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**Monique  
Wittig,  
la déflagration**



# MONIQUE WITTIG

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## Healing the language

MONIQUE WITTIG HAS BUILT A MAJOR BODY OF POETIC AND POLITICAL WORK, TOUCHING ON AN ALMOST TOTAL ART. CONSTANTLY RENEWING HERSELF, SHE HAS CARRIED OUT SUBTLE YET FEROCIOUS FORMAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL OPERATIONS TO ERADICATE ALL SOCIAL AND SEXUAL DOMINATION SINCE HER PRIX MÉDICIS SIXTY YEARS AGO FOR *THE OPOPONAX*, THE STATE OF PLAY IN THE WITTIGIAN ARENA.

Who was Monique Wittig? Her friends describe her as discreet, gentle, a good listener, funny. Celebrated at demonstrations, quoted on placards and tote bags, recognized as the radical lesbian and feminist figure behind the famous sentence "lesbians are not women," the enigmatic Monique Wittig remains little-known in France today as a "writer" - and not a writer, since she insisted that writing should be the site of an unprecedented freedom, that of gender absence. Yet the work of this author, activist, theorist, translator and screenwriter is considered a twentieth century "classic" in the United States. Published in a dozen languages, she is currently being translated into Chinese, Finnish, and Swedish.

The year 2024 opened with a number of works questioning the possible or desirable links between literature and poetry, and it's surprising that Monique Wittig's fresh and vibrant responses, which have always navigated this space, are not more widely studied. By universalizing her minority lesbian point of view, she has brought about a unique epistemological revolution not without links to Proust's work: "At the end of *La Recherche du temps perdu*, it's done. Proust has succeeded in transforming the 'real' world into a uniquely homosexual one," she writes. Against all binarity and

dogmatism, to read Wittig is to radically experience dissolution, dismemberment, multiplicity, demasurement, the literary murder of conventions and the possible overcoming of classes and categories. It also means going through hell, meeting monsters, facing the unknown, killing the enemy, and embracing a terribly abundant imagination, for Monique Wittig invented a world at the same time as she reinvented the language to express it. Her work has established itself as a "war machine" in a literary field that was - and still is? - hostile. She calls this situation a "Trojan horse": "And the stranger, non-conformist, unassimilable this Trojan horse appears, the longer it takes to be accepted. Only two symposia have been devoted to it in France since 2001. It is slowly making its way into universities, and its transmission has long remained dependent on militant circles. Much remains to be discovered of this ambitious and total work, which Éditions de Minuit has been reissuing in paperback since 2018, and of this revolutionary author capable of admitting naturally that she also wrote to seduce.



Expressing what exists but has not yet been named. This is the quest that drives all her books.

Portrait of Monique Wittig (1935-2003), in 1987.  
(Colette Geoffrey)

Monique Wittig was born in Dannemarie, Alsace, in 1935. She died suddenly in 2003, at 67, in the United States. Little is known about her, and even less about her childhood, since she wrote so well from this point of view. What we do know is that she had a religious upbringing and that her feminist consciousness took shape very

early, from the age of 12, when she made the decision never to marry and drew the implacable consequences: "By not marrying, I would escape the dependence of women and, therefore, I would not become a woman." In the 1950s, she moved to Paris, where she studied literature and Chinese at the Sorbonne.

Monique Wittig was 29 when her first novel appeared, the striking strangeness of its title foreshadowing the singularity of the work to come. *L'Opoponax* was published in 1964 by Éditions de Minuit, for whom she had worked as a reader and who would remain her main publisher. Jérôme Lindon was the one who introduced her to writing. Having spotted her talent in a previous unpublished manuscript, he granted her a six-month leave of absence to complete the project. *L'Opoponax* could be described as an abstract novel about childhood, a childhood taken over by a systematic, heady, and destabilizing pronoun, the indefinite pronoun "on" freed from the question of gender. "The *on* of stifled, silent childhood", "a philosophical problem that concerns everyone", recapitulates Wittig. Catherine Legrand's impersonal point of view, from infancy to adolescence, allows us to follow the constitution of a being and to touch upon a pre-social humanity. *L'Opoponax* is political in that it takes a minority viewpoint - we've never before read a book about childhood from a child's point of view - but also because it finally shows little girls as active subjects of their own desires. "A tide of little girls that comes over you and overwhelms you (...), a tide of children", writes Marguerite Duras, who describes this tsunami as a "masterpiece." Although virtually unnoticed by critics at the time, the lesbian theme is already doubly present: in the budding passion between Catherine Legrand and Valérie Borge and in the search for new words - "opoponax" - to express what exists without yet having been named. This is the quest that will drive all of Monique Wittig's books for more than thirty years, which was to have a profound influence on her "Literary Workshop" (the title of her thesis, published in 2010 and largely devoted to the author of *Tropismes*). The woman she described as "the genius of the century" worked "with language like raw material": "Suddenly, in Sarraute, you realize that you're living on the run, ceaselessly, without a moment's rest, night and day, when you're asleep and when you're awake" (paper presented at the Sarraute symposium, 1989). Armed with this conviction, Monique Wittig pursued, from one book to the next, the possibility of a "plastie" of language on reality, politicizing this physical relationship, so Sarrautian, between words and the body.

