

which exists simultaneously in a variety of forms, shaped by a variety of interacting discourses, but which is held together by a concern for the function of gender in the symbolic practices of particular social groups.

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Postmodernism Meets the Great Beyond: *les guérillères* and *Le corps lesbien*

In many ways, Monique Wittig's *les guérillères* and *Le corps lesbien* explore the intersection of feminism and postmodernism; these texts function both within and outside (alongside) the postmodernist exploration of the thinking subject and the feminist exploration of the female subject. Wittig's texts investigate a feminist urge to violate and/or obviate the social construction of the female self and to explore alternate possibilities made available to the feminist writer through the fragmentation and decentering proposed by postmodernist readings of the world. Wittig's process, her attempt to write against, outside and beyond the dictates of a masculinist culture, are the focus of this paper. In taking up this reading strategy, the paper intervenes in a debate between French feminisms which has been played out in the form of a running argument between Wittig and Hélène Cixous and their respective "supporters." Though Cixous and Wittig have different agendas, their protests are not fundamentally at odds; they both wish to deny or abrogate the patriarchy, admittedly through different processes. Thus, this paper attempts an analysis of Wittig's work in terms of literary and social theory rather than solely in terms of her relationship to other French feminist theorists/writers, or to her own conceptualizations of her project.

Wittig's earlier text, *les guérillères* (1969), comes out of the context of the 1968 radical student movement in France and intervenes in that social moment in the form of a manifesto calling for all-out rebellion. *les guérillères* conspicuously engages in restructuring European phallogocentric myth and genre in terms of the female. It is an epic tale told in terms of battles, "pastoral" interludes, and stories of the "time-before." As Dianne Chisholm writes:

les guérillères narrates the epic tale of a lesbian people who separate from patriarchal society, arm themselves with "feminaries" — little books, little war machines, inscribed with Sapphic lyrics, lesbian mythologies, bestiaries, and vulgar iconography — who mobilize armies, launch a holocaust, destroy surviving patriachs, and absorb the total converts. (11)

The "story line" follows the structural form of epic, as it juxtaposes stories of trials and discovery in a stately progression to the orgasmically destructive climax. The text presents the reader with an Edenic New World built upon the

violence of gender-based conflict wherein only those who are like (self-same) the *guérillères* are accepted; these converts are made (forcibly) part of this totalitarian Utopian society. During the process of warring, of returning a systemic violence to the patriarchy, we learn that: "Quelquefois il s'agit d'un beau corps évasé aux hanches où la peau est miellée où les muscles n'apparaissent pas. Elles le prennent alors par la main et le caressent pour lui faire oublier tous leurs mauvais traitements" (152-53). Unfortunately, the re-writing of history and myth, within the system of gender conflict and war on which those myths are and were based, results in a problematic parody of that system. The problem with parody is that it very often paradoxically reinforces the conventions of the genre or situation it is intended to subvert because it reinscribes those very conventions. The denial of history is not successful if one unwittingly reimposes the structure of that history on the text. This structure then functions to prevent any truly subversive textuality. Because it is impossible for a woman to occupy the positionality available to a man within the structure of the patriarchy, even if she should desire to do so, *les guérillères*' reversal of the patriarchal power structure might even be seen as unintentionally humorous rather than as dangerous. What, for instance, is one to make of the fact that "Elles disent qu'elles ne pourraient pas manger du lièvre, du veau ou de l'oiseau, ... mais que de l'homme oui, elles peuvent" (139-40). Given its placement in a scene of ritualistic abuse which plays off gender-role based expectations, this unfortunate image manages to mock the militant separatism of *les guérillères*.

