The Lesbian Body re-examined: an interview with Monique Wittig

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By: Melinda Camber Porter

Monique Wittig, the small, dark-eyed Joan of Arc of the lesbian community, perched on her chair, and in a voice which gradually lost its defensive tone, said, “I could not bear to write anything obscene about a woman's body. Until now men have held the monopoly in describing a woman's body. But their vocabulary is tainted by their attitudes. I felt it was time for women to start writing about their own bodies. In *Le Corps Lesbien* I tried to use a fresh and untainted vocabulary.”

Far from being regarded as pornographic, Wittig's book has been acclaimed by French critics as a masterpiece. In addition, her novel *L’Opoponax* won the Prix de Medicis in 1964, and *Les Guérillères* (1969), was championed by Marguerite Duras and Claude Simon in France, and by Mary McCarthy and Edna O'Brien in England and America. Her British publisher, Peter Owen, brought out *The Lesbian Body* last year. Freed from the Sensationalism and persecution that surround lesbianism in France (one thinks of Violette Leduc and Albertine Sarrazin), her book may well receive a more sober and just appraisal in Britain.

“The critics say that the book is beautifully written, but that's not really my main concern. *The Lesbian Body* is the only book I have written with such passion and personal commitment. Though the subject is very much a part of me, I didn't write it for myself. I wrote it for lesbians, on behalf of lesbians. I could never have written it if the ground hadn't been prepared by the Women's Liberation Movement, and if I hadn't written it, someone else would have.”

Monique Wittig's mission to publicise and make acceptable lesbianism has become something of a crusade. She talks of world-wide persecution, citing numerous examples, and wishes to enlist all women in her battle. Her camaraderie with me, the immediate ‘tutoiement,’ evoked the feeling generated between members of a revolutionary band. Whether a woman is lesbian or not, she is a woman, and for Monique Wittig that is all that counts.

“All women suffer from the same oppression, whether they be lesbian or not, and we should be united in our fight against the male phallocracy,” she said. “I think that lesbians can inject new blood into the Women's Liberation Movement (MLF) and give it fresh impetus. In France, however, there is division and conflict and this results in the formation of numerous splinter groups. In the beginning, the lesbians of MLF left to form a group called Le Phare. But soon male homosexuals invaded it to a point at which women were only a very small minority. So we left the men to it and created a new group which in turn dispersed because a lot of people found it too radical.

“In the MLF itself there are two main currents: the psychoanalytic and Marxist, and the feminist group to which I now belong. But there’s a general feeling of confusion and a lack of unity, partly because lesbians are too frightened to come out into the open and join us and partly because they feel that they are not real women—they are made to feel this by others, and so they are unwilling to participate in movements that are not solely concerned with lesbianism.

“Politics is another divisive factor: one group was abandoned because the Trotskyists took over. Out of this confusion ‘Choisir’ and ‘MLAC’ were created. The latter concerns itself mainly with the problem of abortion. Though men dominate the group it nevertheless serves a function by providing an organisation that does not frighten off provincial housewives. But I would like to see an international organisation. Then we might eventually be able to do something for the really backward countries like India and South America. We need to communicate our ideas to others through films, painting and literature. But we have no cultural tradition, whereas male homosexuals have felt free to write about their problems. In my book I made reference to the Sapphic and Amazon traditions because these are the only roots that we have.”

Although Monique Wittig might not consider Albertine Sarrazin and Violette Leduc as champions of the lesbian cause, these two writers have provided a living literary tradition for younger novelists. The isolation that Monique Wittig feels in relation to a hostile Society and a ‘non-existent’ lesbian tradition is symbolised in *The Lesbian Body* by islands that were the homes of matriarchal cultures. But the writer's alienation from society also springs from a conscious and deliberate withdrawal.

The Lesbian Body combines the war-like fervour of the Amazon and the poetic strength of a Sappho: prose and mythical under-currents with an intense polemic create a new kind of irony. For, where the Swift of 'A Modest Proposal’ uses ferocious satire, Monique Wittig uses poetry. *The Lesbian Body* can be compared with ‘The Female Eunuch’ and ‘Sexual Politics' but it also stands in its own right as a work of fiction.

“I would like to write a purely polemical work because I feel that the question of lesbianism needs to be explored as much as possible,” she said. “But I chose to write 'fiction’ for a number of reasons: to describe how one can live as a lesbian in our society involves one's imagination. At the moment, it is practically impossible to live happily as a lesbian, but fiction allows one to describe a new world where lesbianism can exist. If I wrote a discursive work I would be forced to describe the misery and pain of reality. In fiction my vision and my hope become immediately alive."

In order to describe her vision, Monique Wittig is obliged to use the language of her present, a language which she finds hostile to her purposes: "Language has a magical relationship with reality. It creates our experience and goes beyond it. Although we are imprisoned by language we must attempt to escape. The French language is grammatically and semantically saturated by the sexual dominance of men. Take, for example, the fact that in plural agreements the masculine always predominates over the feminine. When I was faced with the prospect of describing a woman's body in the language of men I could not do it. Instead, I used medical terms that are freed from any male connotations. Although I could not create a new vocabulary, I think that the words became new through existing in a totally different context. I 'divided' as personal and possessive pronouns (Je, m/a), because I wanted to create a separate expression for the female subject. I find it physiologically impossible to use the same personal pronoun to describe a man and a woman. Problems arise when men translate my work. Their attitudes are obvious in a variety of ways: for instance, in *Les Guérillières* the male translator wrote 'The trees were erect' instead of 'The trees were upright.' He also translated 'le sexe' as 'genitals' instead of 'the sex.' And I believe that in English this word refers mainly to the male, or to the whole reproductive system of the female. From now on, I would like all my books to be translated by lesbians." One can only wonder which dictionary provided Wittig with such definitions.

Why then is Wittig's book entitled *The Lesbian Body*? Does the title suggest that a woman as sexual-object can exist just as easily in homosexual relationships? "I see my book as a body, a concrete entity, something that exists in space. At regular intervals throughout the book I interposed facing double-pages, printed in large capitals, of lists of all the parts of the body. I wanted the new reality of woman's body to run through the texture of the book." 'Corps' also means type-face: it is the body, the visual and material presence of the letter. The exploitation of different 'corps' is by no means new, and one wonders whether she could not have manipulated language to do the job itself without having recourse to typographical devices, for their effect on some readers is doubtful.

"*The Lesbian Body* is more concrete and substantial than anything I have written. It is full, crammed with passion. The oblique strokes that separate the letters in personal pronouns and the facing double-pages provided a breathing-space for me and perhaps for the reader."

In saying this, Wittig is voicing an attitude towards language that is shared by many of the younger writers in France today: they stress the materiality of language and view words as 'substantial' forms rather than as intangible receptacles for intangible ideas.

Wittig's isolation becomes increasingly less convincing when one sees her in the context of Parisian literary life: her attitude towards. language and her belief that her books are not ‘literature,’ but statements, link her to the adherents of ‘la littérature engagée’ and the writer-linguists of ‘Tel Quel' who carry her views even further.

Her situation and work become more relevant in a larger, extra-literary context, for her battle against the status quo is shared by all writers and thinkers who have minds of their own.

Ref: The Paris Post, 1976