This resounding entry into literature (*L'Opoponax* sold around 30,000 copies in the years following its release) came shortly before the first acts of her militant commitment. Her participation in the events of '68 and the publication of her second novel, *Les Guérillères*, were almost concomitant. Her activism began with the company of several women, and we can't help but think of the female choruses that populate her texts: "It so happened that at the time I wrote *Les Guérillères*, I met

several women I liked," she declares in an interview with Josy Thibaut (1979). From October onwards, Wittig strongly felt the need to "start a women's group. The initial idea was to propose a radical and virulent rereading of Freud, in the form of a manifesto. Having just translated the Marxist anti-imperialist philosopher Herbert Marcuse (*One-Dimensional Man*, 1968), Wittig had in mind the guerrilla groups in Laos and Vietnam, which certainly inspired the title of *Les Guérillères*. Then Wittig reunited with a former lover, Josiane Chanel, now in a relationship with Antoinette Fouque. With Suzanne Fenn, they met at Wittig's initiative, who took charge of the theoretical development of their nascent movement and laid the groundwork for her own materialist feminism. Marxist. She spoke of bonded labor, the invisible exploitation of women, sexual oppression, street harassment... A few meetings later, the Mouvement de libération des femmes (MLF) was born, and she and her sister Gille co-wrote one of its first manifestos, entitled "Combat pour la libération de la femme" (the plural "des femmes" was removed against their advice), published in May 1970 in *L'Idiot international*. Monique Wittig, who at the time called herself Théo, took part in the first actions and was already diverting some of the readership won over by *L'Opoponax*. In August of the same year, alongside Christine Delphy and a few others, she laid a wreath at the tomb of the unknown soldier at the Arc de Triomphe: "There is someone more unknown than the unknown soldier, it's his wife." Monique Wittig was also one of the signatories to the Manifesto of the 343 calling for the legalization of abortion.





On August 26, 1970, nine feminist activists, including Christine Delphy, Monique Wittig and Christiane Rochefort, brought flowers "to the wife of the unknown soldier" under the Arc de triomphe.

Les Guérillères, published in 1969, was both the fruit and the driving force of this formidable revolutionary intuition. After the indie "on" of L'Opoponax, the writer did not confine herself to any particular genre or literary expectation. Here she overturns narrative form with a massive, anaphoric use of the feminine plural pronoun "elles" in a form of epic prose poem: sales (4,000 copies) and critical reception weakens. This hybrid text pushes back the boundaries of reality to evoke a place and time without existence, in which "elles", having defeated "ils" through war, form an exclusively feminine society. The nagging repetition of "elles" and above all "elles disent", the hammered enumerations, the austere, cold syntax, the sacred, solemn atmosphere surrounding the actions of these guerillas and the composition in fragments build a jerky, martial, irresistible rhythm, fit to move crowds. Here too, the narrative is twisted, and the three parts that organize the text, each announced by a mysterious circle, are not arranged chronologically. "They say they cultivate disorder in all its forms."

In 1971, Monique Wittig temporarily joined Les Gouines rouges, a radical lesbian feminist movement founded in reaction to the misogyny of the Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire. Two years later, *Le Corps lesbien* (The Lesbian Body) was published, its title alone placing the lesbian question at the heart of her literary project. The success of *L'Opoponax* is no longer a reality, but Jérôme Lindon continues to support the work. In this third text, which she herself describes as "cryptic", Monique Wittig makes the most radical departure from narrative, bringing her poetic, experimental language to a climax in elegiac prose, somewhere between prayer and the sensual lyricism of a lesbian hymn. As scholar Aurore Turbiau puts it the lesbianism that Wittig perceived as the possibility of breaking out of genre categories is reflected in her texts, which absorb existing literary genres to implode them and "destabilize the agreed order of discourse". This was the case in *Les Guérillères*, but even more so in *Le Corps lesbien*, where we find traces of "Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Du Bellay, Genet, Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Raymond Roussel, Nathalie Sarraute, the New Testament, the Song of Songs, the Homeric poems". In a kind of trance, the aim is to dissect language to evoke love and the lesbian body, to cut out piece by piece, in the very flesh of the text, this body.