In keeping with its attempt to privilege the previously subjugated female body, *les guérillères* is structured by and around the vulva as the signifier of the female body/self. Though this privileging is put under erasure in the middle of the text, one questions a rhetorical move which implies that it is acceptable to represent women synecdochally as their sex organs as long as one later states that the process should not be taken seriously: "Elles disent qu'elles n'ont pas à puiser leur force dans des symboles.... Elles disent que tout symbole qui exalte le corps fragmenté est temporaire, doit disparaître" (102). *les guérillères* functions largely within the present absence of the *ne pas* of *occupatio*, a rhetorical technique whereby something is kept before the reader's consciousness by the paradoxical method of denying its existence or validity.¹ The circular, vulvular structure of the text ensures that there is literally no way out of the bold black ©'s pictured throughout the text as a visual analog of the metaphors given for the vulva. And the vulva of *les guérillères* is a particularly Freudian vulva which plays off male fear about women's sexual power:

1 Mark Antony's speech, in which he harps upon the fact that he has come "not to praise" Caesar, is one of the best known examples.

les combattantes portent à deux mains une petite sphère dont la partie en forme de cratère est dirigée devant elles à hauteur de leurs ceintures. Sur tout obstacle qui se présente à leur progression, elles projettent un faisceau de rayons convergents dont le point d'impact se signale par une lueur fugitive, un éclat bref, ce qui fait que tout objet qui se trouve dans le champ des rayons est instantanément détruit. (155)

Once again, one is led to question whether a metaphoric presentation, however temporary, of the collective power of the womb as instantaneous and ultimate destruction can be subsequently (or previously, given the text's structure) recuperated. This problematic presentation of female sexual power seems perilously close to that embraced by the main character of the cult movie *Liquid Sky* who declares, "I kill with my cunt," reifying patriarchal conceptions about the deadliness and perverted nature of female sexuality rather than subverting them.

Thus, perversely enough, both logocentric and phallogocentric systems structure *les guérillères*. This text displays an acceptance of the current post-structuralist emphasis on the disruptive potential of the margin (here the lesbian). Unfortunately, the margin is almost always part of the whole, can be eminently co-optable. According to Foucauldian theories of power dynamics, the centre actually produces its own resistance, and resistance is thus, by its very nature, a part of the "system." As if to emphasize this problem, the end (though really only the re-beginning) of the old order occurs at the end of *les guérillères*, giving the text a circular structure. As a method of containing this structuring principle works very well, *les guérillères*' coordinating metaphor and image, that all-encompassing ©, makes these links apparent: "Le système est clos.... C'est virtuellement la sphère infinie dont le centre est partout, la circonférence nulle part" (97). Re-situating the centre/periphery argument in terms of a centre occupied by that which is literally the periphery of the current patriarchal system leaves a centre/periphery dialectic in place. Finding or inventing a women's tradition and/or utopian existence based on the violent dismantling of patriarchal history, the text remains caught in the undeconstructed "violent hierarchy" (two terms coupled together in a system of which neither can gain control except by violence) of male/female, good/bad etc. *les guérillères* is about gendered categories; it is "constrain[ed]" ... within the conceptual framework of a universal sex opposition" (De Lauretis 2). The men must become women or be destroyed, the "feminaries" speak back to masculinist history, the vulva combats the phallus. Thus, *les guérillères*' violence to the patriarchal vision of women is ultimately a re-inscription of that patriarchy's violence and revulsion.

Le corps lesbien (1973) develops many of the issues raised in *les guérillères*. Wittig's later text reworks the cultural context of mythic history in order to recreate it as a background for the lesbian writing subject, to recreate the lesbian writing subject as an agent no longer under erasure. In *Le corps lesbien*, along with ironizing and de-constructing/re-constructing the more ancient myths on

which the current Western culture of patriarchy is based, Wittig over-writes Freud, Lacan, and the whole mythic-psychoanalytic basis of that culture. In *Le corps lesbien*, re-writing is not undertaken in response to a "default phallic subject" (Shaktini 44), as seemed to be the case in *les guérillères*. The *j/e* and the *tu*² of *Le corps lesbien* exist in a pre-linguistic, undifferentiated state of the Lacanian imaginary, but one which, paradoxically, includes language. The Oedipal period of the linguistic and logic-ruled symbolic does not exist in this text, and these terms (which are related to the process by which Lacan suggests the self becomes distinguished from the mother) are inadequate when applied to *Le corps lesbien*. There is no Oedipal distinction between the self and other. Repeatedly, *j/e* becomes *tu*, *tu* becomes *j/e*, I and you are one, and thus the violent hierarchy of self/Other is obviated:

