

LITERATURE. Wittig reread in the present

Twenty years after the death of the feminist writer, author notably of *The Opopanax* and *The Straight Mind*, a new generation of readers is taking over a fertile work that resonates with the issues of the time.

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Friday, February 24, 6 p.m. On the campus of Grands Moulins, in the 13th arrondissement of Paris, the Bétonsalon art and research center is hosting a collective presenting a reading of *The Straight Mind*, one of Monique Wittig's best-known books. Once a month, throughout the year, a program "around lesbian writing, with Monique Wittig and beyond" will present one of the texts of the writer (she insisted on using the masculine form of the word in French), theorist and feminist activist, who passed on prematurely in 2003, at the age of 67. At the entrance, a stack of copies of *The Lesbian Body* (1973), republished in paperback edition by Minuit, fifty years after its first publication, a tote bag, posters made by the artist and writer Stéphanie Garzanti using Wittig sentences: "*Desire is resistance to the norm*", "*Monique Wittig*" (replica of a T-shirt by the artist Roxane Maillet), "*Each of us is the sum of the transformations made by words*".

Despite the cold, 75 people of all ages, the vast majority of them women, came with their copy of *The Straight Mind* (literally "heterosexual thinking") in their hands. In this collection of articles, which was first published in the United States, Wittig uses Marxism as a support to denounce the "*heterosexual contract*" as a political regime and calls for the disappearance of the categories of sex (man/woman). Originally written for a lecture delivered in New York, the eponymous article ends with the sentence that had a bombshell effect: "*Lesbians are not women,*" meaning they are outlaws and can offer a breach in the heterosexual structure.

A hashtag and a multitude of events, readings, workshops, screenings, podcasts

As shown by the hashtag #Wittig2023, launched on social networks, the twentieth anniversary of her death gives rise to a multitude of events, readings, workshops, projections, podcasts, a conference at the University of Berkeley (United States), on March 17 and 18. Last fall, *Wittig*, a well-documented essay by Émilie Notéris, was published, "*a draft for a biography*", which synthesizes cutting-edge academic research while remaining accessible to the general public.

Co-president of the Association des ami.e.s Monique Wittig, Suzette Robichon fought to make the work known and broaden its audience: "*When we founded the association in 2014, together with the writer Anne F. Garréta, mainly students of sociology and gender studies knew about The Straight Mind. But Wittig is first and foremost a writer, so it was necessary to have readings to make her texts heard: first The Opoanax, then the Guérillères and Le Voyage Sans Fin (a feminist rewrite of Don Quixote - EDITOR'S NOTE). Last month, 90 people attended the reading around The Lesbian Body, in an atmosphere of community.*"

The Opoanax, in 1964, a lesbian love story, which the critics of the time did not see - or did not want to see

Born in 1935 in Dannemarie, in the Haut-Rhin, Monique Wittig's *L'Opoanax*, was published by Éditions de Minuit in 1964. This novel about the childhood of two little girls in the countryside is a lesbian love story, which critics of the time did not see - or did not want to see. "*The Opoanax is the capital execution of ninety percent of the books that have been written about childhood. It is the end of a certain type of literature, thank goodness*", Marguerite Duras wrote at the time. Hailed by Claude Simon and Nathalie Sarraute, writers of the nouveau roman literary movement, the book won the Prix Médicis.

More formally daring and moving forward more openly, the two books that followed, *Les Guérillères* and *The Lesbian Body* will be less well received: "*At the time of The Opoanax, literary criticism was done by writers and gave more importance to writing. When Les Guérillères and The Lesbian Body were published, critics focused on the theme, lesbianism, which amounted to marginalizing her,*" explains Suzette Robichon.

At the same time, Monique Wittig participated, in the wake of May 68, in the creation of the Movement for the Liberation of Women (MLF), whose manifesto she wrote in *L'Idiot International*, marched towards the Arc de Triomphe on August 26, 1970, with a group of feminist activists, to pay tribute to the "wife of the unknown soldier".

In 1976, marginalized within the French feminist movement and plagued by economic difficulties due to lack of a university position, she moved to the United States with her partner, the filmmaker, author and actress Sande Zeig. Even as she continued to write and lecture in the United States, oblivion began to do its work and Wittig fell into a black hole.

It was not until the early 2000's and the symposium organized by Suzette Robichon and Marie-Hélène Bourcier (now Sam Bourcier) that the academic community took an interest in her again, especially through the work of Nathalie Sarraute, to whom she was very close.

"SHE INVENTED A NEW LANGUAGE"

Nowadays she has readers far beyond the university circle, and is celebrated and quoted by a new generation of authoresses and authors, from Wendy Delorme to Guillaume Lebrun (*Fantaisies guérillères*), from Laura Vaquez to Mathilde Forget, who came to listen to the reading at Bétonsalon: *"I have a physical memory of The Opoponax, it was a shock. She invented a new language, neither that of the adult nor that of the child. She's an activist, but her obsession is literature and how one can invest this field politically."*

In the field of plastic arts she is, for example, cited by the artist Maï-Thu Perret who imagined, in homage to the Guérillères, life-sized Amazons in fatigues. Stéphanie Garzenti, author of *Petite Nature*, published in February in the "Sorcières" collection at Cambourakis, discovered the work of Wittig while she was a student at the Beaux-Arts of Lyon about twenty years ago: *"I read her books because I was a lesbian. At the time, no one talked about her in art schools, unlike now, where she is everywhere. On the form it is pure invention, so it is assimilable in the visual arts. I am told that when I write, there are resonances, especially due to the games with typography, the mixtures of pronouns, and I quote her in my texts."*

For Suzette Robichon, the time is more conducive to the reception of her books in France: *"Ten or fifteen years ago, I heard young people say: 'Wittig saved me.' The context has changed, but the need to seek explanations for what we are living and what we are going through remains. Nowadays, with the queer movement, she responds to the desire of going beyond the categories of sex, even if, at the time, there was no mention of non-binarism. She opens avenues for reflection, analysis and is a source of inspiration."* Far from being confined to a niche, Wittig's work now belongs to everyone, infuses literature, art and T-shirts, and is alive and long-lasting.

Le Corps lesbien, by Monique Wittig, Minuit, 192 pages, 9 euros

La Pensée Straight, by Monique Wittig, Amsterdam, 160 pages, 13 euros

Wittig, by Emilie Notéris, Les Pérégrines, 176 pages, 16 euros

<https://www.humanite.fr/culture-et-savoirs/litterature/litterature-wittig-relue-au-present-784810>