Made up of two parts, opening and closing in on itself, Wittig compares its shape to "a cashew nut, an almond, a vulva". The capitalized lists of first names in *Les Guérillères* have been replaced in *Le Corps lesbien* by lists of anatomical terms, "L'IODE LES ORGANES LE CERVEAU LE CŒUR LE FOIE LES VISCÈRES LA VULVE LES MYCOSES LES FERMENTATIONS LES VILLOSITÉS LA POURRITURE LES ONGLES LES DENTS LES POILS LES CHEVEUX (...)" saturating the surface of a page to the point of flooding the margins. The pronoun at work this time is a divided subject, a "j/e" which, through its constant dialogue with an interchangeable "tu", seeks to express what "has no name for the moment". Its destabilizing slash, a sign of excess, is part of the desire that overflows the text. It also reflects her entry into literature, as she analyzes it in the foreword to her translation of *The Passion of Djuna Barnes*: "Every minority writer (who is conscious of being a minority) enters literature obliquely, so to speak. The great problems that preoccupy literati, his contemporaries, appear to him obliquely and distorted by his perspective." In *The Lesbian Body*, Monique Wittig de-romanticizes lesbian love, seizing on the violence inherent in all passionate love. "In an interview in December 1973, she declares: "We must put an end to the myth of the mawkish, decorative feminine homosexuality, which is harmless to heterosexuality and can even be recuperated by it. Lesbian passion is written as it declares itself: wild, powerful, organic, cannibalistic. Against symbols and metaphors - Anne Garréta speaks of "undoing a certain symbolic order" - the writer reveals everything about the lesbian loving body, right down to the organs

and entrails. A way of writing against pornography, she says, against the obscenity inseparable from "a male enterprise", "typical of the relationship men have with their own bodies and those of others".

In less than ten years, the novelist will have published three of her major texts, each of which introduces itself with different grammatical weapons "into the privileged (battle) field that is literature, where attempts to constitute the subject clash" (foreword to Djuna Barnes' book). Sometime later, she embarked on a collective writing adventure with her partner, the American mime and actress Sande Zeig, whom she had met in 1973 while giving karate lessons to feminist activists. Together, they set off writing on the Greek island of Santorini. The result is *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes* (Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary), published by Grasset, in which entry by entry an entirely lesbian world takes shape, oscillating between fiction, utopia and silenced history. Wittig and Zeig invent a world, trace a genealogy of the Amazons, and reappropriate literary history, concepts and ancient culture. This delightful "dictionary" is full of humor and irony. At random, under the heading "INCONSCIOUS", we find: "Warning to lovers, if you have an unconscious, you know about it. But even more so, if you have one, beware of the traffickers in the unconscious."



**Sande Zeig (left) and Monique Wittig in Gualala, California, 1979 (photo Adele Prandini)**

At the same time as her fight for the rights of the lesbian subject marginalized her in literature, she failed to introduce the lesbian question within the MLF. The divisions between "sexual difference" advocates and revolutionary materialist feminists



deepened to such an extent that Monique Wittig decided to move to the United States in 1976 - a move that probably contributed to her oblivion in France. This marked the beginning of a pessimistic turn in her work, expressed primarily by a period of literary silence. In the U.S., she became a professor at several universities, something she had been unable to do in France in the absence of a thesis. It was during this period that she devoted herself to her theoretical essays on lesbianism, feminism and literature, which formed the basis of her thinking on the "heterosexual contract" and are now collected in *La Pensée straight*, first published in the U.S. in 1980 (only translated into French in 2001, reissued in 2018). Her loudest polemic was triggered by a single sentence: "Lesbians are not women". If married women are the domestic property of men, then those who extricate themselves from the "sexual contract" and its clauses (reproduction, domestic work etc.) de facto no longer belong to this category of women. The assertion is of course a provocation, for Wittig's founding project is nothing less than to abolish all "gender traps". In *The Lesbian Body*, this tear in the heart of the "j/e", finally maintained in a subtle balance, can still be explained by an intrusion into a language that does not belong to her, because it is dominated by a universal masculine. Likewise, she was wary of possible reductions of her work as a writer to this single lesbian identity, erasing her literary creation. Unambiguously, and with Nathalie Sarraute, she declares that "there is no such thing as feminine writing" (just as there is no such thing as lesbian writing), referring to the theory of the essentialist view was first put forward by the writer and playwright H  l  ne Cixous (*Le Rire de la m  duse*, 1975) and taken up by several intellectuals and psychoanalysts. To which Wittig responds: "'feminine writing' is tantamount to saying that women are not part of history, and that writing is not a material production." And no doubt it's her choral writing, through the powerful "j/e" of *The Lesbian Body*, the multiple "on" of *L'Opopanax*, the warrior "elles" of *Les Gu  rill  res*, that enables her to work towards "lesbianizing symbols, lesbianizing gods and goddesses, lesbianizing Christ, lesbianizing men and women." Lesbianizing the world means eradicating all sexual domination and neutralizing the mark of gender.

