Autofiction, Ethics and Consent: Christine Angot’s Les Petits

“L’autofiction a volens nolens à obéir à une obligation éthique”

§1 The construction of the literary field is contingent upon an economy of consent. In autobiographically-driven forms where the investment of writers and readers may be especially intense, negotiations of consent are bound up with ethical considerations and are notoriously fragile. Autofiction, a particularly controversial sub-set of autobiographical experiment, further refines - and raises the temperature of - debates about legitimacy, writer-reader commitment, the ownership of experience and the nature and limits of invention in self-narrative. Enumerating the criticisms to which it is subject, Claude Burgelin notes its uncertain boundaries, its impurity, its rupturing of Philippe Lejeune’s famous autobiographical pact, and the slightness of much of its material. The intellectual malaise which it engenders is compounded by distaste: its self-indulgence and provision of dubious pleasures make of it a “genre masturbatoire”. Further, as lawyer Emmanuel Pierrat confirms, it is “un des genres éditoriaux les plus périlleux judiciairement”, giving rise to legal proceedings under France’s stringent privacy laws as its writers weave into their narratives recognizable individuals, often without their consent. Framed, then, as a crime against literature, taste, decency and the right to privacy, autofiction is frequently castigated as a “symptôme révélateur de l’esprit du temps”, leaving its writers exasperated at the regularity with which they are called upon to justify their project.

§2 Christine Angot has long been positioned at the sharp end of such debates. An un-consenting author, she has carved out her distinctive terrain by negation, refusing to settle within a recognized position on the self-narrative scale and establishing the terms of her practice heuristically in tandem with each new work. One constant is Angot’s argument for and demonstration of, an especially intimate interweaving and blurring of writing and lived experience, which fold into one another in an unending, disorientating relay. The production and reception of each work thus enter the diegesis (the legal wrangling over the naming of protagonists that is written into L’Inceste or the breathless account of responses to L’Inceste in Quitter la ville are good examples) and readers are keenly aware of being positioned within an evolving constellation of stakeholders, including the real individuals who are incorporated in Angot’s work.

§3 A further constant is Angot’s pursuit of an idiosyncratically paradoxical pact with the reader, the central ethos of which is doubt. The intensity, intimacy and experiential immediacy of Angot’s first-person, present-tense accounts leave involved readers open to particular kinds of bruising, abruptly exposing the assumptions that underpin naïve reading positions as it becomes unclear whether the (often disturbing) experiences narrated in her work are to be approached as ‘truth’ or as fabrications with ‘truth-value’. A range of unstable defences and obstacles, such as the anti-Lejeunean distinction sometimes
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drawn between Angot the author and Christine the narrator/protagonist militate against lazy reading and encourage new patterns of engagement and investment.

§4 If Angot’s work is shot through with uneasy relations wherein trust is betrayed and consent unclear, this creative principle may be traced, as several critics argue, to the incest narrative which contaminates it at source and which pervades the corpus as both theme and founding trope. Indeed, it is tempting to read Angot’s entire, performative project as driven by repetition compulsion: thus she is repeatedly led not only to explore in her work, but also deliberately to create through it, relations which highlight vulnerability and which explore what it means to be instrumentalized and unconsenting. This article’s analysis of Les Petits will explore the latest episode in the “long feuilleton fascinant” of Angot’s life-writing as an especially concentrated case-study of ethics and consent. It will argue that the novel, in tandem with the subsequent justificatory essay which it generates, constitutes a landmark in the author’s articulation of the relationship between life and life-writing, confirming her evolving concern less with self, self-fashioning and self-performance than with others and with social problems. It is the author’s determination to “montrer où se cache le ‘je ne suis pas libre’ des uns et des autres” (AB 35) that drives her latest work.

Ethics and Consent in Les Petits

§5 Les Petits traces the trajectory of Billy, a Martiniquais musician, from his first meeting with Hélène, a white woman, to the couple’s establishing of a family, their violent separation and the subsequent legal battle over the father’s rights to have access to their children. In the first two-thirds of the work an unsituated, third-person narrator provides a condensed, present-tense account of the relationship between the protagonists. Billy is portrayed as phlegmatic and quiet, Hélène as manipulative and violent. The narrative voice is uncharacteristically restrained: Angot’s nervous first-person flow is replaced by something clipped, measured and apparently objective. We could be reading a fictional micro-narrative of a failing relationship; a latter-day Adolphe. Angot anatomises with dry, dispassionate concision the wrenching and the power dynamic at work.

