Monique Wittig

Les Guérillères

Presented by: Aurore Peyroles

“THE WOMEN AFFIRM IN TRIUMPH THAT / ALL ACTION IS OVERTHROW” (5): these words appear in capital letters on the opening page of Les Guérillères, immediately heralding the radical nature of Monique Wittig’s novel. Published one year after the events of May 1968, it emerged during the early years of feminist mobilisation in France, which would soon crystallise into the *Mouvement de libération des femmes* (Women’s Liberation Movement, MLF). It is thus part of a militant effervescence that aimed to break with established forms of engagement, including literary engagement. Oscillating between utopia, epic and manifesto, *Les Guérillères* is an unclassifiable narrative that offers not only a vision of a post-patriarchal world, but also produces the conditions for its realisation, during the time it takes to read the book, by transforming the structures of representation, language and narration.

In *Les Guérillères*, Wittig does not depict the gradual liberation of women from male oppression. Instead, she presents a world that has already undergone transformation. She forges a community that spends its days engaged in practical, collective activities, such as hunting, construction work, farming, combat training, and providing mutual care. Each task and gesture performed together strengthens community ties and transforms the space in which “*elles*” live. The novel introduces a world in which emancipation from male domination is proclaimed, but also lived, celebrated and perpetuated through the intertwining of memory, narrative and action in a performative and political continuum.

The collective dimension is essential here. In stark contrast to the traditional novel, *Les Guérillères* dissolves the individual into a collective “*elles*”. The systematic use of the plural pronoun suspends individuality in favour of a shifting plurality, as does the regular insertion of lists of women’s first names, which are set apart from the rest of the text. These processional enumerations are reminiscent of ancient epics, with one obvious reversal: whereas Homer listed Greek warriors, Wittig celebrates a female community without an internal hierarchy. She replaces the individual heroism of great men with a diffuse, horizontal memory in which each name is given equal weight. This collective is always expanding and capable of integrating new figures. However, the community envisioned by Wittig is not abstract. Instead, it takes shape in the powerful, sensual — and occasionally violent — bodies of the *guérillères*. Their emancipation is experienced physically, transforming their relationship with clothing, mobility, and strength. Indeed, the *guérillères* undergo combat training. Violence is not only metaphorical; it is a necessary means of emancipation. However, the *guérillères*’ war is not aimed at establishing women’s domination over men. In the final third of the book, some men join the collective “*elles*”. Rather than pitting two fixed groups against each other, *Les Guérillères* suggests dissolving differences. The aim is not to reverse relationships of domination, but to abolish the categories that structure them, deconstructing the very logic of the sexual binary in the process. By proposing an upheaval of the categories that define femininity and masculinity, as well as the individual and the collective, Wittig views emancipation as a dynamic state that is experienced, performed and renewed at every moment, and expressed through speech, dance, and writing.

In *Les Guérillère*s, Wittig directly addresses what Pierre Bourdieu termed “the symbolic power of language”, namely the ability of grammar and vocabulary to establish and normalise hierarchical social relationships such as male domination. French is a prime example of this, as its supposed neutral form (*il*) is actually a generalised masculine. In this regard, the anaphora “*elles disent*” (they say) is a tour de force. It places the pronoun “*elles*” at the beginning of almost every sentence in the narrative, establishing the speech act as the foundation of this epic. The act of speaking enables all the others. Each fragment beginning with “*Elles disent*” acts as a founding gesture, establishing a symbolic order in which language actively shapes society rather than merely describing it. The present tense plays a crucial role in this institutional process. It shifts the narrative focus from a retrospective stance to a performative immediacy. The text’s temporality is a founding temporality — an ever-renewed beginning.

Not only does Wittig reflect on the power of language, she also actively deconstructs traditional narrative elements such as plot, temporal continuity, and narrative hierarchy. By replacing these with a fragmented, cyclical form, she turns the act of storytelling into a political experiment, creating meaning through the accumulation of speech rather than the organisation of a linear narrative. The text’s circular, repetitive, almost mythical temporality reflects that of a revolution which must never become static. The narrative itself adopts a circular logic, returning to recurring images, formulas and episodes in altered form, as if imitating the community’s ritual practices. By thwarting the notions of origin and conclusion, the circular form embodies a politics of the present: each victory must be performed again; each gesture must be reinvented. In this sense, the circle becomes both the structural rhythm of the book and the imaginative horizon of the *guérillères*, symbolising a revolution conceived not as a final resolution, but as continual performative reiteration through which the collective sustains itself.

In *Les Guérillères*, Wittig seizes upon narrative’s founding power as a tool for political and feminist creation. Utopia does not consist of imagining elsewhere, but of shifting the very coordinates of what is thinkable, making emancipation an immanent operation inscribed in bodies, language and stories. Rather than depicting oppression in order to incite revolt, the focus is on dismantling the categories that organise domination in the very act of writing. Representational logic is replaced by a performative one: emancipation is not merely discussed, but also enacted linguistically and narratively.

LANGUAGE: French / Français

This title was not censored before publishing