-class domain, which Christine threatens doubly to disrupt. The impetus behind Pierre's abuse, she deduces, lies in counteracting this legacy. There is a notable emphasis in the first half of the text on the physical resemblance between Christine and Pierre, a resemblance Christine insists that her mother recognise: '—Regarde mon pouce. La forme de mon pouce c'est la même que la sienne. Exactement. Regarde. Regarde mes doigts. Tu as vu? T'avais jamais remarqué? Tu trouves pas que je lui ressemble?' (116-117) ['Look at my thumb. The shape of my thumb is just the same as his. Look. Look at my fingers. Have you seen? Haven't you ever noticed? Don't you think that I look like him?']. The self-same dimension of this sexual act reinforces the perception that Pierre is seeking somehow to reverse the melding of his class identity with that of Rachel. His incestuous fantasy, Christine indicates, is one of self-replication. Driven to supplant the crossover between classes that she consolidates, he seeks to replicate his own self, to eclipse the dangerous room for difference that his perpetuation through Christine affords.

It is no coincidence that Christine is the one who elicits this resemblance. The child's desired identification with the father takes place at the expense of the mother: just as Christine values Pierre's education, knowledge and taste—all advantages of his upper-class upbringing—she criticises Rachel's lack of such qualities. For this reason, Christine perceives herself as having repeated Pierre's gesture in her own relationship with her mother: together, father and daughter have sought (unconsciously or otherwise) to erase the mother from the

family story. Christine's admission that 'j'ai joué le jeu de mon père' [I have played my father's game] (194) by no means refers only to her childish outbursts. Rather, she develops a parallel between Pierre's desire to suppress the mother's genealogical side of the story and her own treatment of Rachel in previous works. Blaming Rachel for what she saw as her silent complicity, the account of the abuse that she gives comes at the expense of the mother's voice. In their analyses of Angot's work prior to *Un amour impossible*, Isabelle Cata and Eliane Dalmolin (2004), Shirley Jordan (2007), and Ruth Cruickshank (2009) all characterise her writing as an incestuous space, a space which Jordan describes as 'open to self-doubling, self-obsession and self-wounding' (2007: 206). In *Un amour impossible*, this incestuous space is also layered with self-accusation. Self-doubling emerges as an unsettling mirror of Pierre's self-replicating gesture, as Christine forecloses Rachel's alternative version with the proliferation of her own singular storyline. Much like her analogy between Pierre and the rigged sporting contest, she had ruled out her mother's account before passing a predetermined guilty verdict.

A change in perspective?

The first half of *Un amour impossible* signals, therefore, Christine's attempt to bring about her own narrative '[c]hangement de point de vue'. She endeavours to reverse the way in which she and Pierre had written out Rachel's influence over the narrative in life and writing respectively. For the first half of the text, Christine's narration is overlain with her mother's third-person perspective: her voice becomes a vehicle for Rachel's narrative gaze. Angot's characteristic use of the narrative 'je' ['I'] becomes somewhat paradoxical given that the start of the story precedes its first-person narrator. Christine's narrative dependence is reinforced

when recounting episodes from her early childhood, in which the amusing anecdotes rest on the mother's grasp of the humour of the situation that is beyond the child's comprehension. One such example is the story of Christine as a toddler throwing a banana across the kitchen. Having stormed out of the room when ordered by Rachel to pick it up, she brings her doll back in with her, and instructs it to pick the banana up in her place. The explosion of laughter that this prompts in her mother and grandmother was one to which Christine was not party at the time: 'Je suis sortie./ Elles ont éclaté de rire, seules dans la cuisine' (58) [I left the room./ They burst out laughing, alone in the kitchen]. By making it clear that the child Christine could not have heard this reaction, Angot indicates that she was told the story in retrospect. She makes plain that Christine is first and foremost *recipient* of the narrative that she claims to tell.