§6 With its reference to powerless persons – specifically, but not only, children - the novel’s title alludes to the problems of consent which it raises with particular acuity. Les Petits explores consent as it applies to the competing needs of protagonists who struggle against each other’s agendas. And Angot’s novel considers how categories of individual are objectified and pre-judged by society – especially on racial grounds - and takes note of the lack of scope for refusing to consent to the repercussions of such categorization. In particular, a much cited incident wherein Hélène urges Billy to have her name tattooed upon his body (LP 23) becomes a pivotal point, implicitly connecting the dynamic of a personal relationship with the entire history of slavery. Hélène’s attempted subjugation of Billy is clearly played out in this broader context, consistent with the author’s aim to show through intimate domestic drama that “un
appartement n’est pas un espace privé” and that “toute la violence sociale et politique du monde arrive très bien à passer par les murs”\(^4\). Ethical issues and problems of consent are also raised by aspects of the novel’s structure and conception, as I shall now argue.

§7 *Les Petits* reserves some of the violent - and violently pleasurable - jolts in reading position which Angot is adept at producing. Belatedly and abruptly, the author establishes her own autofictional place in the text, slipping the first person quietly into the narrative: “Après un concert à Montreuil, qui se termine plus tard que prévu un soir, il [Billy] m’emprunte mon téléphone” (*LP* 115). Thus a new, melded author/narrator figure enters the diegesis as Billy’s current partner, on the periphery of his family life and a powerless witness of his separation from his children. A revision of the entire work’s narrative focalization is at once in order, for the author/narrator’s implication means that she cannot be impartial. Autofiction’s “contradiction dynamique”\(^5\) and its familiar, productive discomforts now begin to dominate as the tectonic plates of the narrative shift: issues of objectivity must be examined afresh; the narrator becomes newly implicated in the ethics of the production of both Billy and Hélène and the reader’s consent is challenged.

§8 Authorial involvement in *Les Petits* is deepened by accretions of especially difficult paratextual material with which assessments of the book rapidly became enmeshed. This material once more puts to the test Angot’s habitual protestations that “Je ne lave pas MON linge sale. Mais le drap social”\(^6\), and that her narrator is detached from the sticky matter of the author’s life. Media sources divulged information about such close correspondence between events inside and outside the novel that ethical and legal issues inevitably inflected its reception: once it was clear that the work not only described but had itself generated legal proceedings, it became impossible to engage in a reading which was not thickened by the porousness of orders of experience\(^7\). As readers we are enmeshed by proxy in the problems of consent which, we come to realize, are at stake in the interface between book and world: as text and reality loop into each other we wonder whether individuals whose lives feed (into) the narrative are consenting, what the costs might be if they are not, and where we ourselves stand among the consenting and un-consenting voices that coalesce and orbit around *Les Petits*. In a vigorous defence of the work, Tiphaïne Samoyault pinpoints the emergence of a new literary charge levelled at Angot: that of “le plagiat du réel ou le plagiat de la vie”\(^8\), a paradoxical and peculiarly contemporary accusation which reveals more about the shared unease generated by autofiction than it does about autofiction itself, and which resonates interestingly with other recent French literary disputes about the ownership of experience\(^9\).

§9 The charges levelled at *Les Petits* appear to be anticipated by the photograph of Angot chosen for the paper band which enfolds the otherwise bland Flamma-rion cover, for it is dynamically implicated in the autofictional problematic. Its emotional temperature is unusual. Looking drained and conflicted, Angot gazes diagonally at something outside the frame, her hand clutching at her head in what is constructed to feel like a very private moment. The image is intended to capture something beyond a writer’s interest in marketing her work: Angot is
entirely, earnestly absorbed in something else and it is that quality of absorption that defines her current project. The portrait, in addition, is double: a back view of Angot is reflected in a window. This second image, sunk into the band’s purple background, suggests splitting, vulnerability and only partial self-knowledge. The transaction initiated with readers through the photograph is subtle: we consent, in opening the book, to become voyeurs of intimate distress and to engage with the intellectual and ethical problems posed by Angot’s life-writing. Perhaps the photograph also suggests that we may, by our possible opprobrium, collude in the author’s anticipated isolation. Whatever the case, it shows an author who has deliberately placed herself under the sword of Damocles - a metaphor for Billy’s experience within Les Petits (LP 81; LP 89) - for she has produced a narrator who is driven by precisely the same frustrated lack of consent which compels her to write the novel in the first place. What, more precisely, are the mechanisms through which the un-consenting author structures this troubling work?

