

Books

Monique Wittig: twenty years after her death, a thought still very much alive

Avant-garde and very political, the texts of the feminist thinker already questioned the kind there is more than one half-century. The revolutionary radicality of the author of the "Lesbian Body" and of the "Guerillères" always inspires.

#Wittig2023: in large white and purple characters, the inscription is imperative, at the top of the home page of the rich website dedicated to the thought and work of Monique Wittig. In 2023, we will celebrate the 20th anniversary of the death of the feminist and lesbian writer and activist - who died on January 3, 2003, at the age of 67, in the United States where she lived. The 50 years, also, of the publication of her novel *The Lesbian Body*, reissued today in paperback by the Éditions de Minuit, with an unpublished afterword of the author. In truth, the insistent presence of Monique Wittig in the contemporary ether did not wait for this double anniversary.

A clue, among others: "The sales of his three books published by Minuit, *The Opoponax* (1964), *The Guérillères* (1969) and *The Lesbian Body* (1973), have changed abruptly from 2018. If only for the first two, they have been multiplied by ten: *The Opoponax* has gone from 100-150 copies per year to turn around 1500-2000 now, those of *The Guérillères* have gone from 250-300 copies to 2500-3000. This is a rare phenomenon," observes Thomas Simonnet, director of Éditions de Minuit, who also notes the multiplication of requests for translations and adaptations for performances.

In 2019, one of these performances made a lasting impression. On the stage of the Maison de la poésie, in Paris, they were five - the writers Virginie Despentes and Anne F. Garréta, the historian Laure Murat, the lesbian activist and publisher Suzette Robichon, the author and performer Rébecca Chaillon - to make a difference.

Anne F. Garréta, the historian Laure Murat, the lesbian activist and editor Suzette Robichon, the author and performer Rébecca Chaillon - to make resound the epic and bewitching prose of *The Guérillères* in front of a captive public. A sign that our time is rediscovering, more than half a century after their publication, the founding texts of Monique Wittig's work and setting up their author as a capital contemporary. She proposed to reinvent the world from the feminine," analyzes Thomas Simonnet, underlining the concomitance between the feminist "militant moment" of today and the new appetite, notably among young people, for this "incantatory, performative word". This is the case of *The Guérillères* and *The Lesbian Body*, novels that are both very political and of a high literary standard.

"I didn't want to live like my mother, like I saw women living around me."

For aesthetics and politics are inseparable in the avant-garde writing of Monique Wittig, who envisaged the literary gesture as the means of "demolishing the old forms and conventional rules" that stify and perpetuate the hierarchy between the sexes. Language carries the "mark of gender", and it is this that we must try to abolish. The personal pronoun (I, you, they, we...) concentrates all its vigilance and its effort. "The pronouns [...] are the subject, the very matter of all my books. By these same words which establish and control the kind in the language, it seems to me that it is possible to question it in its use, even to make it null and void", she explained. In *The Opoanax*, the "we" leads the narrative of the heroine's apprenticeship. The epic of *The Guérillères*, it is a "they" who carries it. Lyrical and raw, description of a moment of "total ecstasy" between two lovers, *The Lesbian Body* pushes further the experiment: it is all at the same time to welcome, in the text, "all the words of the female body [...]", and to reconsider the « *j/e* ». "The slash of my *I*" is a sign of the excess [...], an I exalted in its lesbian passion, an I so powerful that it can attack the order of the heterosexuality in the texts and lesbianize the heroes of the love...".

To the questions: why did you become a writer, why did you become a feminist, Monique Wittig gave answers of a troubling similarity. "I didn't want to live like my mother, like I saw women living around me," she replied one day to the first question. And to the second, decades later: "I remember that I made a conscious decision at the age of 12: I would escape the dependence of women, I would not have the life of a woman who serves a man, who has no life of her own." We know very little about this time of childhood, as Wittig lived through it (1). Just a date and a place of birth: July 13, 1935, in Dannemarie, Alsace. In the middle of the mid-1950s, she was in Paris, enrolled at the Sorbonne, then we find her as a proofreader for Éditions de Minuit, to whom she entrusted a first manuscript, which was rejected, and then a second one, *L'Opoanax*, which won the Médicis prize in 1964, supported at the time of its publication by, among others, Claude Simon ("After so many stories in which so many adults have vainly tried to express their childhood memories, how did Monique Wittig succeed in telling the childhood?") and Marguerite Duras.

She participated in the creation of the MLF

At the end of the sixties, at the beginning of the following decade, it is at the heart of the student and worker protest movements that Monique Wittig evolves and becomes active, participating in the creation of the Women's Liberation Movement (MLF), trying with a few others to file a wreath in memory of the wife of the unknown soldier ("There is even more unknown than the unknown soldier: his wife"), signing in April 1971 the "manifesto of the 343" calling for the legalization of abortion in France... But soon will come, in the heart of the French feminist movement, the time of discord and splits. The Monique Wittig's feminism (called "materialist") is profoundly revolutionary, which professes that "heterosexuality is the political regime under which we live, founded on the slavery of women", and that it is advisable to put it down, no more and no less - and, with it, the categories and denominations men and women. Marginalized, Wittig chose exile. Settled in the United States from 1976, she taught at the university, producing a number of theoretical texts, some of which were collected in *Straight Thinking*, published in English in 1992 and nine years later in France (2).

This translation of her essays marks the beginning of her rediscovery on this side of the Atlantic. Added to this are the multiple references to her thought contained in *Trouble in Gender*, the book by the American essayist Judith Butler, a founding figure of gender studies and queer theory. It is finally her radicality, which had isolated her half a century ago, which today makes Monique Wittig a leading figure in feminist thought. Giving reason to the historian Michelle Perrot who underlines, in the forthcoming essay *Le Temps des féminismes* (published by Grasset): "Feminism is not only concrete attitudes in everyday life [...], not only a protest movement, it is a thought."

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- (1) Read, however, the beautiful essay Wittig, by Émilie Notéris, published by Les Pérégrines (2022).
(2) Available from Éditions Amsterdam (edited by Sam Bourcier).