Pairing first-person voice with third-person perspective invites the reader to query the narrative gaze from the outset. Who is telling the story, and whose story is being told? In parroting Rachel's perspective, Christine appears to be displaced as narrator, and Corsini gives shape to these power dynamics in the film in the form of the daughter's disembodied narration: 'La voix off c'est celle de la fille qui raconte l'histoire du point de vue de la mère' [The voice-off is that of the daughter, recounting the story from the mother's point of view]. It is true that the emphasis on 'elle' ['she'] in the first part of the text affords Rachel a narrative space that she was denied by the overwhelming focus on the 'je' and 'il' in previous works. As a kind of mouthpiece, Christine's role also proclaims her passivity in the unfolding of the story. Yet the importance of Angot maintaining the first-person narrative mode should not be underestimated. The tendency in the text's reception to discard this ever-present 'I' is exemplified by Claire Devarrieux's interpretation of Angot's narrative dynamics:

> Si la première phrase d'*Un amour impossible* est lancée par un <<Mon père et ma mère>> qui renvoie au <<je>> identifiable de la narratrice, l'usage répété du pronom <<elle>> est la manière discrète qu'a trouvée l'auteur de très vite nous informer qu'il

> s'agit d'abord de son point de vue à elle, Rachel. C'est en grande partie une forme de discours indirect libre, nourri par ses souvenirs, ses récits, à partir de quoi l'écrivain peut se mettre à la place de sa mère. (Devarrieux 2015: n.p.)
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> [If the first line of *An Impossible Love* begins with "My father and mother", which links back to the identifiable "I" of the narrator, the repeated use of the pronoun "she" is the subtle way that the author has found to inform us very quickly that it is primarily from *Rachel's* point of view. It is chiefly a form of free indirect discourse, made up of her memories, her stories, through which the writer can inhabit her mother's perspective]

For Devarrieux, the first-person viewpoint in the opening line is eclipsed by the subsequent emphasis on the 'elle'. Her reading ignores the way in which returns to the 'je' punctuate the narrative; reminders all the starker for their scarcity. The breakdown in relations that is laid bare in the second part of the text casts significant doubt on the harmonious cohabitation between perspectives that Devarrieux describes. Instead, the painful parallel with Pierre's incestuous gaze surfaces once more: overlaying Rachel's viewpoint with Christine's voice speaks to the same narrative drive to assert control over the differences between them, the places in which they diverge.

The suppressed knowledge at the centre of the text makes it evident that the supposedly synergic narration of the first part cannot but be a veneer. The tale of incestuous rape that recurs throughout Angot's oeuvre is glaring here in its absence: blinkered by the mother's narrative gaze, any knowledge of Christine's abuse is withheld from the text until it is finally revealed to Rachel by a family friend. Adopting the mother's perspective as narrative frame is not, therefore, merely a means of bringing to light her version of the story. It is also a thinly veiled accusation of the ignorance that Rachel claims. In staging the story as it unfolds, Angot points to the supposed lack of knowledge in the first half of the text being a feigned position. Just as narrator and reader alike are well-acquainted with the trauma at the heart of the tale but retell and receive it in a way that conceals this knowledge, so too is there a sense that the mother's awareness of the abuse is actively suppressed, rather than simply lacking. Rachel *does* know the story, Angot seems to be saying, she simply refuses to hear it.

Rachel is hospitalised with an 'infection des trompes': 'Elle tombait des nues. En même temps…elle n'était pas surprise' [She was stunned. At the same time…she wasn't really surprised] (156). Angot's wordplay does not derive only from the double meaning of 'les trompes' (fallopian tubes) and the reflexive verb 'se tromper' (to make a mistake); she draws too on the deliberate misleading or self-deception that 'tromper' signifies. Christine's accusation thus infiltrates the mother's narrative point of view. By ending the part of the text that purports to be told from Rachel's viewpoint with Christine admitting the mother's 'guilt' on her behalf, Angot strips away the semblance of cohabitation between the mother's perspective and the daughter's voice. Telling the story in such a way either silences Christine, who of course has been party to the abuse all along, or Rachel, as Christine overrides her mother's perspective with her own denunciation. Angot demonstrates that within this apparent co-existence, there is in fact room for only one view of events.