The Un-consenting Author

§10 Les Petits is constructed in response to a pre-existing document, the report of a family psychologist, which is folded into and which drives the novel. In interview, Angot describes how she studied this report obsessively. It is this document which is deemed by the Social Services to provide an authoritative version of the failed relationship around which the novel is constructed and upon which is based the ruling of the Family Affairs Judge. Les Petits stands in competitive relationship to it, as a counter-report which seeks to undermine its validity. Angot’s novel embodies, in fact, a threefold refusal: refusal to consent to the particular manipulation of reality effected by this key text; refusal of its claims to scientific objectivity; and refusal that it be uniquely determining. In setting her narrative against the psychologist’s report, she seeks to compare the authority of two very different orders of narrative and equates their power to intervene in lives.

§11 One of the most compelling sections of Les Petits (LP 153-168) explores the psychologist’s involvement. It describes the visits, both to the narrator’s own apartment and to that of Hélèn e, from which the report’s conclusions are derived. Angot thus incorporates certain of the questions put to Billy along with his measured answers and extrapolates from the report to imagine and recreate the corresponding question-and-answer sessions conducted with Hélène. Very early in this episode, the report’s validity is implicitly challenged. The narrator underscores the slightness of contact between the psychologist and those whose lives he is to affect (he meets them once in his office and once in their home); the time lapse between the interview and the production of the report (“On l’aura dans trois mois”, LP 154); its lack of correlation with the facts as she knows them to be (“Je le lirai plusieurs fois, pour essayer de comprendre”, LP 154); and its radical authority (the report is “déterminant”, LP 154).

§12 Described as schematic, the report passes reductively from one category of observation to another (upbringing and education; conjugal life; living conditions; responses to parenthood; behavioural traits), ‘ticking the boxes’ in an impersonal summary. Snatches of interview material are intercalated with the
fragments of the report to which they give rise:

_M. Ferrier veut circonscrire son comportement violent à une seule dispute, la dernière, Mlle Lucas évoque des violences conjugales répétées sur huit années. Il y a là un décalage dans leurs discours respectifs._

Pendant tout ce temps, j’avais une seule préoccupation, avoir suffisamment de force pour protéger mes enfants. (LP 159)

§13 The reader thus hears Hélène produce an alternative version to everything the narrative has revealed thus far. Effectively a co-narrator of the report, she constructs herself as a fearful and passive victim of persistent domestic violence, completely in thrall to her partner, avoiding the involvement of the law in order to protect her children and eventually able to summon the strength to seek police intervention thanks to Buddhist philosophy. Hélène’s version of Billy is of a violent man, subject to sudden outbursts of anger; a man who did not want his children and for whom visiting rights are of value only in as much as they allow him to exercise continued domination over her. It is Hélène’s account of reality that the psychologist adopts, and renders authoritative:

_M. Billy Ferrier parvenait à maintenir un sentiment d’angoisse extrêmement déstabilisant pour la famille. Avec beaucoup de pudeur et d’émotion, Mlle Lucas évoque des violences conjugales régulières, et deux agressions successives, un 11 novembre il y a quelques années contre sa fille, et contre elle-même l’année dernière. (LP 161)_

_Comme beaucoup de victimes de violences conjugales, Mlle Lucas porte seule sa souffrance. Elle finit par se désocialiser. (LP 159)_

§14 Angot’s starting point, then, is a radically over-simplified version of events and of character which exonerates Hélène entirely. By the time readers are presented with this version however, we are habituated, through detailed depiction, to the violence of Hélène and the pacifism of Billy. We have formed judgements which are diametrically opposed to those of the report: Hélène’s assessment of Billy as “vraiment quelqu’un de toxique” (LP 162) maps neatly instead onto our assessment of her.

