

Exit From Hell- on *Paris-la-politique and other stories* by Monique Wittig  
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*Paris-la-politique et autres histoires*, a collection of short stories by Monique Wittig first published in 1999 by Paul Otchakovsky-Laurens, has just been added to the #formatpoche collection published by P.O.L. The appearance in paperback of this book of short stories bears witness to Wittig's singular literary, activist, and publishing career, and to the interest aroused by her work more than twenty years after her death.

In 1964, aged just 29, Monique Wittig was awarded the Prix Médicis for *L'Opoponax*, her great novel of childhood and the awakening to lesbian desire. Claude Simon was dithyrambic, Marguerite Duras announced it was a "dazzling work," and Jérôme Lindon of the Minuit publishing house declared it to be the best first novel he had published since Beckett. This was followed by *Les Guérillères* (1969), an epic and revolutionary gesture by a composite "elles" that met with great success in France and abroad (in the United States, twenty thousand copies were printed in translation). In 1973, at a time when she had become a founding figure of the Women's Liberation Movement, and was also active in lesbian collectives, Wittig published *Le Corps lesbien*. Carried by two dialogical instances, "j/e" and "tu", more than a hundred prose poems question the conditions for the emergence of lesbian subjectivity and passion in language, which is marked by heterosexuality. *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes (Lesbian Lovers. Material for a Dictionary)*, co-authored with Sande Zeig, was published by Grasset in 1976, coinciding with their departure for the United States. The book circulated in lesbian circles on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond. But a gap opened up. When Wittig returned to Minuit in 1985 with *Virgile, non*, it was a resounding commercial and critical failure: the title was ignored and barely sold a thousand copies in a year. In the 1990s, Wittig proposed several works to Minuit (*La Pensée straight*, her major theoretical book published in the United States in 1992, *Paris-la-politique et autres histoires*, and *Le Chantier littéraire*) but Jérôme Lindon turned them down, arguing that the environment that had been favourable to her in the 1960s no

longer existed. Freed from her exclusivity with Minuit, Wittig and *Paris-la-politique et autres histoires* found refuge in the Paul Otchakovsky-Laurens catalogue in 1999. This change of direction heralded the publication by P.O.L of her poetic theoretical work, *Le Chantier littéraire*, a tribute to Nathalie Sarraute, whose death in 1999 affected Wittig to the point of delaying its release. Meanwhile, Sam Bourcier and Suzette Robichon were preparing the translation of *La Pensée straight*, which was published in 2001 in the collection Le Rayon/Modernes, edited by Guillaume Dustan, another P.O.L. author. Wittig died suddenly in 2003, and *Le Chantier littéraire* was published posthumously seven years later by Presses universitaires de Lyon/Éditions iXe, thanks to the efforts of Benoît Auclerc, Yannick Chevalier, Audrey Lasserre and Christine Planté. Such a brief sketch can only hint at the dynamics that sometimes underlined and sometimes concealed the importance of the Wittigian corpus for literature, political thought, and lesbian, feminist, and queer activism. To understand the reasons for such a disappearance would be to speculate on the general orientation of the literary field at the end of the last century and on the loss of visibility of the lesbian materialist paradigm through which Wittig intended to transform reality (as evidenced by the shift to the parable regime in *Paris-la-politique et autres histoires*). Finally, it would be appropriate to describe the power relationships within militant spheres, many of the mechanisms of which *Paris-la-politique* sheds light on. For the time being, it has to be said that Wittig is once again readable, if not completely authorized. A new generation is rereading her with passion and, piece by piece, like the texts of *Paris-la-politique and other stories*, the work is gradually emerging from the limbo in which it was consigned for too many years. Don't get us wrong: Wittig has been read and commented on non-stop, and while her later texts have received virtually no press, a handful of loyal and courageous people have taken up the cause of *Paris-la-politique et autres histoires*: Claire Devarrieux of *Libération*, Didier Eribon, who praises her on *France Culture*, and Marie-Anne Juricic, with Wittig as a guest on *Planète féministe*. We are in the midst of a Wittig 'moment' that few authors are familiar with, and which Sara Garbagnoli recently unraveled. While it remains to be seen whether this resurgence will last, there is no doubt that readers are calling for her work, demanding it, and