Once Rachel's version of the story has been proved unreliable, her perspective vanishes from the text. Angot establishes a direct correlation between Rachel's falling silent and Christine's coming to voice by beginning the subsequent section with an immediate assertion of agency by Christine: 'J'ai écrit à mon père que je ne voulais plus le voir' [I wrote to my father to tell him I didn't want to see him any more] (157). This conspicuous shift in perspective signals the start of the second part of the text. Whereas Christine's voice was stifled, at least in part, in order to make room for Rachel's viewpoint, here she sets out her authority over the direction in which the story develops, an authority that she impresses through writing. Angot tacitly associates Christine's coming to voice with her own authorship. She seems to enact the narrative dynamics of her oeuvre at the start of this second section, in which the emphasis on first-person narration eclipses Rachel's perspective entirely. Importantly, however, these antagonistic dynamics are addressed in *Un amour impossible*,

rather than simply being re-enacted. Christine acknowledges the resulting suppression of Rachel's voice, as in the following example:

> Dans les années qui ont suivi, j'ai commencé à lui attribuer mes échecs. Je l'accusais de ne pas s'être remise en question, de n'être restée en analyse que trois ans, d'avoir trouvé en mon père un coupable facile, de ne pas avoir réfléchi à sa propre responsabilité dans ce qui m'était arrivé. Je lui conseillais de ne pas s'étonner, par conséquent, de la difficulté dans laquelle sombrait notre relation. Je lui disais que j'étais la victime de leur égoïsme à tous les deux. (176)
>
> [In the years that followed, I started to blame her for my failings. I would accuse her of never having examined her own conscience, of only having spent three years in therapy, of having found an easy scapegoat in my father, of not having reflected on her own role in what had happened to me. I would tell her that she shouldn't be surprised, as a result, about how difficult our relationship had become. I told her that I was the victim of her selfishness as much as his]

Amidst this spate of accusations, Rachel is given no room to respond. The anaphoric 'je' represents the domination of Christine's voice, casting mother and daughter in the fixed positions of speaking subject and silent addressee. As narrator, Christine highlights her own inability to hear another side of the story: all alternative interpretations are silenced in the superior knowledge that she assumes over the lead-up to and aftermath of her father's abuse. The propensity that Angot identifies here for the speaking subject to stifle other perspectives points to a wider conflict in relations, and in *relating*, when testifying to trauma. The discrepancy between Christine's and Rachel's versions of events encapsulates how one (hi)story can be lived simultaneously but experienced in entirely different ways. Telling the same, terrible story as they each understand it puts any 'mutual understanding of their address', as Caruth describes it (1999: 42), painfully out of reach. Angot's staging of the incompatibility of these viewpoints in *Un amour impossible* makes relaying the mother's story through the daughter's narrative voice decidedly problematic. Given that the narrative is an extreme manifestation of how far perspectives are not, and cannot, be shared, the premise of omniscience through which Christine tells her mother's story is highly ironic: there are no markers of uncertainty with respect to Rachel's thoughts, feelings, or motivations. The

position of absolute knowledge that Christine adopts—one that is inherited, Angot implies, from her father—casts doubt on whether a 'changement de point de vue' really does take place in *Un amour impossible*, or whether it is in reality an illusion that reinforces the narrative dominance of the 'je' in Angot's oeuvre.

Breaks in communication

I read the second half of the text as an exploration of this very question. Angot writes the aftermath of the traumatic revelation from Christine's point of view, focusing on the painful breakdown in relations and communication between mother and daughter. She provides the '*post-*' to Rachel's *préhistoire*. What is missing between these two parts, however, is the 'histoire' [story of the trauma] itself. As we have seen, Angot's readers believe that they are already party to this knowledge, having been confronted at length in previous works with the harrowing details of the incestuous relationship. But in *Un amour impossible*, it is compressed into a single line: the brutal revelation, 'il la sodomise depuis des années' (156) [he's been sodomising her for years], is delivered by Marc, a minor and otherwise innocuous character who is always external to the family circle. By omitting the accounts of those who were directly involved, Angot undermines any sense of a definitive purchase on what happened. Instead, she depicts the 'real' story as *read* into the text, not only by the eventual readers of *Un amour impossible*, but first and foremost by its narrator. Christine's position as the recipient and re-teller of Rachel's narrative is consolidated when events recounted in the first part of the text resurface in the second, this time as part of a conversation between mother and daughter. Angot reinforces this self-referential narrative loop when Christine asks if she can write down what Rachel is saying in the middle of one such exchange (196). Christine's first-