§15 Angot’s account undercuts the official report in a variety of further ways. On the one hand, her writing sometimes seems to borrow stylistically from its compact and confident assessment of lives, indicating her desire to challenge it on its own turf (it is interesting in this regard that Jean Barbe’s description of Angot’s narrative as a “récit glacial” with a “mécanique impitoyable” is also singularly consistent with the psychologist’s account). On the other hand, Angot is also careful to contrast such blunt short-hand with a more fine-grained, intimate and proximate account which restores the fuller complexity of a lived relationship in its day-to-day minutiae. Various modes of producing the real thus co-exist in _Les Petits_, with striking exercises in abridgement cutting into the work’s more nuanced texture. The first two pages of clipped, notational observations, for instance, offer a _reductio ad absurdum_ of condensation, circumscribing the text’s key relationship in miniature and making huge temporal leaps between the couple’s first meeting (“La première fois que Billy a vu Hélène c’était dans le couloir d’un hôtel”, _LP_ 7), and the current separation (“Aujourd’hui il s’en fout d’Hélène, elle peut mourir même si elle veut”, _LP_ 8).
Almost two hundred pages later, the start of the book’s short final section links very deliberately back to the incipit (“La dernière fois qu’il l’a vue, c’était à la médiation”, LP 187), reminding us once more of the need for a fuller account. Throughout the work, an insistent present tense underlines the immediacy of involvement in the everyday, before it has coalesced into a set of labels, judgements and meanings.

§16 Les Petits thus raises a number of broad questions about the production of narrative, its context, its legitimacy and its impact. Where does the difference lie between a novel and a report? What are the pressures at work behind self-presentation? Who has sufficient power to make their narrative stick? In this instance, the establishment is shown to produce a narrative about Billy which suits its prejudices. By and large, Angot’s protagonists are only too ready to consent to the construction of Billy as an aggressive Black and an irresponsible father: the woman outside Monoprix who flees from him (LP 47-48); neighbours (LP 102); the police, who consent to a system that slots him within a negative typology in spite of the evidence (LP 127); and the penal system more broadly. Billy too internalizes the idea that his expected place is on the wrong side of the law and his partial consent to this also appears to motivate the narrator’s intervention. It is she who organizes a get-away taxi to ensure that Billy’s children spend a day with him (LP 128-131); it is she who narrates on his behalf his experiences of police cells (LP 61-64; LP 103-111). In response, then, to the legal establishment’s version of a set of relationships which matter to her, the author uses her place in the literary establishment to make public an alternative version. This version too, although it seems more even-handed than that of the psychologist, is partial; this version too produces a problem regarding consent; this version too has the power to disrupt lives. Its singular virtue, by comparison with the report, is its consistent interrogation of the very problem of impartiality in narrative.

Narratorial investment

§17 In order to situate herself with regard to Billy and his children, the narrator must also situate herself with regard to Hélène, a process which is subtly managed. Indeed, the textual production of Hélène is one of the most interesting, complex and ethically loaded features of Les Petits. Once the connection between the novel’s protagonists and extra-diegetic individuals is revealed, it is especially our reading of Hélène that assumes a dual focus (we read “Hélène”; we think “Hélène/Elise”); and we are particularly alive to Angot’s conspicuous creation of a version of Hélène to which Hélène herself cannot consent; indeed the reader’s uneasy pleasure undoubtedly derives in no small part from the text’s production of a satisfying retribution which renders Hélène voiceless and powerless. Our reading is shadowed, our perspective double, for we cannot but keep in mind a potential parallel reading undertaken by Hélène. It is clear that the text’s will to objectivity is partially eroded by the narrator’s own emotional investment in Hélène. If the conclusion of the first short episode, “Aujourd’hui il s’en fout d’Hélène. Elle peut mourir même si elle veut” (LP 8), is intended to convey Billy’s current indifference, it expresses still more strongly an active hostility on the narrator’s part.
§18 Let us analyse one key episode wherein the narrator’s investment in Hélène is sharply articulated: a quarrel over a loaf leading to Billy’s landing of a blow which signals the end of the couple’s relationship and the immediate intervention of the law (LP 94-98). Fleshing-out the events to which the psychologist’s report so schematically alludes, Angot recreates the couple’s escalating anger and in so doing knots the narrator into the tangle of emotions. Especially notable is her attentiveness to a tic of pronunciation which characterizes Hélène’s speech. She has the narrator settle upon this, teasing out unrelentingly both its ugly peculiarity and the revulsion which, she claims, it creates in Billy:

