# Body, Text, and Language: Wittig's Struggle For The Universal In Les Guérillères

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**Abstract:**

In her second book, Les Guérillères, published in 1969, Monique Wittig sought to challenge and revolutionize the representation of women's experience. This text has often been read as a militant feminist text, but I would like to suggest a new reading of it: Wittig's Les Guérillères, read in light of the French commitment to the universal, posits the possibility for women to represent all of humanity, that is, the general or the whole. The allegory of the Amazonian women fighting for freedom is a powerful one indeed, for it captures the need for women to reclaim their silenced voices, but more importantly to show a historical process whereby women become representative of humanity, neither more nor less human than men. Reading Wittig's Les Guérillères from a Beauvoirean perspective allows for the realization of the category of women to represent all human beings. How can women represent the universal, be representative of humanity, without denying their situation or claiming some sort of neutrality? Wittig engages this task thematically and linguistically in Les Guérillères. I will argue that the women in the text do not seek a gender-neutral corrective to the destructive masculine order, but that they strive to represent the general, the whole, as embodied women.

**Keywords:** Monique Wittig | Les Guérillères | feminism

**Article:**

In her second book, Les Guérillères, published in 1969, Monique Wittig sought to challenge and revolutionize through her prose the representation of women's experience. This text has often been read as a militant feminist text; that is, there is a focus on women's struggle for power as the main component of the text.[1] Such an interpretation most likely stems from Wittig's own participation in the MLF (Mouvement de Libération des Femmes) and from her reception in the United States. After her first book, L 'Opoponax, won the Prix Médicis in 1964 and drew the critical attention of Marguerite Duras, Wittig faded from the literary scene in France. She moved to the United States, where she lived for the last twenty years of her life and taught Women's Studies and French courses at the University of Arizona, Tucson.[2]

In France, she is known mainly for L 'Opoponax, which has become a cult book; however, in the United States she has gained a somewhat ambiguous star status in academic and feminist circles (Devarrieux i). Virgile, non (1985), was her last publication in France until the appearance of Paris-laPolitique in 1999.3 In 1992, she published The Straight Mind and Other Essays in the U.S. (Beacon Press). Nine years later this text was finally translated and published in France (Balland, 2001). This publication in France spawned a two-day conference in Paris in June 200 1 entitled "Wittig, le retour : Autour de l'œuvre théorique, politique, et littéraire de Monique Wittig." The French press portrayed this recent attention to Wittig as a sort of homecoming for the French author. Her strong lesbian identity and frequent use of this theme in her writing is one explanation of why she has been better received in the United States than in France. Another reason is Wittig's own solicitation of an American audience. In 1984, she chose to address misconceptions about her fiction. Instead of writing an article in French directed towards the French literary community, she gave a talk in English to a young American audience which later became the article "The Trojan Horse" (Ostrovsky 4).

**Monique Wittig and the Universal**

Not enough consideration has been given to Wittig's status as a French writer: her position in the States as a radical lesbian has led to American interpretations of her texts as militant and particularist. Thus her struggle to have women's voices recognized as speaking for all of humanity is overlooked. Naomi Schor, in her chapter "French Feminism Is a Universalism," traces the relationship between feminism and universalism, especially in terms of Enlightenment universal ideals, and argues that French feminist theorists, in the French intellectual tradition, have been particularly attached to the notion of the universal.[4] Feminist theorists often get tangled in the web of the particular and the universal, since claims to the universal invoke the following conundrum: a conflation exists ofMan and the universal, but this universal is very particular (i.e., the white, male subject is its only incarnation), so any attempt to appropriate this universal is perceived as a rejection of one's particular situation (i.e., being a woman). Schor describes this false universal as an inflated particular and argues for a need to conceptualize a new universal which allows for various particulars. Such an assertion necessitates consideration of the rapport between the universal and the particular, especially when women attempt to make claims to both, that is, when they try to represent the general category "human being" without denying their specificity as women.

Wittig's *Les Guérillères*, read in light of the French commitment to the universal, posits the possibility for women to represent all of humanity, that is, the general, the whole. I want especially to analyze the extent to which she "writes the body," specifically the female body, to what purpose she takes up this strategy, and for what end she abandons it. It may be tempting to view this text merely as one in which Amazon women engage in warfare for their liberation in a liminal Utopian time and space. I would rather see it as an allegory, the telling of a story in a figurative language requiring interpretation, which shows women defining themselves as they seek to represent the universal. Specifically named as elles, seekers of truth, they refuse to be trapped in their sexed subjectivity, they try to come together with the other through revolutionary means, and eventually achieve liberation by belonging to the universal as women. They hope to access the general category of human being, so that they too may be representative of humanity as are men. I will argue that the women in the text do not seek a gender-neutral corrective to the

destructive masculine order, rather they strive to represent the general, the whole, as embodied women.