J//ai accès ... jusqu'à ton pounon gauche ... le pounon se met à battre, il sursaute tandis que de tes yeux grands ouverts les larmes coulent, tu m/e pièges m/a bouche en ventouse sur la masse gluante de ton pounon ... m/a langue est prise dans une glu innomable, ... j/e m/étouffe et tu t'étouffes privées de cris, il est à cette heure m/a plaisante entre toutes impossible d'imaginer pour nous un plus magistral un plus fatal accolement. (71-2)

The total invasion, total knowledge, total love, total acceptance of the continuous destruction and reconstruction of the female body in this text is predicated upon the *j/e* and the *tu* being in comparable positions of alienation and otherness. Neither is able to usurp the central position of a Self which defines its separateness against an Other it considers necessarily unknowable. The action is performed upon and by the *j/e* and the *tu* equally; they may in fact be the same being. The "text" of woman's body/self thus intervenes in its own reading/dissection. Therefore, any Cartesian split between mind/body, on which the Western binary opposition between self and other is based, is removed from consideration. In *Le corps lesbien*, pain and pleasure are not on different ends of the continuum, good and bad do not exist, and there are no sexless, as well as no sexed and powerless, beings.

The Lesbian Body opens with the fascinating (though somewhat startling) image of the dissolution of Woman:

Dans cette géhenne dorée adorée noire fais tes adieux m/a très belle m/a très forte m/a très indomptable m/a très savante m/a très féroce m/a très douce m/a plus aimée, à ce qu'elles

2 I use the French pronouns here because the English translation gives a feeling exactly opposite to that which Wittig intends. Instead of reproducing the split subject (*j/e*) and thus indicating the difficulty a female (lesbian) subject has in entering a male-dominated language system, the italicization of a single, whole pronoun emphasizes the "importance" of that *I*. A whole, inviolable *I* makes the violence in the text malicious; it puts the speaker irrevocably in a position of power in relation to the Other.

norment l'affection la tendresse ou le gracieux abandon.... L'éclat de tes dents la joie la douleur la vie secrète de tes viscères ton sang tes artères tes veines tes habitacles caves tes organes tes nerfs leur éclatement leur jaillissement la mort la lente décomposition la puanteur la dévoration par les vers ton crâne ouvert, tout lui sera également insupportable. (7)

Repeatedly, the female body (the only body in the text) is broken down, reverts to the viscera, refuses to be categorized as the sum of its "erotic" parts. The dissolution of the social body-category of Woman for which Wittig calls in her theory is the performative function of this text. The violence in *Le corps lesbien* structures a de-inscription of those terms which History and Myth have written over the body of women.

Elizabeth Grosz, reading Nietzsche, discusses the ways in which

civilisation instills its basic requirements only by branding the law on bodies through a *mnemonics of pain*. Morality, shame and guilt are not the causes but the consequences of the subject's incorporation into collective memory or history.... history and social life [are conditioned] on the provision of a kind of corporeal memory for each subject, a memory fashioned out of the suffering and pain of the body. (3)

If it is true that patriarchal "law functions because it is tattooed indelibly on the subject" (Grosz 4), *Le corps lesbien* can be viewed as an initiation into a "gehenna" of pain and beauty which de-inscribes, un-writes the Law of the Father which has been brutally inscribed onto and into the body of Woman. This violence de-mythologizes, insisting on the material specificity of the total body of a woman, the site on (and within) which female subjectivity is based. In this way, *Le corps lesbien*, a text which eschews metaphors, is a strangely metaphoric text. The initiation here marks the body and the society as one, a new one, a re-created one, an unsingular and uncircumscribed lesbian one. Wittig creates her new reality in a way calculated to create its own memory through the mnemonics of pain, a mnemonics which erases the patriarchal memories of the reader in a wash of lesbian blood and essence.

