

Culture

20 years later, light on the writer and lesbian icon Monique Wittig

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Twenty years after her death, the writer Monique Wittig, feminist and lesbian activist, is being rediscovered in France, where her work -- long in the shadows -- on gender and lesbianism is inspiring feminist circles and beyond.

- Monique l'affranchie -

Her name probably won't mean anything to the general public but it has been circulating for years in feminist and lesbian circles.

Born in 1935 in a modest and conservative family, Monique Wittig burst onto the literary scene at the age of 29 with "L'Opoponax" (1964, Minuit), which tells the story of the love of a child for another. The book will win the Prix Médicis.

Then followed "Les Guérillères" (1969) and "Le Corps lesbien" (1973), an essay that has just been reedited. In these texts, she operates a work on the pronouns. Arguing that the masculine has appropriated the universal, she pleads for a recourse to the "on" and that words such as +man+ and +woman+ are removed.

Beyond the pronouns, she wants to free herself from the norms: masculine or feminine, literature or essay ...

"She did not want to choose between literature and theory and put literature in the theory and vice versa," deciphers for AFP the writer Emilie Notéris who devoted the book "Wittig" (2022, ed. Les Pérégrines), a kind of "draft for a biography", according to her.

- From MLF to exile -

On August 26, 1970, she was one of a handful of activists who laid a wreath in memory of the wife of the unknown soldier under the Arc de Triomphe, in what was the founding act of the MLF (Women's Liberation Movement).

Six years later, she left France for the United States. The reason? Deep ideological differences with her MLF comrades. According to Wittig, the struggle goes through the questioning of heterosexuality as a model of society.

In the MLF, "Monique Wittig was confronted with the limits of what it was acceptable to think in a framework circumscribing lesbianism to a simple sexuality", assures for the AFP Dominique Bourque, professor in the Institute of feminist and gender studies and in the department of French of the University of Ottawa.

It is this line of fracture, between on a side the revolutionary vision - that some will judge radical - of Monique Wittig on a heterosexual system (dominated by men) to fight via the political lesbianism and that of the activists of the MLF which, sees in the lesbianism only a sexual orientation, which will isolate the writer.

She was "put aside and invisibilized", affirms with the AFP the Parisian elected representative Alice Coffin, who tells to have discovered her thought only "late". She was inspired by the work of Monique Wittig in her successful essay "The lesbian genius", in 2020. Grasset).

- Heiresses -

Once in the United States, Monique Wittig teaches at the university and writes texts like "The Straight Thought", published in English in 1992. However, Emilie Notéris recalls, her life "was far from easy. She did not know glory, on the contrary, it was a life of struggle".

It was not until the 2000s that her thought circulated a little more widely in France thanks to activists who did not hesitate to quote her texts.

Thus in 2019, the writers Virginie Despentes and Anne Garréta accompanied by the historian Laure Murat, the editor Suzette Robichon and the performer Rébecca Chaillon made a public reading of "Guerillères" at the Maison de la poésie, in Paris.

It also influences novels such as "Viendra le temps du feu" by Wendy Delorme or the book "Sortir de l'hétérosexualité" by Juliet Drouar.

For Dominique Bourque, the evolution of the society and the mentalities "allowed to highlight her course and her works".

A rediscovery linked to the fact that "the post-MeToo feminism is not afraid anymore to point out the men by refusing a discourse of the complementarity between men and women, what the political lesbianism always made", agrees Alice Coffin.