Elle a des inflexions très ouvertes sur les nasales [...] dès qu’il y a un ment, on a l’impression que la mâchoire tombe, ça s’ouvre dans la gorge, il a toujours détesté ces inflexions qui tombent, qui donnent l’impression qu’elle a du fromage blanc dans la bouche [...] Comme si elle mangeait un truc onctueux, qui faisait déraper le syllabe. (LP 97)

§19 Whether or not the trait related here has its roots in extra-textual reality is almost incidental for the passage rehearses so insistently the narrator’s distaste that it becomes more than an accomplished literary account of a domestic argument; it becomes newly performative. It is the narrator, not Billy who invests such energy into revisiting past events in the immediacy of the present tense. Something of Angot’s habitual voice, its effervescent acidity, resurfaces here. What we are becoming privy to is in fact the narrator’s emotional need to explore the residue of a former relationship in a current one; to appropriate events which have been narrated to her at second hand. Momentarily, the narrator and Hélène come together in a shared capacity to harangue; to cling to their quarry. The narrator is as unrelenting in her pursuit of Hélène as is Hélène in pursuit of Billy. There are, then, curiously potent moments of identification between the two women: indeed, in interviews Angot reiterates that she recognizes Hélène’s “petite musique” as her own.[24]

§20 The deep emotional tangle in which the narrator is caught becomes yet more intricate and intense as she explores her involvement with the protagonists who give this work its title: Hélène’s children. “[L]es enfants n’ont pas leur consentement” explains Angot in a powerful text concerning the status of the child, published shortly after Les Petits appeared on the shelves. Les Petits accordingly takes the figure of the child as its key non-consenting category of individual. Throughout, the text suggestively indicates the ways in which children become hostage to the adult world, either by exposing disputes in parenting style between Hélène and Billy or, more profoundly, through indirect tactics, by omitting the children as fully-fledged protagonists and ensuring that their voices are seldom heard. Interestingly, it is precisely once children are on the scene that Billy too is instrumentalized as “juste quelqu’un qui peut faire des enfants métis” (LP 53). The children become, as Fabienne Pascaud observes, a pretext “à une joute masculine-féminin, noir-blanc, sans espérance aucune”.[26]

§21 It is maternal positioning in - and around - Les Petits that is one of the text’s most inflammatory aspects. The narrator’s record of her growing tenderness towards Clara, Jérémie, Diego and the youngest child Maurice; her account of their visit “en famille” to the parc Monceau (LP 171-175); her implicit plugging
of gaps in their experience (she gives Maurice a pony ride and shows him the Champs Elysées); her rectitude in the face of Hélène’s implied vindictiveness (she is sensible about her gift to Maurice of a special box which Hélène destroys, *LP* 177); her notes on touching the children’s cheeks and hair and on their growing confidence in her, all reach a provocative climax in her declaration of love for them ("je suis bouleversée. Je les... AIME", *LP* 178) and in the question asked by Maurice, when he is told that his mother is waiting for him: "Quelle maman?" (*LP* 178). The figure of Hélène as un-consenting reader is especially live to us at such uneasy moments.

§22 In a fleeting, but key, intertextual reference to children as hostages of the adult world, the narrator evokes Ken Loach’s *Ladybird, ladybird* (1994), a hard-hitting drama-documentary concerning a British woman’s dispute with Social Services over the care and custody of her four children. Loach’s film explores similar territory to Angot’s book, including the major social problem of broken families, patterns of abuse (Loach’s protagonist Maggie was beaten by her partner) and the grafting of a new relationship onto a damaged family unit. Film and book share their critical appraisal of a key scene (the welcoming of a social worker into the family home) and, it is implied, a shared documentary aesthetic fed by a strong ethical drive. Thus, while it is far from surprising in the flurry of controversy generated by *Les Petits* to see Angot once again refining and defending her practice of life-writing, the degree to which this defence is characterized by ethical considerations is unprecedented. It will be useful briefly to consider how Angot glosses *Les Petits* in the manifesto-like text ‘*Acte Biographique*’ which appears as a coda to the novel a few months after its publication. What are the key features of Angot’s latest observations on her writing? It is with an analysis of ethics and consent as expressed in these that I will draw this article to a close.