Monique Wittig returned to fiction, and to a certain extent to France, in the mid-1980s. She tackled a new genre, theater, in 1984 with *The Constant Journey* (reissued in 2022, Gallimard/L'Imaginaire), a feminist rewriting of *Don Quichotte*, which played for a month at Le Rond-Point the following year. The staging, inspired by the cinema of Straub and Huillet in the art of desynchronization between sound and image (she also cultivated a great admiration for Jean-Luc Godard), recalls Wittig's ability to circulate between all the arts. A hymn to lesbian chivalry erranta, the play is again full of humor. When Quixote gets carried away and promises his sidekick Panza "a big island", Panza retorts: "Just show me one, Quixote. A very small

island." And this gesture alone, of designating rather than possessing, is also something of a stunner.

That same year, Monique Wittig published what she considered her favorite book, *Across The Acheron*. After the women's collective, the ancient chorus, the heroic Amazons of *Les Guérillères*, and the utopian islands of *The Lesbian body* this retelling of *La Divine Comédie* shows a lesbian character, "Wittig", guided in her solitary disillusionment by a certain Manastabal amidst "damned souls" unable to break their chains. Breaking with Dante's narrative, *Across The Acheron* zigzags from hell to paradise, as if to mimic the juxtaposition of two places, and to depict lesbian pauses in the hell of heteropatriarchal society. Falling from *Across The Acheron*, the short text "Paris-la-politique" seems to replay the dissensions and rifts within feminist groups. It was first published with a set of short stories in 1985, and under the title *Paris-la-politique et autres histoires* in 1999 by Editions P.O.L (in paperback, 2023). Once again, Wittig invites all readers to identify with this tide of "they". Always demonstrating an extraordinary ability to reinvent herself, both in terms of form and subject, the writer and playwright invents a geography and demonstrates how cinema has permeated her writing. The young people's picnic scene in "Une partie de campagne", for example, is described in virtuoso travelling shots, moving from one detail to another, from grass to wind, from the hesitation of a hand to smoke or drink to mosquitoes swooping on a neck.

"There's a language to invent, that's for next time", she wrote. On the eve of her death, Monique Wittig was working on a rewrite of *The Thousand and One Nights*. What pronoun would she have used to bring into existence what has yet to be named? While we await the publication of many previously unpublished works, such as her correspondances, we hope that her work will be read and reread, studied and criticized, set in motion and extended, so that the word "lesbien" on a cover no longer frightens, but is experienced as a continuous, staggering dream, something that would touch, after having been through war and hell, on a form of harmony. Monique Wittig's books transform everybody, night and day. We no longer stand in the same way.

**Flora Moricet et Feyta Dervitsiotis**

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# An Entry Into The Arena

A WIDE RANGE OF UNPUBLISHED WORKS, FROM LITERARY TO ACTIVIST PRODUCTIONS, TO DISCOVER THE STRUCTURE OF A POWERFUL THOUGHT AND WORK.

To the question of whether Monique Wittig's books reveal anything feminist, she replies: "For me, there's no difference between form and content. And with both, I thought I could go into the enemy arena - really: the enemy arena - and get something across. And it was childhood, it was the theme of childhood that allowed me to send my horse...". Everywhere, Monique Wittig has gone to challenge the established and dominant order. The texts in *Dans l'arène ennemie*, collected and selected by Théo Manton and Sara Garbagnoli, were mostly spoken or written in a university or feminist context.

Among these unpublished works, after many extremely clear precisions on her militant commitment and past divergences, Monique Wittig - so rarely - confides a little. In a 1999 interview, she recalls the broad support of her parents, right up to *The Lesbian Body* whose violence provokes "a reaction of "dread" in her mother, but her parental pride remains. Speaking of her mother, Wittig admits that "she made me a writer".

Her remarks about her more difficult texts (*The Lesbian Body*, *Aross The Acheron*), and even more about her projects that never saw the light of day, shed light on the novelist's antechamber. A small archeology of Wittig's writing takes shape, informed by the work of Proust, Rimbaud, Beckett, Gertrude Stein, Faulkner, Woolf... and, of course, Sarraute. The exchanges with the work of her untouchable "genius of the century", whose shock of words had reached the point of "fainting", are undoubtedly the most precious and original thing to be found here. In "Le lieu de l'action", Wittig takes up an analysis of the circumstances of Sarraute's speech, which she calls "a situation of interlocution": "Since its meaning derives from interrompre, i.e. to cut off speech, which does not design an act of speech as such, I extend it to any action linked to the use of speech, to the accidents of discourse (stops, excesses, defects, tone, intonation) and to the effects associated with them (tropisms, gestures)", she states during a colloque. She goes on to analyze what Sarraute's work deeply suffers: "these are words before words, before 'fathers', before 'mothers', before 'you' (...)". A crucial entry point for understanding Wittig's poetic work, when language does not belong to us.