In her article "Homo sum," in *Feminist Issues* (1990), Wittig calls for a "dialectizing of dialectics, questioning it in relation to its terms of opposition as principles and also in its functioning" (7). She asks, "Who is actually reasonable enough to conceive that it is necessary, or that it will be necessary, not to substitute women for men (the Other for the One), but to destroy these categories as categories and to end the domination of the 'One' over the Other" (9). It is this destruction of the category of Woman, by unmaking its site and thus reconceptualizing woman as "lesbian" outside the violent hierarchy of the patriarchal system, that Wittig accomplishes in *Le corps lesbien*. If a truly comprehensive deconstructive reading is intended to demolish violent hierarchies, and if one feminist project is the creation of alternative spaces which will obviate

the patriarchal structure, *Le corps lesbien* functions as the site of a fruitful and suggestive juncture between postmodernist methodologies and feminist politics.

In conclusion then, *les guérillères* and *Le corps lesbien* can be seen to work in different registers. *les guérillères* attempts to turn cultural violence back upon itself and to recuperate a lost "female" history, proposing that female self-construction is possible within and through the paradigm of patriarchal violence. *les guérillères* unwittingly writes back to a centre which it wishes to overthrow through an excess of "femaleness."³ *Le corps lesbien* more successfully refuses the trap of retribution within the system through its performative de-inscription and denial of the (socially and ideologically imposed) separateness of the female subject from other female (lesbian, the woman-identified woman) subjects and bodies. Thus, Monique Wittig's writing process has allowed her to arrive at a point where she can use postmodernist techniques to move beyond partial deconstruction from within the patriarchal system. She can create radically alternative lesbian spaces.

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3 I use "femaleness" for lack of a better word, as I have been trying to show that Wittig does not achieve the inscription of her category of "lesbian" — that which is outside, independent of, the patriarchy — in *les guérillères*.

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In Her Own Voice: An Irigarayan Exploration of Women's Discourse in *Caro Michele* (Natalia Ginzburg) and *Lettere a Marina* (Dacia Maraini)

Can She speak? Does She have a voice? If She could speak, what would She say?

In this paper, I will apply some aspects of Luce Irigaray's theory of women's discourse to two works of fiction by contemporary Italian women writers. Specifically, I will consider these two works in the light of Irigaray's motifs of the tactile, including her "lips" metaphor; her privileging of a non-logical, non-linear syntax; and her use of images of fluidity, based upon an "economy of fluids." Subtending my discussion of these motifs from Irigaray's *parler femme* is the controversy over Irigaray's perceived essentialist bias and whether or not this essentialism is regressive and counter-productive. Like Fuss (1989) and Whitford (1991), I argue that Irigaray's essentialism is useful in the broader effort to articulate a feminine imaginary. Her critique of patriarchal discourse's domination of philosophical discourse (and thus virtually every other Western discourse including the psychoanalytical) is rigorous. Whether she has managed to articulate a discourse which is unequivocally independent of repressed elements of the masculine imaginary can, I think, be questioned; however, she has created the space and terms for an on-going discussion of a feminine imaginary and of a discourse which corresponds to it. Reading these two novels through the prism of Irigaray's analysis, I found my perspective enlarged and altered. Like a palimpsest, meanings, relationships, dimensions and images emerged from these works which I might not have otherwise seen — rather as though I was watching messages written in invisible ink slowly take shape.

THE ESSENTIALIST CONTROVERSY

As feminist theory, Luce Irigaray's *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un* (1977) has elicited a mixed response among feminists. In a recent essay on Irigaray's "contradictions," Maggie Berg notes (50) that some critics (Plaza, Moi, Jones,