thus introducing a new twist into the history of its fragmentary reception. Following the re-publication in 2022 of her play *Le Voyage sans fin* ("L'Imaginaire", Gallimard) and the paperback edition a few months ago of *Le Corps lesbien* ("Double", Minuit), P.O.L. has taken a new step by republishing *Paris-la-politique et autres histoires*.

Most of the texts in this collection first appeared in literary and feminist journals between the late 1960s and early 1980s. It took three publications for this collection to finally break out of the narrow (i.e. loving) circles in which they had remained confined. As a note of intent, Wittig writes that "there are parasitic texts that 'fall' entirely from the main body on which they were grafted. Thus 'Paris-la-politique' from *Virgile, non*. 'Une partie de campagne,' for example, is detached piece by piece from *Les Guérillères*. The other stories are also, in their own way, parasites of a political written expression, the 'Straight Mind.'" Wittig has often mentioned her interest in cinema and the practice of montage: if a text disrupts the organic unity of the whole, then it is not edited, so it falls. But falling isn't the same as being forgotten, and any 'parasitic' work that is cut during editing hasn't said its last word. This insistence of the text, so characteristic of Wittig's writing, applies as much to the individual parts of *Paris-la-politique et autres histoires* as it does to the work as a whole, as evidenced by its timeliness.

With the exception of "Paris-la-politique," which opens the collection, the 'pieces' follow one another in chronological order (although the publication dates given in the text are often erroneous), without any link of necessity other than that of their publishing history. However, we can identify a first group dating from the 1960s, which is close in style to the books written before she left for the United States. "Elsa Braun" dates from 1963, a year before the publication of her first novel. It is her earliest published text to date, featuring the space of the religious school that would provide the main setting for *L'Opoponax*. In a few abstract, anguished lines, Wittig presents a scene of abuse and the mechanism of derealization needed to escape from it. "Yallankoro" is a collection of poetic impressions probably made during Wittig's stay in West Africa in 1957. A character of considerable strength stands out from the groups of women described: Nyuma, powerful and radiant, who would have been right at home in *Les Guérillères*. Although colonial reality is absent from

these dreamlike reminiscences, the narrative point of view, marked as external, depicts "an order that is not understood by a foreigner" and, for the duration of the text, makes whiteness specific. Written in 1967, "Une partie de campagne" occasionally uses the indefinite, pluralizing "on" that made the fortune of *L'Opoponax*. The episodes are patchy, "defying both logic and rhetoric", as Wittig wrote a year earlier about Jean-Luc Godard's films, but the whole holds together thanks to its geography and its roads, fields and gardens. The discontinuity between first names, actions, and sensations evades any fixation on the dramatis personae, a group of female hunters and drivers, "they" with names reminiscent of those in *L'Opoponax*. But the novella also points towards *Les Guérillères à venir*, a text to which Wittig devoted herself from 1966-1967 onwards, and of which "Une partie de campagne" was not edited. Published in 1973 (and not 1970, as indicated in the volume) in *Nouveau Commerce*, the same year as *Le Corps lesbien*, the text also seems to foreshadow a future lesbian community, thus completing the synthesis of Wittig's first three major books.