person narrative is a (necessarily subjective) retelling, therefore, of the story that she receives. Whilst this does incorporate Rachel's perspective to an extent, by ignoring the limitations of her own access to the story, Christine asserts authority over the account. She takes possession of her mother's narrative as she relays it. Rewriting the story in retrospect does not only apply to Rachel's *préhistoire*, but to the wider text. Christine's singular control over the storytelling emerges most explicitly in their exchange—or lack thereof—when she delivers her definitive explanation of Pierre's abuse:

> —Tu veux que je te dise vraiment comment je vois les choses? Je suis sûre de ce que je dis. Tu peux ne pas être d'accord. Mais moi je suis sûre. Vous apparteniez à deux mondes différents, étrangers l'un à l'autre, en tout cas c'est comme ça que les choses ont été posées dès le départ. (204)
>
> [Do you want me to tell you how I see things? I'm sure that I'm right. You might not agree. But I'm sure of it. You belonged to two different worlds, each alien to the other, in any case, that's how things were set up from the beginning]

As she groups together Rachel and Pierre into the 'vous' ['plural you'], Christine claims to occupy the perspective of the father as well as the mother. She professes knowledge of the unconscious motivations behind Pierre's actions that even he cannot fully possess. Yet Christine's doctrinal stance cannot but evoke, chillingly, the one that Pierre had assumed in 'conversations' with Rachel in the first part of the text. Rachel becomes the passive recipient once more, this time to her daughter's categorical account of events. Their one-sided interaction is all the more conspicuous given that the experiences that she interprets are in large part Rachel's own. The power dynamics that underpin this conversation in the text are a far cry from Corsini's balanced panning from Christine, to Rachel, and back again as she re-fashions the scene as one of reconciliation. Angot, for her part, cuts short any potential dialogue between different understandings of why events unfolded as they did when Christine rules out any opportunity for Rachel to respond. Instead, the metacommentary becomes akin to a monologue. In a way that echoes the end of the first section, knowing (or not) again gives Christine agency and reduces Rachel to silence.

As Laurence Houot notes, the revelation at the centre of the text compels us as readers to go back and comb the *préhistoire* for inklings of the incestuous abuse (Houot 2015: n.p.). So too does Angot invite us at the end of the *post-histoire* to re-read the whole story as a product of Christine's sociological interpretation and re-writing. Like the so-called conversation, whose dynamics are far closer to those of a lecture, there are no two distinct 'sides' of the story in *Un amour impossible*: both are subsumed from the start under Christine's conclusions. Does the text thus simply consolidate the suppression of alternative perspectives on the incest narrative that courses through Angot's oeuvre? Certainly, *Un amour impossible* makes plain the extreme difficulty of relating (to) a perspective that conflicts with one's own when the parties involved are in such close proximity, both to one another and to the traumatic events on which they are attempting individually to get some purchase. This is not only a difficult venture, Angot implies, but a dangerous one, which risks further silencing the other party even as it claims to give them voice. It is in this respect that the shift in focalisation in the second part of the text becomes so important. Far from detracting from Christine's attempt to take up her mother's point of view, it brings to the surface the violent clash between their perspectives in a way that acknowledges the existence of other possible versions. Attempts at dialogue, which end repeatedly in failure, dominate this second part and, unlike in the film, communication is never smoothly restored but portrayed as perpetually partial, shifting, and incomplete. The first efforts to re-establish contact take the form of a series of messages from Rachel, in which Christine's replies are excluded. As the letters between Pierre and Rachel from the first part of the text are replaced by email and text messages between Rachel and Christine, the gap in communication redoubles. The more fragmented channels of conversation underscore the disjointed nature of the exchange between mother and daughter: a broken communication that differs sharply from the cohesive flow of dialogue in Christine's childhood. By compressing Rachel's emails into a rapid-fire

sequence, Angot heightens the lack of, and indeed lack of room for, a response. As the mirror-image of previous retellings, Christine's position seems to be gauged only through Rachel's words, before the communicative dynamics are reversed again in Christine's metacommentary. By tipping narrative weight so palpably from mother to daughter and back again, Angot underlines the asymmetry of their often one-sided (mis)communication. The jarring back-and-forth motion she induces is key. It testifies to the rift between their perspectives torn by the traumatic breakdown of relations, and the representation of this rupture is a move towards addressing, instead of forcibly suppressing, the differences between them.

