

## Monique Wittig, all fire and brimstone

The texts and interviews of the MLF pioneer, published between 1966 and 1999 and brought together by Editions de Minuit, show that her radicalism at the time, which put her on the periphery of militant circles and led to her exile, has become one of the driving forces of contemporary feminism.



In Paris, June 1999. (Jean-François Joly/Libération)

By **Philippe Lançon**

For Monique Wittig, woman is man's future, but not in the sense that man imagined. It's the future without him. In any case, as she sees it, he has long since built and imposed their relationship. August 10, 1974, to a Dutch newspaper (she was 39 and had just published *The Lesbian Body*: "What I

dream of is a society of women among themselves. Of groups of women who develop their own culture, and an idea of their own which is no longer imposed from outside and in the service of something else, which is not a reaction either, but which is completely separate from the points of view which have hitherto existed in the patriarchy about women... Men? Ah, I'm not that interested, they should rather try to live among themselves or with women for whom the total rupture goes too far... me, in any case, I don't need a society with men.”

In *The Enemy Arena* (1) brings together articles and interviews published in various countries between 1966 and 1999 by the French writer, lesbian and shock materialist, who died in 2003 in Tucson, Arizona. Their clarity, humor and caustic naturalness will enable older readers to brush up on their feminist history, and younger ones to discover it. A pioneer of the MLF, Wittig was sidelined in the 1970s from the movement she had helped to found, and moved to the United States: too separatist, too wild, too hostile to the Freudian psychoanalysis so prevalent in French feminism. Too convinced, finally, that heterosexuality is a “system of domination,” obviously male: “Only men can be heterosexual” (1983). As for the expression “heterosexual woman,” that's a term I've never used, and which horrifies me. But history is full of tricks and reversals, and reading these texts today is an edifying experience: we see the birth and evolution of a thought that, from the periphery of the militant and social circle in which it found itself, ended up becoming a center of it. Wittig's “radicality” is one of the driving forces behind contemporary feminism.

## **Bats, Owls and Worms**

It was theorized in *The Straight Mind*, the collection of texts (published in France by Amsterdam) that has had such an influence, not without misunderstandings and misappropriations, on gender theories and queer studies. *In the Enemy Arena* reveals its day-to-day evolution, its nuances, its facets, through the real-time struggle, then the very quickly retrospective analysis, of a woman who, as early as 1979, became a memorialist of the

illusions she carried: “And we didn't imagine that women would take so long to become feminists. We thought it could happen overnight. And I think we were really thinking of a mass feminist movement. It was a beautiful dream.”

The struggle began with an oft-repeated observation. She summed it up one day in 1973 by quoting a phrase from a 17th-century English feminist: “Women live like bats or owls, work like beasts, die like worms.” In this cave, can they join forces with the man holding up the walls to, as the other would say, “deconstruct” him? 1974's answer: “It's going to take a lot of energy on the part of the woman, and you have to be constantly on your guard. Because, in general, I don't have much faith in men's need to change. Imagine yourself in a man's shoes: he has all the privileges; he has everything to lose.” Well, war? “It's still complicated. In any case, I'm of the opinion that you shouldn't shy away from confrontation; I think it's necessary to feel your anger and your power, to express it. The worst thing that can happen is for that anger and hatred to turn against us, rendering us completely powerless. But a war like the one fought by the Amazons, for example, sometimes gives me the impression that women already have the power to completely paralyze society without armed struggle by simply refusing everything that's expected of them.” In other words, no longer make yourself available for sex, children and housework...”. Motherhood is the enemy. The Amazon is the epic, heroic figure.

## **Drôlerie**

Wittig made her decision at the age of 12, during her solemn communion. That day, like Pascal weeping with joy or Joan of Arc hearing voices, she was “struck”, but not by God or his angels: “I was asked to swear like an adult, so I felt a certain responsibility, but I couldn't see how I could decide. Something really had to happen to make me understand what to do. What happened that day was that I made the decision never to get married.” The revolution began with a revelation. It was to be met with disillusionment. In 1974, describing a world where women had built a place, a way of life. and a language, she had these melancholy phrases: “Sometimes I think that in ten years' time the women's

movement will have sunk body and soul, for lack of fighters, determination, or long-term goals; I know absolutely and for certain that if the women's movement dies, I die. My person loses all reality, all meaning; I won't be able to survive in the old order." She died before the new order was born.