## Flora Moricet

*Dans l'arène ennemie*. Textes et entretiens 1966-1999 Éditions de Minuit, 368 pages, €22





# In the winged cohort of words

REISSUE OF VIRGILE, NON, FROM THE ECSTASY OF PARADISE TO THE ATROCITIES OF HELL.

When *Across The Acheron* was published in 1985, Monique Wittig was already mostly associated with radical lesbianism. Yet this text, which remains little-known, is the least assertive of her novels, the most open to doubt, the most troubling.

From the very first page, the "I" detonates in a work built against individuation. A lone woman, "Wittig" (she borrows the use of her own name from Jean Genet), embarks on a "classical and profane" journey into the hell of a heteropatriarchal society. Classical because, like Dante in his *Divine Comedy*, Wittig follows a guide, a woman whose name has as many syllables as "opoponax" and sounds as good as it does: Manastabal. Profane because, unlike Dante and Virgil, Wittig and Manastabal proceed in disorder. Like the earlier books, conceived as puzzles, 42 scenes are juxtaposed here. The transitions are razor-sharp, from the ecstasy of paradise to the atrocities of hell, via the lesbian "respite" of limbo, before taking another turn. It's announced from the outset, "there's nowhere to go".

The starting point is a "desert in the middle of the earth, an area of beaten surface with blade-shaped sand", a kind of reverse of the utopian islands of *Les Guérillères* or *The Lesbian Body*. But we also go to the city, to San Francisco, making *Across The Acheron* the American novel by Monique Wittig, who has lived there for ten years. In a laundromat, a ring, a jumble sale, "damned souls" or "souls in distress" - "they" at last, but without ever reading the word "women" - are raped, bought, tied up by numerically weaker "they". Wittig and Manastabal witness several parades of supplicated, mutilated bodies. While Manastabal, disillusioned by the pathetic spectacle, performs a makeshift rescue, Wittig literally writhes in pain and rushes off to fight all the torturers single-handedly, but in vain.

There's only one guerrilla left - this solitary "I" - and the usual rhetoric no longer applies, warns Manastabal: "I defy you to find some peculiarity for them that would give them a cloak of glory. Here, "they" are no longer heroic, and the real hell turns out to be their voluntary servitude. "Ah, to be servants is to be criminals!" exclaims Wittig, in a daze. The wandering lesbian ends up observing more often discordant arena, a painful metaphor for the author's conflicts with the MLF. The "souls" Wittig wants to save turn their anger against her, insulting her - "defector, renegade", "repugnant dyke" - making her the martyr of an apparently lost cause.

But if the harmonious chorus of women has disappeared, faith in the powers of language remains. Wittig the writer demonstrates this ironically in a scene in which the words of a "fury" ("Look, she's covered in hair from head to toe") are fulfilled: Wittig the character is subito transformed into a monster of lesbo-phobic legends. The book ends with an enumeration of birds, fruits and gestures, while the "no" that undercuts its pessimism resounds for a long time. Words are the only form of paradise, the only individual horizon: "When words reach me in the depths of hell and do not fail me, when I walk sustained by their winged cohort (...)".

### **Feya Dervitsiotis**

Virgile, non, Éditions de Minuit, "Double", 132 pages, €9

# "Bringing Wittig Back onto the Literary Scene "

Publisher and lesbian activist Suzette Robichon co-founded the Ami-es de Monique Wittig association ten years ago. She created the magazine *Vlasta*, a review of Amazonian fic- tions and utopias, of which she edited the only issue - to date - devoted to Monique Wittig, and in which her play *The Constant Journey* was first published in 1985. Suzette Robichon was a friend of the novelist and activist, and the transmission of her work owes much to her. We met her in a late-night Parisian café near the Monique Wittig Garden.

## **Suzanne Robichon, what kind of person was Monique Wittig?**

It's difficult to answer, because Monique Wittig was a friend, and she didn't like personal details to be circulated about her. Wittig was really there, present in the world, and her books are proof of that. When she was in Paris, I loved seeing her, dining with her, and having long conversations while watching the Seine flow by. She talked as much about birdsong as she did about literature, about what made her life, there and here. Our exchanges were free and easy.

## **How did you meet her?**

Wittig's work has always been with me. First *L'Opoponax*, then all her books as they came out. I've always followed her work, even if at first I didn't always understand the literary significance of her writing, but every page was a shock, the shock of words. She was, and still is, part of my literary landscape. Then came the 1980 publication of *The Straight Mind*, which concluded with the sentence "Lesbians are not women". I agreed entirely with her analysis and conclusion. This text provoked quite violent movements, leading to a split between certain feminists and lesbians. I thought she was really mistreated, but I didn't know her personally yet.