These prototypes from the "Minuit" period are matched by the parable texts from the turn of the 1980s, a phase in which a systematic critique of heterosexuality as a political regime based on the appropriation of women and of the lesbian position as a transcendence of the category of sex was developed. Wittig then joined *Questions féministes* and, following the violent split in the collective over the definition of heterosexuality and the relationship between feminism and lesbianism, continued to publish in *Feminist Issues* with, in particular, Colette Guillaumin, whose influence is particularly felt in the short stories entitled "Le Jardin" and "Les Tchiches et les Tchouches". The first appeared under the title "Un jour mon prince viendra" in 1978, following Guillaumin's famous article on the appropriation of women in an issue of *Questions féministes* devoted to "corps appropriés.". For Wittig, these are bodies deprived of agency, stretched out on transatlantic liners and enslaved by powerful 'beings' who come and go in packs and use them for their games. Presented at New York University in March 1982, 'Les Tchiches et les Tchouches' is a revival of Brecht that Wittig published the same year (and not in 1983 as indicated in the book) in a special issue of *Genre humain* (a journal founded by Guillaumin, among others) about "manipulations." Here,

unlike Brecht, who places anatomical dimorphism at the heart of his story, it is economic relations that differentiate the Tchouches, rich and healthy, from the Tchiches, oppressed servants who have integrated and naturalised their 'difference'. If oppression lasts, it is because powerful fictions sustain it: it is therefore a question of punching holes in these fictions, and this is the task that Wittig undertakes in all her books. The centerpiece of the book being reissued these days, was originally published in 1985 in the journal *Vlasta*. An Amazonian fiction/utopia, "Paris-la-politique" is a collection of vignettes taken from *Virgile, non*, a rewriting of Dante whose heterosexual hell opens its breach in San Francisco. In order to write it, Wittig had to rid herself of another hell: that of feminist and lesbian infighting. Why fight for power when you have nothing? asks Wittig. While the "they" of *Les Guérillères* moved forward as a group, "Paris-la-politique" offers a bitter look at this subject, whose brutal heterogeneity Wittig realizes is a consequence of the painful experience of political disillusionment that led to her American exile and her subsequent repudiation of the label "feminist." Indeed, Wittig never ceased to fight against the hegemony of differentialist feminism (in particular 'Psych et Po') and the way in which it prevented any attempt to think about struggles from a lesbian point of view. There is little room for grievance, however: neither resentment nor abjuration, what she draws from those winter years is directed towards the use of the word and what it does to politics. It is here that Wittig is a formalist in the strongest sense of the word: the use of language and the displacement permitted by fiction enable her to universalize her argument "because here are described phenomena that are the same in all political groups."

Never before has Wittig gone so far in the 'gender confusion' that characterizes the protagonist who bears her name in *Virgile, non*. A "political written expression", *Paris-la-politique et autres histoires* unravels categories and species: parables, fables, testimonies, literary theory inspired by Sarraute, sociological narratives.... Such "counter-texts" (Wittig claims the term) disturb any analogical relationship to the social space: fiction operates its displacements and each text opens up the possibility of a reversal. A book not of renunciation but of disillusionment (and therefore of learning), Wittig marks her exit from

Paris (la-politique) and triumphantly announces: "Neither gods nor goddesses, neither masters nor mistresses." The same is true of the other short stories, where "the action may be tomorrow", as Nyuma radiates power in "Yallankoro," Simon becomes a wandering Tchiche by choice in "Les Tchiches et les Tchouches," and the seditious "corpses" are on the threshold of their revolt in "Le jardin."

The reissued set is expanded with a text by Anne F. Garréta, who has already written an important essay ("Wittig, la langue-le-politique," 2012) that warned of an interpretive tendency to bypass the materiality of Wittig's writing and go straight to the concept. In *Paris-la-politique et autres histoires*, the dialectic is such a concept that, from the top, suffers a 'catenary failure' and falters. The magic no longer working, Wittig unearths the 'tomb of politics' in her fables without morals or closure. While her parables come back to us from the abyss like a *de profundis*, Garréta insists that *Paris-la-politique et autres histoires* was not written from nowhere. Rather, it is a 'wandering book' within a familiar and disturbing geography, whose locations are admirably mapped out in the afterword. It's an incomplete book of flight without an outside, of the "fall into abyss" in which fiction is the force of affirmation, and what remains is the "little Wittig" watching "the manure on which [she] has been living for years turn into roses." And now these texts are blooming again.