In the 1970s, machismo and sexism were everywhere. They did not spare fellow travelers, including the militants of the Cause du peuple. Wittig writes about it with a sense of humor. She and her sister Gille went, like others, "to the factories": it was the time of "the campaign against petty bosses." The young Maoist males "couldn't think of anything better than attacking a woman who was a foreman, a forewoman. They couldn't stand that. So they denounced this forewoman, and started their leaflet with a headline: "Femme de flic." She was a cop's wife. So it wasn't even as a forewoman that they were attacking her, but as a cop's wife. I bugged them around for two hours to explain that it was reactionary, but they didn't get it [...]. [...]. Flic" was so big, 'femme' was so small. "Femme de' seemed so self-evident that they didn't see a thing."

Much of Wittig's relevance comes from the fact that she is an excellent writer. Her attention to language, in all circumstances, is profound, concrete, and revolutionary: it has to change for things to change. The book opens with a text on Godard, continues with an analysis of *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, and ends with an interview with Nathalie Sarraute, whose use of language determined her own. She also discusses Virginia Woolf, the Nouveau Roman, Marguerite Duras, to whom she rents a room and who unexpectedly turns up during a feminist meeting to, she says, move a piece of furniture, and Genet, the homosexual for whom an obscenity is reserved that, in her opinion, lesbians lack. Genette directed one of her works. Reading one of her books, he wrote to her: "It's hypertext or I don't know anything about it." Two verses by Rimbaud, she said in 2005, "obsess me and move me as much as ever: In the woods, there is a bird, his song stops you and makes you blush."

## **Victimization theories**

Through the reading of others, Wittig defines her work: the importance of facts, fragments, “snippets,” in a world where women, victims of Woolf's “pumping of men”, have been dispossessed of all language. Baudelaire and Verlaine are also mentioned. With them, “these were rich hours for lesbianism as a literary paradigm, which saw gay men themselves hide their homosexuality behind lesbian characters. Where would I be without them? When I was fifteen, they told me everything I needed to know.” This is virtue's tribute to vice.

In a 1982 text, “The Place of Action,” she analyzes how Sarraute's “*matière romanesque*” “envelops [...] the mortal embrace” in which words are caught. On the one hand, there is that social pact “where there are neither men nor women nor races nor oppression, nor anything that can only be named by measuring, word for word, language. Here we are all equal and free, without which there would be no pact possible.” This pact is the women's pact that Wittig dreams of. On the other hand, there's this society where, implicitly, “the I is made prisoner, here he is the victim of a fool's bargain, what he took for absolute freedom, the necessary reciprocity without which one cannot understand why... is only surrender, a bargain that throws him at the mercy of the slightest word.” Sarraute, with her words, revealed all this. “It is they,” Wittig concludes, “that make me say that the paradise of the social contract exists only in literature.” It's a paradise that dissolves categories, assignments. “*Combattre le canon*,” 1988:

“I can no more say I'm a lesbian writer than I can say I'm a woman writer. I'm simply a writer. It's the writing that's important, not the sociological categories. I think some changes of form are more open to history than others; but working, writing - for the writer - is an individual process, never a collective one.” For her, as for Sarraute, there is no such thing as feminine writing. You're either a writer or you're not. To say that writers have been excluded from the canon because they are women seems to me not only inaccurate, but the idea stems from a tendency towards theories of victimization. There are few great

writers in a century. Whenever there has been one, not only has the work been well received in the canon, it has been acclaimed, applauded and praised in its own time - sometimes especially because it was by a woman. I'm thinking of Sand and Colette. I don't think the real innovators have missed out." The activist's order is necessary. The writer's order is more powerful, and more solitary: the form struggles against all to fix reality and reach the ideal. This is what makes Wittig both admirable and impossible. She has experienced and tried to overcome "the strange wrench, the tension in the movement from the particular to the general that every human being makes, when from the unique I of language, formless, boundless, infinite, he suddenly becomes nothing or almost nothing, you, you, he, she, 'an ugly little man', an interlocutor."

(1) Les éditions de Minuit are simultaneously republishing, in paperback, *Virgile, non*, an intimate lesbian epic inspired by Dante's *Inferno*, dating from 1985. Some of the texts in *In the Enemy Arena* refer to it.