## **How would you assess her presence in the literary and social landscape today?**

Her presence in the literary landscape has grown again in recent years. It was first through the French edition of *The Straight Mind* that a new generation came to know her. Then, whether through the two colloquia organized on her in France, or the readings we organized as an association, or other initiatives, her literary work has circulated more and more. Newspaper articles and re-editions bear witness to

this. She is also present in the artistic field, with choreographies inspired by the rhythm of the Guérillères text (shows by Marta Izquierdo Muñoz, Marinette Dozeville, Théo Mercier and Steven Michel, and many others).

She also exists in the public sphere, through the naming of the Monique Wittig Garden in the 14th arrondissement, inaugurated in 2020, through some of her phrases inscribed on walls, and through placards in feminist and lesbian demonstrations taking up excerpts from Les Guérillères. This book in particular, published in 1969, resonates strongly today.

**Can you tell us about your own experience of reading Monique Wittig's books? Which one made the biggest impression on you?**

It's hard to answer, because I grew up with her work. I reread them all, of course, and I love them all. I have a soft spot for the last one, Across The Acheron, which is the least studied and in which most of her themes and reflections are to be found. I find it remarkable for its construction, its ferocious humor, its writing and its complex content. And what's even more novel is that the narrator's name is Wittig! Les Guérillères and L'Opoanax are undoubtedly easier for someone who wants to discover her.

**What role did Monique Wittig play in the Vlasta adventure? What did the special issue you devoted to her consist of?**

We created Vlasta magazine in 1983 with Michèle Causse and Sylvie Bompis, after having taken part in Masques, a cultural magazine on homosexuality. Vlasta was a Czech heroine, an Amazon, who raised a whole army of women in the 8th century. The editorial is really inspired by Wittig, from whom we take certain phrases, "they say that every word must be sifted", and also by Quebec writer Nicole Brossard. In 1983, I met Wittig to prepare an issue with her on her literary work, which seemed to have been silenced in France. And we became friends. For this issue, published in 1985, she gave us two texts that had never been published before: Paris- la-politique and The Tojan Horse.

This issue, like The Constant Journey published at the same time in 1985 (and which we now read in Gallimard's "L'Imaginaire" collection), was produced and printed in a printing house, Voix Off, run by women. We financed its release out of our salaries and with a small grant from the then Ministry for Women. It's the only issue on Wittig currently published in France.



**Monique Wittig in 1985 in Paris (photo Colette Geoffrey)**

**Could you go back over the circumstances of her departure or exile to the United States?**

I can't speak for her. What's certain is that Wittig wanted to write, but how to make a living? Her odd jobs in publishing weren't enough. She has just published *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes* (Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary) with Sande Zeig. They both left, and it was in the United States that she began to write essays.

As for *The Constant Journey*, between 1985 and 2022, the context has changed radically. In 1985, this play was successfully performed for an entire month at the Compagnie Renaud-Barrault. In 2022, the reading at the Maison de la poésie with Adèle Haenel, Nadège Beausson-Diagne and Caroline Geryl took place against the backdrop of the famous "Let's get up and go!" at the Césars awards ceremony, and a massive awareness of sexist and sexual violence against women. A total of 600 people attended over the three evenings. The audience could hear, for example, in



Quichotte's gesture of tilting at windmills, the question of having to be believed. The fervor in the room was unprecedented.

We mustn't forget the project born in 1974 to create an international lesbian front. Wittig is at the heart of the feminist and lesbian movement, she's a pioneer, *Les Guérillères* was published in 1969! Collectives are complicated: as soon as you put your head above water, you're attacked. Read *Paris-la-politique*! The divergences don't only concern lesbians: some were against the international lesbian front. But Wittig was deeply committed to this project.

**Was the internationalization of these struggles important to her? When you read *Les Guérillères*, you sense a strong desire to include "all" women in this long list of names.**

Of course it does. In the 1970s, we were demonstrating against the Vietnam War. At the time, we weren't talking about intersectionality but about internationalism, which was central in militant circles. In her book, *Notéris* raises the question of the slave metaphor, a debate that didn't exist at all at the time. Analyzing the fact that lesbians escape the heterosexual contract, Wittig comes to a metaphor of *marronnage* (the escape of slaves) that may be questioned, but at the time didn't seem problematic. What term should we use? The important thing is to be able to discuss it.

The feminist and lesbian movement of the time was almost entirely on the extreme left. The Algerian war had just taken place, we were against apartheid, against female circumcision, against imperialism, we supported wars of national liberation and so on. We were, of course, aware of this double or triple oppression. Some of our texts and slogans bear witness to this.

**How was *The Lesbian Body* received when it was published? It was after this book that Monique Wittig's audience began to wane. Do you feel it's still being read today?**

You can see that very clearly by studying the press reviews of the time. After *L'Opoponax*, most literary critics reduced her to lesbian feminism... they took her out of the universal. This simplistic view is totally reductive.