A small but significant change in the communication between mother and daughter takes place in the final section. Their meeting in the café is followed by a return to telephone calls and emails, but with a more optimistic twist: '[o]n a commencé à se téléphoner plus souvent, et plus régulièrement' (216) [we started calling each other more often, and more regularly]. Whereas the previous scene had aligned Christine with Pierre's position, here, the use of the 'on' draws her away from the identification with paternal legacy, and from their mutual silencing of Rachel. In the final exchange between mother and daughter, Angot points to the potential for a different dynamic. This is, we must remember, a missed conversation; Christine telephones her mother but Rachel is unable to speak to her since she is hosting dinner guests, and the desired communication remains frustrated. But the email response with which the text closes seems to open up the possibility of more balanced exchange:

> « J'ai regretté de ne pouvoir te parler hier, mais ce n'était pas facile (. …) Lors de la lecture de ton manuscrit, j'avais relevé quelques petites choses à te communiquer éventuellement. Est-ce que ça t'intéresse? Libre à toi ensuite. Rien de très important.
>
> Je pense bien à toi. Ces jours-ci, je revoyais la rue de l'Indre, et surtout le chemin, le jardin, le gros marronnier. Je revoyais quand je cueillais des cerises. Que je ramenais des brassées de lilas. Il y avait une forme de liberté dont je ne me rendais pas compte. Mais, trêve de nostalgie, c'est aujourd'hui et maintenant ». (217)

> [I was sorry not to be able to talk to you yesterday, but it wasn't easy (. …) As for your manuscript, I'd thought of a few little things that I could pass on to you. Would that be of interest? It's up to you, at any rate. It's nothing very important.
>
> I'm thinking of you a lot. Lately, my thoughts keep going back to Indre road, especially the lane, the garden, and the great big chestnut tree. I think back to when I used to pick cherries there. When I would bring back armfuls of lilacs. There was a kind of freedom that I didn't appreciate at the time. But that's enough nostalgia, we should focus on the here and now.]

Coupled with Christine's transcription of their earlier conversation, Rachel's reference to the 'manuscrit' establishes a parallel with the present text. The emphasis on Rachel looking back reinforces the connection: the setting of the first part of the text, the house on Indre road, resurfaces in the mother's recollections. In spite of Rachel's rhetoric of self-effacement, she is positioned here as the primary reader to Christine's manuscript. The fact that Christine has asked for her mother's feedback, and that Rachel's reply elicits Christine's opinion in return, posits a potential conversation about telling the story. Here, the sense of 'trêve' as 'truce', as the cessation of hostilities, comes to the fore. Situated firmly in the present, the end of the text is a nod to conflicting relations, but also to the desire for resolution. As our unpicking of the narrative dynamics has made plain, the desire remains unfulfilled in *Un amour impossible*; Angot's choice to make this final exchange a missed conversation reinforces this interpretation. Nonetheless, she envisages a narrative negotiation—perhaps a revision of the manuscript we have just read—in which both she and Rachel might inform the way in which the story comes to be told.

