

Not getting sexuality straight

Monique Wittig's manifesto of materialist feminism

ALICE BLACKHURST

**LE CORPS LESBIEN
MONIQUE WITTIG**

176pp. Éditions de Minuit. €9.

**WITTIG
ÉMILIE NOTÉRIS**

176pp. Éditions des Pérégrines. €16.



Monique Wittig, 1966

IN RECENT YEARS, aided no doubt by the reach of social media, the name of the French radical lesbian writer and activist Monique Wittig has circulated with more frequency and more insistence. In 2020, after years of being almost ignored by the French intellectual establishment, she was honoured by the opening of a public garden bearing her name in Paris's fourteenth *arrondissement*. This year, which marks the twentieth anniversary of her sudden death from a heart attack, has become an unofficial *année Wittig* with workshops, conferences, dance performances and screenings dedicated

to her work. Yet the life of Wittig, a founding member of France's first nationwide feminist group, the Mouvement de libération des femmes (MLF) and author of such pioneering essays as "The Straight Mind", which argued that straightness isn't a "natural" state but a calculated political choice, remains relatively unknown. If the author's most innovative and enduring novel remains *Le Corps lesbien* (1973) (The Lesbian Body), then Wittig's own body is comparatively difficult to find.

Émilie Notéris's recent biography of Wittig offers a new portrait: making a case for her in three-dimensions, and shifting the emphasis from Wittig's theory - for which she remains best known - to her material *practice* as a lesbian writer living in mid-twentieth-century France and, later, the United States. The result, a concise, readable book, is far from comprehensive. Yet Notéris's intention is not to fill in all the gaps of Wittig's life, nor to demonstrate everything she knows about the thinker, but rather to recount, as an admirer, what she learnt during a year spent in the author's archives at the Beinecke Library at Yale, and through meeting her former comrades, lovers and acquaintances. Her book is an exuberant sketch of a lifetime's worth of grappling with Wittig's experimental, disruptive and sometimes elusive *oeuvre*. In a reflection of Wittig's own writing process, which she described as a never-ending "literary workshop", Notéris reveals the seams, limitations and loose ends of writing biography, as well as the joyful new connections it fosters.

Wittig's "materialist feminism" was influenced by the work of Karl Marx. Breaking away from the psychoanalysis that had dominated feminist thinking in 1970s France, she envisaged women as a social and economic class rather than a natural, biological or given category. Largely understood as "difference feminism", French feminism's psychoanalytic branch had been rooted in ideas of binary difference between the sexes and was informed by Lacanian ideas of subject formation. For Wittig, nonetheless, the manufacturing of "difference" was a potent weapon in the arsenal of the "straight mind" which sought to control all those who did not adhere to what Judith Butler would describe in the 1990s as the "heterosexual matrix". Wittig's influence, along with Butler's, would go a long way in prompting young French feminists to conceive their sexual orientations as political as much as personal, paving the way for radical thinkers such as Virginie Despentes, Anne F. Garréta and Paul B.

Preciado. It has also inspired a newer generation of writers in France (Wendy Delorme; Juliet Drouar; Sam Bourcier; Alice Coffin) who, without the precedent set by Wittig, might never have been allowed to publish such explicitly "out" books in France.

Wittig was born in 1935, in the Haut-Rhin region of France, but grew up in the more remote Rouergue, after her parents, who opposed the Nazis, moved the family there. Little is known about her adolescence, but in 1950 she moved to Paris to study at the Sorbonne, and eventually earned a PhD from the École des hautes études en sciences sociales, writing a thesis titled "The Literary Workshop". The early 1960s saw her juggle a procession of academic-adjacent jobs, including proof-reading for the Éditions de Minuit publishing house. Though Jérôme Lindon, her mentor at Minuit, rejected her first novel, *La Mécanique*, in 1960, in 1964 he gave her a sabbatical to finish *L'Opoponax*, which went on to win the prestigious Prix Médicis, selected by a jury composed of Nathalie Sarraute (who became a lifelong friend), Claude Simon, Alain Robbe-Grillet and Marguerite Duras. Written in the template of the period's ubiquitous *nouveau roman*, *L'Opoponax*, hailed as a third-person autobiography, recounted a young schoolgirl's feelings for a fellow female classmate and her subsequent intellectual development, loosely modelled after Wittig's own. One of the book's primary accomplishments, marking the start of a career-long obsession, was to reorientate and de-sex French subject pronouns (the novel deploys the indefinite *on* throughout) to suspend "temporarily the social division of the sexes". Then followed *Les Guérillères* (1969), a visionary lesbian feminist epic, and in Mary McCarthy's admiring view, "the only work of beauty to come out of the Women's Lib". This book imagined a future defiant warrior-class of women battling against patriarchal language and male bodies, worshipping an emphatically clitoral order ("the O, the zero or the circle, the vulval ring"). Stylistically, *Les Guérillères* fought to elevate the pronoun "elles" (unfortunately rendered into English, in David LeVay's 2007 translation, as "the women", a term that Wittig despised: better would have been "the people") to a more neutral status, as common and unblemished by gender as the default plural masculine pronoun, *ils*.