‘*Acte Biographique*’: Concluding Remarks

§23 In ‘*Acte Biographique*’, Angot argues vigorously for the ontological and ethical necessity of the uncomfortable life-writing practiced in *Les Petits*, inscribing it forcefully within the latest debate to mark French literary history: that involving the so called “retour du réel” in the novel27. Her relationship with the real is characterized here as adversarial; as a “combat à deux” (*AB* 33), undertaken in the name of personal freedoms. The author’s task is to elaborate a form and a voice which will ‘catch reality at it’, exposing unarticulated repressions and insidious assumptions and bringing them raw to the page. Preparing to write is thus equated, rather unconventionally, with the meticulous planning of a hold-up, motivated not by self-gain but by ethical integrity. Referring to the forthcoming trial brought against her by Elise Bidoit, Angot thus professes incredulity at the idea that jurisprudence might favour those who are affronted by her objective account of unpalatable truths and portrays herself as the injured party: “Perdre des procès parce qu’on a dit ce qui est ?” (*AB* 31).

§24 Angot’s ethical account of her project is backed up by her rather surprising implied alignment of it with nineteenth-century Naturalism. Her essay reclaims the movement’s drive towards psychological realism and objective knowledge
of contemporary life as well as its scientific pretensions. Literature thus becomes once more a “processus chimique [...] microscopique et macroscopique” with “un intérêt et une portée scientifiques” (AB 35). The writer’s sensitive instruments of perception make available, as they expose the real, an order of truth which is deeper, argues Angot, than that obtained via other methods and mechanisms commonly thought of as objective. Such revelatory writing comes, however, at a personal cost: Angot once more underlines in this essay the violent transformation required by “[l]a suppression du moi qui est nécessaire pour faire advenir le je qui dirigera le livre à écrire” (AB 36).

§25
‘Acte biographique’ sees Angot situating herself not only with regard to other forms of realism, but to other practices of autofiction. While she formerly rejected the term’s applicability to her work, here she consents to it, provided that appropriate distinctions are made. She proposes that autofiction’s ethical emphasis be shifted away from problems of reader/writer involvement and towards the writer’s commitment to the real, for as a writer there is “un contrat sur soi qui vous oblige à dire ce qui est” (AB 39). A new term needs to be found, she argues, for “cette écurie qui n’est pas celle de Lejeune-Doubrovsky [...] cet acte obligatoire qui ne laisse pas le choix” (AB 39). Thus, where theorists of autofiction habitually emphasize its connection to intimate forms of writing, Angot argues instead for autofiction as subversive critical practice; as “de la critique sociale dissimulée sous des traits biographiques, pour ne pas faire d’ombre aux professionnels de la pensée” (AB 39). The characteristics of such autofiction are its clarity of vision, its determination to find an appropriate form to express social realities, its veering away from the ‘moi’ of the author, its status as an objective, quasi-scientific mode and its determination to “retir[e] à la société un pan de son contrôle sur la vérité” (AB 39).

§26
If Angot focuses in her essay on literature’s ethical weight and on the ways in which it is bound by irrevocable contracts, it is clear that her understanding of such obligations relates solely to the writer/real relationship, the integrity of which overrides all other interests. Thus, “[l]a pression du réel à décrire” (AB 35) outweighs any scruples about the disruption of delicate social ties which may ensue. The concluding paragraph of Les Petits reserves a further jolt for the reader in this regard, for the author/narrator seems to confirm that her text has indeed had as real – and as toxic – an impact as the psychologist’s report with which it competes:

[Hélène] a une boule dans le sein qui est peut-être cancéreuse. J’ai pensé que c’était de ma faute. Que c’était à cause du livre, que je l’avais tuée. Comme après la sortie de L’Inceste quand mon père est mort. Maurice ne voulait pas me dire bonjour, il ne voulait pas m’embrasser. Il marchait dans le couloir, devant moi, sans se retourner. (LP 188)

§27
In chronological terms, this ending is perplexing. Did Hélène/Elise know about Les Petits before its publication? Is Angot’s conclusion purely proleptic? In fact, the final paragraph sends us back to Angot’s previous work, Le Marché des amants, which Elise Bidoit had already charged with violating her private life, although this back story is not necessary for the reader to understand that the work’s parting shot concerns the cost to the writer of her allegiance to the real. For Philippe Forest, these concluding lines require the reader to reconsider the
text as “une réflexion sur l’art du roman envisagé comme une parole de justice et de vérité dont l’exercice meurtrier oblige l’artiste à assumer la culpabilité.” Angot’s commitment to writing the real and consent to any consequent guilt are all the more troubling given that the potentially injured parties include children, a situation already produced by her courageous exploration of mother-daughter interaction in Léonore, toujours. The violent harnessing of children to adult agendas which so preoccupies her is not only illustrated in her latest novel but, she seems keen to confirm by her conclusion, enacted by it. In spite of her proclaimed sensitivity to childhood, Angot here risks being ranked once again among ‘culpable’ mother creators who are castigated for producing works which take real children hostage.