Conflicting voices and clashing versions

While a genuine exchange between the conflicting perspectives of mother and daughter remains beyond the bounds of the text, Angot invites us to picture a relational writing space in which it

could take place. The first step in doing so, she indicates, is dispensing with the illusion that accommodating and articulating someone else's perspective on such a catastrophic breakdown of relations can ever result in a harmonious coexistence between voices and versions. Underlying the conflicts in both experience and narration that *Un amour impossible* explores is the matter of knowledge: what protagonist, narrator, and reader alike 'know', what they purport to know but don't, and what they claim not to know, but do. The epistemological dilemma is at the crux of the divide between silence and speech in the text, where the narrator's 'knowledge' of the story and the reasons behind it is twice the trigger for Rachel's silence. Challenging the absolute nature of this knowledge gives rise to key questions for representing relations in life-writing. How far can we truly change our point of view and so portray the other's perspective faithfully, especially in the grips of such traumatic binds? To what extent are we able to give voice to a version of the story that diverges from the account that we 'know' to be true?

The image of relational life-writing with which we are left in *Un amour impossible* is the very antithesis of Susanna Egan's description of the relationship between self and other in contemporary autobiographical practice as 'mirror talk'. According to Egan, in autobiographical accounts of crisis at the turn of the millennium, authoritative first-person narrative is replaced by a dialogic form, where two speakers share the same textual space alternately 'self' and 'other' for one another as they recount their life-stories. Since the subject positions are interchangeable and interdependent in this 'mirror talk', neither perspective is privileged over the other (1999: 25). The high stakes and deep divisions of *Un amour impossible* preclude any such balanced narration. Angot strips away the smooth cohabitation of voices that Egan posits, which fuses together two viewpoints and versions into a cohesive whole, to reveal the skewed power dynamics that sustain it. At the end of both sections of text, she shows that this apparent alignment is what blocks alternative versions of the story from view; it is the more broken, disembodied communication between mother and daughter that paves the way for a

possible exchange at the text's close. The gaps established by this mode of communication between their different points of view serves to separate back out the perspectives that had been falsely enmeshed in the first part of the text. It is only by disentangling and distinguishing these points of view, Angot suggests, that both voices might be heard.

The crisis in relations, and indeed in relating, is by no means resolved in the reiteration of the incest narrative *Un amour impossible*. But the relational space that Angot envisages, in which competing perspectives tell the story in tandem, rests on foregrounding rather than eliding the clash between versions. The clash between them, as painful as it may be, serves as a strategy for incorporating both sides. Enabling the points of contrast to emerge also represents a turn away from the self-replication towards which Pierre strives, from his desire to subsume the other. The narrative relationship she seeks to facilitate instead, one that is built on difference rather than sameness, speaks to a wider tendency in contemporary women's life-writing, particularly in writing lives at once bound together and rent apart by traumatic experience. The holes that shattering experiences tear in relations and communications, the extreme divergences in perspective that their ricocheting impact instigates, produce a perpetual sway in textual power. Assumptions about relational life-writing that are premised on concord and balance fail to account for the conflict and clashes that form an essential part of these (hi)stories. It is by refusing to sidestep the struggle for narrative space that writers like Angot, Lydie Salvayre, Sophie Daull, and Annie Ernaux, to name but a few, are establishing a new approach to writing lives, in which they have room to engage with the clashes as well as the connections that make up lives and life-stories.[iv] In so doing, they point to a process where it is only through the collaboration of conflicting voices and contrasting perspectives that something like the 'real' story might come to be told.

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Notes

[i] A key proponent is Shirley Jordan, who observes that speaking out is symptomatic of Angot's entire oeuvre (2007: 214). Ruth Cruickshank argues similarly that Angot's writing is exceptional in the way in which it breaks through the prohibition founded on silence and elision that surrounds the incest taboo (2009: 171).

[ii] Eakin, for example, acknowledges the imbalance between stories in relational life-writing but puts these skewed power dynamics down to an individual author's persistent desire for autonomy rather than understanding it as an irrevocable part of the narrative process (1999: 58).

[iii] Henceforth page numbers listed without further specification will refer to Angot's 2015 publication, *Un amour impossible*. All translations are my own.

[iv] Lydie Salvayre's *Pas pleurer* (2014) and Sophie Daull's *Camille, mon envolée* (2015) and *La Suture* (2016) both explore the skewed power relations and narrative tensions between mother and daughter when telling a story in which they can only partly share. In *Les Années* (2008), Annie Ernaux navigates the implications for voice, identity, and subjectivity when attempting an autobiographical account of the collective experience of a generation.