Chronique

« L'Invitation au voyage » de Baudelaire est-il un poème lesbien?

Elisabeth Philippe

J'AI LU ÇA #63. In an interview given in 1986, Monique Wittig said of the famous poem by the author of *Flowers of Evil* had always been a lesbian text for her. Apt or misleading interpretation?

By Elisabeth Philippe

As we peruse the texts by Monique Wittig (1935-2003) in the collection *In The Enemy Arena*, we come across this sentence from an interview she gave to the German magazine *EMMA* in 1986 "Guérillères": "My favorite poets were not women when I started writing, but Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Nerval, Verlaine, Lautréamont, Rimbaud... Traces of this can still be found in *The Opoponax,* as the last chapter is built around Baudelaire's poem "Invitation au voyage," which has always been a lesbian poem for me."

A lesbian poem, "Invitation to the Voyage"? "*Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté/Luxe, calme et volupté*" - could these famous lines really be singing about the secret ecstasies of Sapphic love? That's not at all what I learned when I was preparing for my French A-levels! The landscape-woman, the quest for the ideal to escape spleen, the inner

journey, the dieresis and hypotyposis effects - these were all duly highlighted in yellow Stabilo on my revision sheets. But lesbian exegesis, absolutely not. Similarly, it seems to me - though my memories are now distant, alas - that the poems on female homosexuality in *Flowers of Evil* ("Lesbos", 'le Lethé' and 'Delphine and Hippolyta' in 'Femmes damnées') had barely been touched upon.

Recently, reading the essay "Écrire à l'encre violette" (Le Cavalier bleu)," on the history of lesbian literature, reminded me that the facetious Baudelaire had originally planned to give the collection of *Flowers of Evil* an otherwise provocative title in the mid-nineteenth century: *Lesbians*. Also, in "Écrire à l'encre violette," one of the authors, Camille Islert, insists that the presence of lesbians in Baudelaire's poetry is part of a form of erotic fetishization that was very much in vogue at the time, as seen in Balzac ("La Fille aux yeux d'or") and later in Pierre Louÿs ("Les Chansons de Bilitis"). From a male point of view, lesbian love is seen as forbidden (to men) and therefore subversive. Always with a touch of voyeurism. Thus in "Lesbos":

"For Lesbos among all has chosen me from the earth
To sing the secret of its blooming virgins,
And I was from childhood admitted to the dark mystery Of unbridled laughter mingled with dark weeping;
For Lesbos among all has chosen me from the earth."

If in "Lesbos" or "Delphine et Hippolyte," lesbianism is explicit, what is it about "Invitation au voyage" that allows Wittig to see it as a lesbian poem? Once you've put on Wittig's moonlight, it's impossible to see anything else. Right from the very first stanza:

“My child, my sister, Think of the sweetness
To go there and live together! To love at leisure,
To love and die
In the land that's like you!
The wet suns
Of these misty skies
For my mind have the so mysterious charms
Of your treacherous eyes,
Shining through their tears.”

The use of the expression “my sister” suggests the mirror-like relationship that poets fantasized about between women at the time. And the aquosity of the alliterations and the “wet suns” bathe the verses in a liquid moisture evocative of feminine eroticism. There's also the idea of an elsewhere, a distant place to live out one's love, reminiscent of the dream islands where women love each other in Wittig's texts (“Les Guérillères”).

As the writer recalls in her interview with *EMMA*, she quotes Baudelaire's poem in *The Opoponax* her first novel published in 1964, which won her the Prix Médicis:

“They say, sunsets coat the fields the canals the whole city in hyacinth and gold the city falls asleep in a warm light. They say, I loved her so that in her I still live.”

A magnificent picture of childhood, written entirely with the pronoun “*on*,” *The Opoponax* also tells the love story of two girls, Catherine Legrand and Valérie Borge - something no critic saw at the time. Just as I didn't see the lesbian dimension of “Invitation to the Voyage.” The remark by Wittig, a feminist activist, lesbian, and pioneer on gender

issues (The Straight Mind*),* reminds me of the fascinating work of researcher Elisabeth Ladenson, “Proust lesbian” (translated from English by Guy Le Gaufey, Epel, 2004), which questions the place of lesbian desire in “*In Search of Lost Time.”*

In both cases, these interpretations, which could be described as “situated,” recall a fundamental right of the reader: that of projecting oneself. His or her freedom of interpretation is total, even more so when the work proves rich enough to unfold in all directions. Of course, it's just as important to be able to identify with a particular character, and the demands of minorities to be better represented in the works are undeniable. But a literary text also allows us to find ourselves in others. And that's just as fundamental.

In The Enemy Arena. Texts and Interviews 1966-1999, by Monique Wittig, edited by Sara Garbagnoli and Théo Mantion, Minuit, 368 p., 22 euros.