The claim that an individual can represent the universal from a particular situation appears contradictory at first glance unless we reconsider how both can be possible. If the universal is understood as collected human experience, a variety of human experience that makes up a whole, then a large range of human experience can be represented by either men or women, since an overlap of different kinds of lived experience exists between the two. If human experience is only represented by men, it suggests that women do not have this range of experience or gives the false impression that women cannot or do not have it. Having men represent the universal, or a range of human experience, therefore misrepresents the full range of women's lived experience and leaves a portion unrepresented. The solution is not to have women replace men as representative of the universal, as the imbalance would remain, but instead to understand women as equally representative of humanity as men.

Universalism as an approach to Wittig's work is important, since she has often been read retroactively as part of the écritureféminine brand of feminism. Wittig explains her approach to writing: "Il n'y a pas de littérature féminine pour moi, ça n'existe pas. En littérature, je ne sépare pas les femmes des hommes. On est écrivain, ou pas" (Devarrieux ii-iii). Such a statement affirms a desire to speak or to write to and for all. The universal is defined as the general category and implies the whole, the total, and all of humanity. It is simultaneously a position, a state, and a goal towards which one may strive while speaking or acting as an individual. To struggle for the universal is to struggle for the right to speak or act from our specificity with the hope that the one toward whom our speech or action is directed will agree or at least understand us. Toril Moi, in her latest book What is a Woman?, insists on the importance of the right to speak and to participate in public, and shows that it was one of Simone de Beauvoir's central goals for women.[5] For women to lay claim to the universal simply implies taking back what should never have been denied in the first place: the right to be representative of humanity.[6]

The feminist theory and philosophy ofBeauvoir exemplifies the challenge of speaking as a woman while making claims to the universal, or more specifically, of speaking as a woman with the ambition of the universal in so doing. It is not surprising that women have denied their femaleness in hopes that, by doing so, they could represent the universal as a generic individual. Since women have been defined as particular, deviant, abnormal, not representative, the hope was to deny difference and stand in for the general as men do. Moi argues at length that Beauvoir's speaking as a woman, while having the goal of the universal in mind, is an attempt (and a bold one at that) to challenge women's exclusion from the universal. Throughout Le Deuxième Sexe, Beauvoir foregrounds her subjectivity as a woman and describes the situation of women in post-war France. According to Moi, the power of Beauvoir's text emerges from the description of women's situations, the author's own subjectivity transparent in its creation, and the affirmation of the female embodied subject as representative of humanity.

Wittig addresses this complex relationship between the particular and the universal in her theory and writing, especially through her use of language and of the incorporation of the female body to undertake the difficult project of revolutionizing a system that posits women and femininity as being outside the realms of representation. Wittig has often been considered in the same camp as the French feminist theorists who celebrate the female body, but I now want to show that she uses a strategy different from écriture féminine. For Hélène Wenzel, écriture féminine is a movement in which the female body is valorized to create another culture and realm of signification separate from those of men. Wenzel argues that "numerous other writers

were soon grouped under the aegis of écriture féminine, and within a short period of time this *pratique* appeared to exercise a virtual hegemony over French women's writing, including in its ranks, according to Cixous, Monique Wittig" (266).7 Wenzel differentiates Wittig from the écritureféminine kind of women's writing and recognizes the development of a specific lesbian feminist discourse in her work. I want to take Wenzel's observations a step further and show that Wittig's work is powerful and liberating because it explores women's relationship to the universal in new ways. How does Wittig try to represent women's bodies and language in a way that does not make being a woman an impossible position outside of signification, nor make essentialist claims in the name of destroying this system?

**Wittig's Theory of Sex**

To understand how Wittig's writing and theory differ from those of the é*criture féminine* model, we need to understand Wittig's analysis of the category of sex, the female, and woman in *The Straight Mind*, a collection of theoretical essays. Language and the body function in different ways for Wittig. In the introduction to *The Straight Mind*, she outlines her project of showing "sex" as a political category, a conception of existence that offers a possibility of transcendence or of subversion of sex categories. Wittig does not differentiate between the distinctions masculine/feminine and male/female, since she argues that both oppositions function simultaneously in a complex system of oppression. In her article "The Category of Sex," Wittig argues:

> The ideology ofsexual difference functions as censorship in our culture by masking, on the ground of nature, the social opposition between men and women. Masculine/feminine, male/female are the categories which serve to conceal the fact that social differences always belong to an economic, political, ideological order. Every system of domination establishes divisions at the material and economic level. (2)

Our bodies and the cultural experience of them cannot be separated from one another. For Wittig, social differences are bound up with biological ones. The category of sex is linked to women and a theory which tries to dislodge the category of sex from its social rendering serves no purpose. Since Wittig's project is one of social liberation, she has no interest in a theory that only accounts for sex or femininity in a realm outside of social signification and practice.