§28 Angot’s latest book, then, and her critical framing of it challenge us once again to consent to her difficult negotiations with reality. Critics’ responses are polarized: Jean Barbe, following Pierre Jourde in his consideration of Angot as a blot on the world of French letters and revolted by what he considers to be her predatory relationship with life off the page, sees Les Petits as “un exercice unilatéral de diffamation qui dépasse de loin les prérègatives de la littérature.” Others argue unequivocally for the book’s aesthetic and ethical subtlety and restraint: indeed, Philippe Forest bases his account on the concept of “délicatesse”, a term which belongs “à la fois au vocabulaire de l’art et à celui de la morale” and which he attributes to both the author and her novel.

§29 The average experience of reading Angot is, however, probably more conflicted than such a Manichean division suggests. Despite the author’s rallying declaration in Quitter la ville that “C’est pour ou c’est contre”, it is paradoxically possible to be both at once. We may succumb to the narrative momentum of Les Petits, to the unfolding tangle of emotions, to the intractable complexity of fine-grained distinctions between “l’intimité de l’écriture” and “l’écriture des intimités”, yet still experience some unease about Angot’s involvement with the real. The truth is doubtless that we are suspended between conflicting responses which interfere productively with each other; that we are, to borrow from Angot’s exploration of her position within the central incest trope of her work, only ever “presque consentant[s]” to this latest project. Beyond dispute, however, are the inherent interest of its experimental entanglement with the real, and its author’s resolute attachment to her distinctive version of the ethical obligation of autofiction referred to in this article’s epigraph.

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NOTES

Burgelin, “Pour l’autofiction”, p. 8.


As Barbara Havercroft notes in “Le refus du romanesque? Hybridité générique et écriture de l’inceste chez Christine Angot” (forthcoming), Angot’s writing stands in productive tension with autofiction, confession, témoinage and the autobiographical “I”, provoking refined consideration of their conventions.


Paris, Flammarion, 2011, henceforth LP.


“Acte biographique”, in Forest (ed.), Je & Moi, p. 31-40, henceforth AB.


Burgelin, “Pour l’autofiction”, p. 11.

Quitter la ville, p. 161-2.

Le Nouvel Observateur, ironically manifesting less discretion than Angot, revealed that the “source” for Hélène was one Elise Bidoit and that her children “passent un week-end sur deux chez la romancière” (“Comment Christine Angot a détruit la vie d’Elise B”, 9 Feb. 2011. http://www.actualité.nouvelobs.com/Elise%20Bidoit). The magazine’s apparent parti pris against Angot began with her previous work, Le Marché des amants (Paris, Seuil, 2008), which Elise Bidoit also deemed to violate her privacy. On the intricacies of these legal cases see Pierre Assouline, “Christine Angot attaquée par l’un de ses personnages” (http://passouline.blog.lemonde.fr/2011/02/18/christine-angot-attaquee-par-lun-de-ses-personnages/).


A notable example concerns Camille Laurens’s accusation that Marie Darrieussecq was “squatting in a world of maternal bereavement of which she had no first-hand experience. “Enjeux d’un conflit” (Autofiction(s). Colloque de Cerisy 2008, p. 495-525) contains essays from Laurens (“Marie Darrieussecq ou le syndrome du coucou”) and Darrieussecq (“La Fiction à la première personne ou l’écriture immorale”) setting out their respective ethical positions on the issue.

Entretien avec Jean-Michel Devésa.


Angot gives space for Hélène’s viewpoint (e.g. LP 97) and incorporates moments when Billy is shown as unreasonable (e.g. LP 145) or frustratingly passive.

Entretien avec Jean-Michel Devésa.


“Ce n’est pas MON LIVRE. C’EST l’histoire de personne, l’autofiction n’est pas possible”, Quitter la ville, p. 158.

Forest, “Christine Angot: Les Petits”.

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Forest, “Christine Angot: *Les Petits*”.


See Rye, “Public Places, Intimate Spaces: Christine Angot’s Incest Narratives’ for discussion of partial consent.