**In 2014, you founded the Ami-es de Monique Wittig association, which is behind a number of events. What do you hope to gain from this joyful transmission?**

After noticing that Wittig was read and known mainly for *The Straight Mind*, with Anne Garréta, Yannick Chevalier, Catherine Écarnot, Laure Murat and Aurore Turbiau, we wanted to bring her back onto the literary scene. The aim was very simple: to make her work better known, to provide tools and access to her bibliography (on our website), and to bring together people working on Monique Wittig. I remember, at the very beginning, when a friend sent me a photo of a wall in Rennes on which was written: "Wittig saved me". What happened was very powerful, as if Wittig had set something in motion. Then, when the actress Isabelle Lafon spoke to me about the rhythm of *L'OpoPONax*, I was convinced of the need for readings. For the Wittig year (2023), we started reading *The Lesbian Body* to seventy people. Then, every month, between 60 and 80 people came to share another of her books. This sparked off a number of more spontaneous initiatives here and there. Today, Wittig's presence is also very strong in Latin America, particularly in Buenos Aires. In Spain, *The Straight Mind* and *Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary* have just been reissued. New translations are appearing in Germany, Slovenia and Italy, and others are underway in China and Sweden. Wittig's work lives on.

**The only silent field remains the cinema, which seems to have so little interest in Wittig's work...**

Yes, there have been more proposals for theater and performance. Even if the actress and director Sande Zeig, her former partner, is currently preparing a film entitled *Wittig, Yes!*

**Interview by Feyá Dervitsiotis and Flora Moricet**

# Tracing paths

In 2022, writer and art critic Émilie Notéris published a form of literary investigation entitled *Wittig (Les Pérégrines)* in an attempt to capture and embody the unfathomable novelist.

**Émilie Notéris, your "Material for a biography of Monique Wittig" fills a gap. How has your work been received?**

The writing of this book is first and foremost the result of an investigation carried out to answer a question I asked myself and to which I hadn't found a satisfactory answer: "Who is Monique Wittig?" I don't think, however, that it can be said to fill a gap as such. The Association des Ami-es de Monique Wittig, and in particular Suzette Robichon, or Yannick Chevalier, Catherine Écarnot, and others, have done considerable work to ensure that she does not disappear from the French literary and theoretical landscape as a foreigner. Sande Zeig and Dominique Samson Wittig, who are her heirs, i.e. her companion and niece, but who above all shared a history with Wittig and are an integral part of the history of feminism, take care of her living memory. What struck me after the publication of my book was the profusion of encounters, mainly in mid-literate bookshops, or organized by feminist and queer associations. By this I mean the cross-fertilization of audiences and generations that don't usually meet in the same places, who gather around Monique Wittig, drawn by the power of her texts and the desire to learn more about her. If her work sometimes divides interpretations, we have to admit that she is capable of bringing together very different people in the same piece. And that's very powerful. As an art school teacher, I can also see how much her writing resonates with younger generations, and how necessary it is.

**How do you think Wittig is read today? More for her ideas or for the form of her texts?**

There are as many ways of reading Monique Wittig as there are readers, and this multiplicity transcends the very category of literary and theoretical genres. What I have proposed in my book is a potential assemblage of the archives and voices of the people I have met and read. Other books will follow and, in turn, initiate new discussions. A real movement has been underway for some years now, and it's not about to stop. It also seems to me that her literary writing is once again inspiring a large number of writers; I interviewed three of my own generation at the end of my

book (Wendy Delorme, Stéphanie Garzanti and Claire Finch). Among the younger ones, we could add Léa Rivière and Miel Pagès. It was from literature as a "Trojan horse" that Wittig envisaged above all the feminist and lesbian struggle. In the same way, it is summoned up, read and taken up again by artists and researchers.

We're also interested in the work of women writers who propose their own assemblage, their own dialogue with our contemporary context of reception.

**You mention that Monique Wittig's persona is difficult to grasp today, and we had the same feeling during our research. Your book manages to give her a little more body. How difficult was this work? And how do you explain it?**

The work was never difficult. I met some very important people, and it was very beautiful and intriguing to unravel the threads of this story. There was suspense and action in the research, no room for boredom. The places where the investigation stalled, and the false leads, I made transparent in my writing. It was a question of writing as a feminist and not just about feminism, of showing the structure of the book as material, as a "workshop" - that's the strength of her work. I had to remain faithful to her. The only thing that worried me at the start was the mythologization she was subject to, due to the lack of context and definition of her person and personality, missing the opening of archives and transmission. The question of the body was particularly important to me because, paradoxically, it was the contours of the body of the woman who had written *The Lesbian Body* that seemed to me to be fading. There's still a lot to be done to restore her body to a higher density.

My contribution is modest because I had no funding, no institutional support, no power. I would have liked to travel to the United States, to spend days immersed in her archives at Yale rather than in digitized files, or to visit her house, which is still Sande Zeig's home. This is first and foremost a reader's book, a literary object, an essay in the sense that I've tried something. The subtitle "Material for a Biography" is a nod to *Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary*. Material (Roughdraft) means refusing to respond to the norm of producing a specific category of object.

