
"Monique Wittig's writing - or lesbian phrasing"

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Monique Wittig's literary work opens onto a world in which lesbians inhabit a livable and desirable environment, coordinated by writing, eroticism and political struggle. Catherine Écarnot offers us a detailed exploration of this singular universe and the specificity of its language.

L'écriture de Monique Wittig à la couleur de Sappho (Monique Wittig's writing in the color of Sappho) by Catherine Écarnot is the first French thesis devoted to the texts of novelist, theorist and lesbian radical Monique Wittig (1935-2003). This study takes the time to examine the power and inventiveness of Wittig's language, in the tradition of the Nouveau Roman. Published in 2002, it has just been updated and republished by Éditions Ixe.

Who was Monique Wittig? This intrepid author and activist broke new ground in the field of literature by proposing new stories and her own language. She studied in Paris, where she became involved with the MLF (Mouvement de libération des femmes), then co-founded the FHAR (Front homosexuel d'action révolutionnaire) in April 1971, before taking part in the creation of Les Gouines Rouges in May of the same year, an exclusively lesbian group. In her introduction, Catherine Écarnot offers a number of suggestions for approaching Wittig's life and work, such as the radio documentary devoted to her by Clémence Allezard for France Culture.

Hybridization of genres

Always hybridizing, Wittig's texts go beyond how they can be summarized. This is not Catherine Écarnot's project. Instead, she sets out to analyze how Wittig's language is shaped and transformed in the course of his work. She notes that theory always intersects with literature, as Wittig's use of language is inseparable from the prospect of shifting the lines of reality. To this end, Catherine Écarnot focuses on six of his literary works, which she analyzes chronologically: *L'opoponax* (1964), *Les guérillères* (1969), *Le corps lesbien* (*The Lesbian body*) (1973), *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes* (*Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary*) (co-written with his partner Sande Zeig in 1976), *Le voyage sans fin* (*The Constant Journey*) (1985) and *Virgile, non* (*Across the Acheron*) (1985).

Armed with her analytical and precise mind, Catherine Écarnot guides us through a careful reading of Wittig's language. To do so, she examines the stylistic devices that are dear to her. She notes his use of repetition, quotation and re-appropriation of other texts. *Le voyage sans fin* and *Virgile, non* are respectively feminist and lesbian rewritings of Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Wittig mixes scientific and erotic lexical fields, inventing new words to breathe air into a sclerotic language. Such is the case with the title of her epic tale of a lesbian community, *Les Guérillères*.

She also works with typographic space, using capital letters to occupy the page in a different way, varying empty spaces, rare punctuation and text fragments. In *Le corps lesbien* (*The Lesbian body*), a poetic prose celebrating female homosexuality, Wittig strings together different parts of the body in capital letters that cover the entire page.

In short, Wittig challenges the way we understand and study literature, as she constantly hybridizes literary genres. This was already the case in her first book, published at the age of 29, *L'opoponax*, which is neither quite a novel nor quite autobiography, but which places a schoolgirl, Catherine Legrand, at the center of her reflections on childhood and the unspeakable.

One thing is certain: Catherine Écarnot's study arouses our curiosity as readers: dive into this bibliography to take the pulse of this literature ourselves.

Lesbian are not a woman

The link between language and politics must be understood. To this end, Catherine Écarnot's study shows a Wittig who is convinced of the need to change the world, and who works language to the core.

Our language is the vehicle of a discriminating system based on the ideology of patriarchy and heterosexuality. It is organized around the distinction and link between men and women. The woman is always defined in relation to the man as his subordinate and his wife. In this linguistic and social system, woman does not exist without man. Yet Monique Wittig cannot accept this, and so she proposes an "à-côté" that opens the door to other forms of life and relationships.

Living on the margins of this heterosexual system, and not defining itself as a mirror of a masculine identity, the lesbian point of view escapes this dominant model and proposes an alternative. Catherine Écarnot takes up Wittig's famous statement that "*lesbians are not women*". She shows how lesbianism "*is inconceivable, in that it proposes a way beyond sexual bipartition (...) instead of marking an addition of the feminine, or an aspiration to the masculine, it becomes the means of abolishing sexual opposition*". Lesbians are on the margins of a system that excludes them, but allows them to escape the definition of gender role distribution according to the heteronormative model.

The pronoun as a battleground

However, Monique Wittig does not advocate "feminine writing", but seeks to abolish sexual difference. She proposes a "*beyond gender*" and a form of writing that emerges from male/female co-dependence. But how can we think of a form of writing that goes beyond gender, when language is constantly organized around the differentiation of the feminine and the masculine? Monique Wittig believes that the major battleground must be the overhaul of our use of personal pronouns. Catherine Écarnot outlines three militant techniques used by the author to act on these little words that never cease to gender what we're talking about.

First of all, she makes extensive use of the indefinite pronoun "on", which is neuter. Then, she proposes a feminization of the language, not in the aim of feminine writing, but as a step towards destabilizing the dominant language. She reverses the use of "they", (*ils*) supposedly encompassing all humanity, to appropriate "them" (*elles*) as a new "*collective and anonymous character*", or feminizes nouns (a kangaroo becomes a kangaroo). Finally, in some cases, she uses the masculine when we'd expect the feminine, to neutralize language habits.

Catherine Écarnot's examination of Monique Wittig's writing reveals the rare precision with which language transformations are produced. Whether seeking to "*abolish grammatical gender*" or inventing stories that create new spaces of thought and life, Monique Wittig offers a lesbian imaginary that gradually permeates the fabric of reality.

[L'écriture de Monique Wittig – A la couleur de Sappho de Catherine Écarnot, Éditions Ixe, 20euros.](#)