Wittig's political affiliations were the impetus for her rise to public consciousness in France. As well as being a founding member of the MLF, Wittig was also (alongside Christine Delphy, Anne Zelenky and Christiane Rochefort) photographed and eventually arrested in 1970 for placing a bouquet of flowers underneath the Arc de Triomphe to symbolically acknowledge the wife of the Unknown Soldier, for them a problematic totem of the patriarchal nation state. Wittig was also involved in establishing the *Féministes révolutionnaires*, a revolutionary feminist collective; and the absence of "a strong lesbian group in Paris", as she put it, pushed her to become a founding member of the *Gouines rouges* (the "Red Dykes"). Ultimately, though (as Ilana Eloit has noted), the tensions between the heterosexual faction of the MLF and its burgeoning lesbian contingent proved too "oppressive" for Wittig. She emigrated to the United States in 1976 and established herself at the University of Arizona in her later years.

Minuit's fifty-year anniversary edition of *Le Corps lesbien* has just appeared, including all the prefaces Wittig wrote to the text. Yet *Le Corps lesbien* - a crystalline, poetic novel where the boundaries between self and other are deliberately porous - began life as an irreverent aside. In "Some Remarks on the Lesbian Body", an essay she wrote in English, Wittig reports how the title came to her from the "hilarity" of putting the word "lesbian" next to the masculine noun "body" in French: a combination that was "a sort of paradox but not really, a sort of impossibility but not really". Grounding this wordplay was the sustained desire to describe a lesbian body "without metaphors" in a way that was "concrete and pragmatic, without



'Clouds over hill' 30"x24" Oil on board

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sentimentality or romanticism”, and adamantly not pornographic. *Le Corps lesbien*'s 110 lacerated fragments locate passion in the body's interior: in its organs, its “humours”, even deep in its intestinal villi. There are few other novels about sex so anatomically precise. The novel's notorious slashing of its first-person pronoun so it reads “J/e” as opposed to “Je”, has been read as a visual sign of lesbian subjectivity as inherently split or “torn” between competing sexual and social impulses. Yet Wittig herself was determined that her divided “j/e” was intended rather as a “sign of excess”. “A sign”, she wrote, “that helps to imagine an excess of ‘I’, an ‘I’ exalted.” This makes sense in the context of the novel's lexical abundance; its revelry in the contagious invention of new, “entirely lesbian” textures, sounds and words.

It feels fitting that Notéris's purposefully errant biography does not try to tidy the diverse - and sometimes contradictory - strands of the writer's life and personality. Showing her to be a more kaleidoscopic figure than the public perception of a stony lesbian separatist looking down from an ivory tower, is, in itself, an exercise in going against the encroachments of the dominant “straight mind” that wants to see everything in inflexible

black-or-white hues. Instead, Notéris's Wittig has a penchant for vacations on exotic islands, gets nicknamed “Théo” by her life partner Sande Zeig, and takes a group of travelling academics out to local Arizona diners for breakfast grits. An anecdote from 1967 in which Wittig, at the age of thirty-two, falls in love with the male journalist Jean-Pierre Sergent and usurps his girlfriend, the feminist activist Suzanne Fenn, might be the cause of some surprise. So might the ensuing revelation that, following this act of apparent feminist betrayal, Wittig urgently tried to secure alternative accommodation for Fenn, eventually coming across a place in the fifteenth *arrondissement* owned by none other than Marguerite Duras. Though accounts of her subject's “sweetness” or *douceur* recur throughout, Notéris is not afraid of calling Wittig out for a few of her more provocative statements: the analogy she makes between the figure of the lesbian and that of the slave, both “fleeing” repressive regimes, is rightly exposed, though she defends Wittig's unforgettable 1978 declaration - that “lesbians are not women”, since “women” are a symptom of the dominant straight patriarchal order - as a seismic moment in radical French feminism. Far from making Wittig a perfect monument or casting

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herself as a devoted fan, however, Notéris argues that “it is genuinely time to be able to critique Wittig, and queer culture more generally”. It's a bold assertion, and the invitation is kept open as Notéris ends her book with emails exchanged with other Wittig scholars: a gesture of “gathering and welcoming”, including different “vibrations of assembled voices”, meant to illustrate that no one has the final word about a life, not even the protagonist herself.