**Do you feel that the radical scope of her literary and theoretical project - as a challenge to the straight mind - is still being heard?**

It seems to me that it's precisely this message that carries the most weight today. There are powerful echoes reverberating from the lines of her texts to our bodies and thoughts. Fighting against the "mark of gender" and the heteropatriarchal regime as an imperative injunction, as a constraint, responds to contemporary fluidity and

non-binarity, even if the reaction is strong and transphobia is still splashed across the front pages of our national newspapers. What I also find fascinating is the revival of Wittig's critique of psychoanalysis by certain psychoanalysts such as Laurie Laufer. As the philosopher Pierre Niedergang puts it in *Vers la normativité queer*, we need to create new, non-normative standards that shape our bodily subjectivities in different ways. Rereading Wittig helps us to chart a new course.

***"I'd like it to be said between us that I've never used the words 'women' or 'men' in a single one of my books."* Monique Wittig said this during a speech in 1995 (Dans l'arène ennemie). What do you think remains of this annihilation of gender categories in language today?**

To answer this question, I wanted to see MW in 1995, and I came across this video archive of her speech at the Kessler Award ceremony at the City University of New York. In it, she reads an extract from her favorite book: *Across The Acheron*. As she explains when explaining the making of her book, it's not possible to disrupt the text from the outset. To transform the original fable, you have to follow it point by point, move with it.

It seems to me that this is just as true when it comes to moving fiction as it is when it comes to changing people's consciences. To disrupt the original fable, you have to change the names of the protagonists, reject the language that has been used up to now and that is no longer appropriate. We have to work point by point to undo it, to make it break out of its weft, to plot a conspiracy, to prepare a new secret agreement. This project of working with language as a material is now being taken up by graphic designers who propose to experiment typographically with a non-binary language, and by authors who try their hand at it in the body of the text. What starts out as a fable is transformed into a structuring narrative, a transition that always takes place in slow motion, says Wittig, before picking up speed.

**Interview by F. M. and F. D.**



# Early memories of a biographer

by Laure Murat\*

Biography is a genre for which I have no affinity. Not as an author, nor even as a reader. Yet I didn't hesitate when I was offered the chance to write Monique Wittig's biography, which is currently in progress. Why did you do it?

Monique Wittig's entire life has been carved out of language, in its entirety, and by it alone. From an avid reader as a child, always perched in a tree with a book, to a writer in the evening of her life in her library in Tucson, Arizona, from 1935 to 2003, she lived her life entirely in words, to the letter. Like any writer's life, no doubt. Yes, but with Monique Wittig, it takes on an extra dimension.

As you fly through Monique Wittig's life, you're struck by the clear dividing lines it contains. France until 1976, then the United States until her death. The *romancière* on the one hand, and the theoretician on the other. The latest arrival of the Nouveau Roman and the pioneer of gender studies. The Parisian activist of the MLF years and the proto-queer teacher on American campuses. And so on. Yet it would be a fatal error to try to slice and dice by theme a life cemented by language and, as such, incredibly homogeneous and coherent. Monique Wittig has waged all her battles and projects without compromising the very substance of her texts, whether they be theater, novels, manifestos, essays, short stories, translations or magazine articles. Everywhere, it's a language free of artifice, crutches and rhetorical clutter that cuts to the heart. Whatever the subject, it always delivers the same matt, drawn, unabashed sound. Monique Wittig's whole life, her personality, her obsessions, her sensuality, her humor, her vulnerabilities, her angers, can be heard in her work and in her personal correspondance, in exactly the same way, without any break in tone. This continuum of work and life, exceptional as it is, is hardly surprising. Everything is reasoned in this poetics of the world, everything resonates in this politics of the world. Form is meaning. "Solitaire, solidaire: my life can be summed up in two words," said Victor Hugo. Poetic, political: such was the life of Monique Wittig.

And her language - in its structure, acceleration, eroticism, scansion and juxtapositions - is, literally and in every sense, her life laid bare. Her prose is, in this respect, disarmingly honest. In this grammar of the imaginary, this matrice stripped of all anecdote, drawn from the sources of Antiquity and nourished by classical literature, we read openly the modesty of her character as well as her tenderness,

the rigors of his intelligence as well as the mischief of a willingly ironic mind, her generosity as well as her intransigence.

Yet this language is neither simple nor transparent. It is highly erudite, and has been described as hermetic and austere. It is demanding, as is the language of poets and philosophers. Above all, it is unusually ambitious. Right from the publication of her first novel, *L'Opoanax*, Prix Médicis 1964, Monique Wittig set the bar very high and, much more rarely, always stayed the course. What does she want? To make a revolution. Start all over again, from scratch. She will never give up on this project.

\* Latest book: *Proust, roman familial* (Robert Laffont, 2023)