An understanding of Beauvoir's philosophy helps shed light on Wittig's approach. Beauvoir, as an existentialist, considers the body as a situation. In her text Pyrrhus et Cinéas, Beauvoir argues that one's situation is related to that of the other.8 A situation can be seen as the sum total of the mutual interactions between the individual and her environment and the attendant experience. In Le Deuxième Sexe, this notion is developed into the concept of situated, incorporated subjectivities. This philosophy allows for freedom, especially for women, since one is constantly becoming; that is, the body informs, but does not always determine, experiences which in turn are culturally shaped. Wittig, in light of Beauvoir's theory, critiques categories of sex, but she departs from her in a significant way. Judith Butler has explained the similarities and differences between Beauvoir and Wittig:

> To be a woman is, then, for Wittig as well as for Beauvoir, to become a woman, but because this process is in no sense fixed, it is possible to become a being whom neither man nor woman truly describes. …
>
> In response to Beauvoir's notion "one is not bom a woman, but rather, becomes one," Wittig claims that instead of becoming a woman, one (anyone?) can become a lesbian. (127, emphasis in original)

Neither Beauvoir nor Wittig claims that certain attributes are essential to women. Wittig states from the beginning that the category ofsex is a political category and that gender in language demarcates categories ofsex.[9] As Beauvoir's work shows, it is precisely because they were never stable categories to begin with that change may occur. It is her very point that woman does not describe one experience, but at best describes a cluster of experiences.

Wittig's politicization ofthe category ofsex leads to a radical conception of women and oftransformation ofsexual categories. Beauvoir conceives of change arising from freely chosen acts as lived by the body as situation; but these chosen acts are contingent to the situation, for a given situation offers only certain choices. To avoid dangerous generalization and universalization of women's experiences, we must reconsider the sexed body as a situation, a state through which experience is translated and political engagements are derived.[10]

This leads us back again to the pressing question at hand: how can women represent the universal, be representative of humanity, without denying their situation or claiming some sort of neutrality? Wittig engages this task thematically and linguistically in *Les Guérillères*. In her essay "The Mark of Gender," she explains: "In *Les Guérillères*, I try to universalize the point of view of *elles*. The goal of this approach is not to feminize the world but to . . . set up *elles* as the absolute subject of the world" (*The Straight Mind* 85). In her text, Wittig makes this linguistic move by showing how experience is mediated through the body, specifically the female body. Does her language as expression of the female body lead to a universal or a particular recounting of experience? How does Wittig use the body as a mode of experience without reducing lived experience to essentialist claims?

Wittig's theoretical and linguistic move is powerful because she tries to make elles exemplify or embody the universal, the general, rather than just a particular experience. To what extent is this possible, since in Wittig's own words, "the category of sex is the category that sticks to women, for only they cannot be conceived outside of it" (The Straight Mind 8)? Wittig argues that "sex" is a marker of a heterosexual economy, one that can be altered through modes that challenge the institution." The struggle is to get the female body accepted as universally human, as human as the male body, instead of merely celebrating the particularity of women and their sexual organs. Being representative of humanity should be a possibility for women and not just for men. In her essay "The Point ofView: Universal or Particular?" Wittig states from the outset that there is no "feminine writing" and that to try to produce such writing, even with feminist intentions, merely perpetuates the myth ofthe eternal feminine:

> That there is no "feminine writing" must be said at the outset, and one makes a mistake in using and giving currency to this expression. What is this "feminine" in "feminine writing"? It stands for Woman, thus merging a practice with a myth, the myth of Woman. "Woman" cannot be associated with writing because "Woman" is an imaginary formation and not a concrete reality; it is that old branding by the enemy now flourished like a

> tattered flag refound and won in battle. "Feminine writing" is the naturalizing metaphor of the brutal political fact of the domination of women, and as such it enlarges the apparatus under which "femininity" presents itself: that is, Difference, Specificity, Female Body/Nature. (59-60)

The combination of terms "writing" and "feminine," Wittig goes on to argue, reproduces the peculiarity of Woman based on a biological specificity without consideration of a particular, historical situation.