Monique Wittig remains best known as a thinker who wanted to challenge the ubiquity of the term “woman” in feminist writing. But given the diversity of her output (spanning theory, literature, theatre, and filmmaking later in life), to conceive of her only as a policer of language would be wrong. Though her vision sometimes hardened into stark calls for an outright “lesbianization” of the world, and her resurgence in recent years in France has been reductively described by some as a by-product of “identity politics”, she presented queerness in more subtle and helpful terms in “The Straight Mind”: “the desire for something else that is not connoted”, namely “resistance to the norm”. For Wittig, lesbianism wasn't an identity but a method of reorientating the world. ■

Move over, Homer

Enheduana, the oldest named voice in literature

OLLIE RANDALL

ENHEDUANA

The complete poems of the world's first author
SOPHUS HELLE

288pp. Yale University Press. £18.99.

THE OLDEST NAMED VOICE in human literature erupts into the record with a passionate prayer to the goddess Inana. Speaking forty-three centuries ago, and over more than 140 lines, the narrator names herself as Enheduana, a priestess from ancient Iraq, turning to Inana in her hour of need. Enheduana's prayer is urgent and insistent - her enemies are closing in, and her only hope is to persuade the terrifying goddess to help her.

“Raging rainfall of fire! It was An who gave you power. You are a queen astride a lion, you give orders by the holy order of An. Who can fathom the great duties that befall you? It is you who strike down the enemy, you who give the storm its strength. Enlil loves you for teaching the land how to fear, An has ordered you to stand by for battle.”

It makes for astonishing reading. The drumbeat of this *Exaltation*'s chaotic imagery evokes the chaos of the divine Inana herself.

Since Enheduana's Sumerian poetry was rediscovered on clay tablets in the last century, she has remained a relatively obscure figure (despite an exhibition devoted to her that recently closed at the Morgan Library, New York). Her new translator, Sophus Helle, intends to make her go mainstream, establishing her place at the very beginning of human authorship. Enheduana's poems are the earliest works ascribed to a named composer. They are one and a half thousand years older than the *Iliad*, and Helle's stated ambition is nothing short of dethroning Homer as the starting point of our literary canon.

As with Homer, there are questions - probably unanswerable - about who *really* composed the texts. But on this point, Enheduana's hymns have two major advantages over the Greek epics. Firstly, there is archaeological proof that Enheduana was a genuine historical figure: no less than the daughter of Sargon, the conqueror who established history's first empire. (This proof includes the cylinder seal - that is, the Sumerian identity card - of her hairdresser.) Secondly, the narrator of the hymns refers to herself as Enheduana the priestess. So if the real Enheduana did not compose the texts, then whoever did so was impersonating her, writing as if they were Enheduana. Either way, the first individual voice in world literature is that of a woman, unlocking the cataclysmic powers of a mighty goddess.

This book is the ideal introduction to the priestess-poet. As well as being a first-rate Assyriologist, Helle is a gifted poet himself, and he presents us with translations that are nothing short of gripping. His priority has been the poetic force of the original Sumerian texts, and the meaning behind the words, rather than giving a precisely literal translation from such a deeply foreign language, which tends to sound ponderous and opaque. And because he also carefully shows his working with plenty of helpful explanations, his lively approach is ideal for enabling new readers to access Enheduana's extraordinary literary achievements.

These are accompanied by detailed notes and three excellent essays, in which Helle puts his mastery of the subject at the disposal of the general reader, who might never have heard of Enheduana or know anything of the Sumerian language. His fascination with the abstract concept of authorship won't be shared by everyone, but he is a consistently trustworthy guide. Helle has already given us the best English translation of *Gilgamesh* to date; and this book does an even greater service to the cause of opening ancient Mesopotamian culture to a wider audience.

Philologists, Helle explains, have recovered the texts of three main hymns by Enheduana. The first one, the *Exaltation of Inana*, contains her own dramatic story as she pleads with Inana for help against a usurper. The second, the *Hymn to Inana*, extends over almost 300 lines and has even more intense, dazzling imagery: imagine a Psalm, but older and wilder. “When your eyes rage, the bright light turns to gloom, midday to midnight. When your love for a land has run its course, you crush it, and the earth shakes, for nothing can resist your rule ... When your name is spoken, it is greater than the mountains.” Enheduana's third major work is



the *Temple Hymns*, a collection of forty-two hymns to the temples in her father's empire: a less riveting read to modern eyes, but one that nonetheless demonstrates another striking side to Enheduana's literary personality. One cannot help sensing - or imagining - the powerful, proud character behind these three works.

Which leads us back to the same question: were they really composed by Enheduana? Sophus Helle, like a Shakespeare scholar who is sick of hearing about Francis Bacon and the Earl of Oxford, is reluctant to engage. As far as he is concerned, we have the author's persona, whether genuine or assumed, and that is what matters. Readers will have to make up their own minds. And, thanks to Helle's pioneering work, they can. ■



‘Sun and boats’ 42”x48” Oil on board (detail)

Nick Schlee

‘Early and Late’ - Sept 5-16

A retrospective exhibition at
Harvey & Woodd 4 Dundas St, Edinburgh
A full **digital catalogue** of this exhibition & of all the artist's work can be viewed on request from flora@harveyandwoodd.com

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