**Les Guérillères**

Language, especially effects of style and textual devices, is the tool by which Wittig attempts textual violence in order to achieve freedom in *Les Guérillères*: what Wittig is articulating and how she is saying it is of utmost importance. Wittig's narrative style and her reworking of mythology indicate the importance of language for her project. Erika Ostrovsky enumerates the strengths of Wittig's techniques in *Les Guérillères*. Wittig reworks words by destroying and recreating language through the structure of the text, the treatment of literary genres (especially mythology), the absence of individual protagonists, the presence of transformed mythical figures, symbols, and finally through a reconceptualization of grammar, especially her use of pronouns (A Constant Journey 7). Ostrovsky's description of Wittig's techniques is useful in understanding *Les Guérillères*; however, her use of the term universalization obscures what Wittig is really doing. She argues that Wittig's goal is a universalization of the author's point of view and thus a universalization of her fictions. Wittig's writing, she claims, "implies a recognition of a universal law and is thus the farthest removed from a limited, personal point of view" (30). This argument keeps the universal and the particular separate and overlooks Wittig's attempt to have the guérillères be representative of the universal, the general, as women.

Wittig constructs *Les Guérillères* in an episodic fashion: the main texts of fragmented incidents are framed by a poem in capitals, and interspersed with lists of women's names printed in capital letters. The three main parts of the text are delineated by the symbol O, which reveals a change of attitude by the author each time it is used. Wittig's priority in the first portion of the text is to affirm the circle, for in this section it represents an opening as a reflection of the vaginal opening. She strategically posits the circle in an affirming way before she can create the possibility of leaving it behind. She writes:

> Il y a quelque part une sirène. Son corps vert est couvert d'écaillés. Son visage est nu. Les dessous de ses bras sont couleur d'incarnat. Quelquefois elle se met à chanter. Elles disent que de son chant on n'entend qu'un O continu. C'est ce qui fait que ce chant évoque pour elles, comme tout ce qui rappelle le O, le zéro ou le cercle, l'anneau vulvaire. (16)

This section is striking because it simultaneously evokes the myth of Odysseus, the importance of the body and voice, and meaning and representation of the O in terms of women's bodies. The circle acts simultaneously as an opening and as a prison of phallocentrism, its negative image. At the beginning of the text, however, it is the opening, the hole that creates the possibility of a new imaginary. At this point in the text, the hole is productive and not yet restrictive, since its limitations have not thus far been discovered. The women want to affirm the hole and reject the conception of it as a lack; that is, they admit the zero, but instantly move to the circle or ring.

Wittig describes the sexual organs of *elles* explicitly and suggests that they experience the outside world directly through their bodies. She writes:

> Elles disent qu'elles exposent leurs sexes afin que le soleil s'y réfléchisse comme un miroir. Elles disent qu'elles retiennent son éclat. Elles disent que les poils du pubis sont comme une toile d'araignée qui capture les rayons. On les voit courir à grandes enjambées. Elles sont tout illuminées en leur milieu, à partir des pubis des clitoris encapuchonnés des nymphes doubles et plissées. (24)

This passage is particularly fascinating because it shows the link between language, the speech act, and the body. Wittig creates her sentences in a way that establishes an interdependency between the syntax of the sentence (the first three sentences repeat the same form), the formulation of an utterance ("elles disent"), and the description of the women's bodies. Wittig attempts to create a textual disturbance in her portrayal oí elles, one that implicates completely the female body. The repetition of "elles disent" emphasizes the significance ofthe voice in articulation oflanguage; at the same time, their declaration reveals important elements ofthe bodies, especially their sexual organs. Their vaginas, pubic hair, and clitorises mediate their experience of nature (feeling and reflecting the sun) and how they move through space; however, this is not going to be how the women translate their experience at the end of the text. Wittig's grammar, the "elles disent," suggests a distance between the physical phenomena and the conceptualization and articulation as such. The use of the present tense, however, creates a feeling of immediacy; the description is always already translated by the mode of the body.

The vulvas and the female sexual organs serve as the model of representation and articulation: "Elles disent qu'elles ont trouvé des appellations en très grand nombre pour désigner les vulves. Elles disent qu'elles en ont retenu quelques-unes pour leur amusement. La plupart ont perdu leur sens" (66). The vulvas are at the center of the women's conceptualization of language; words and meaning start with their bodies, describe their sexual organs, and extend out to the external world. The women consider and see the world through the grid of their sexuality to the point where the proliferation of meaning solely based on an anatomical aspects becomes senseless according to Wittig.

Ostrovsky argues that the creation of speaking subjects is in and of itself the central victory of Wittig's text. She maintains:

> It [*elles*] appear in the phrase "elles disent," seemingly an expansion of the "on dit" that pervades *L'Opoponax* [Wittig's first text]. However, in "elles disent" the impersonal quality of "on dit" is gone. It can no longer be interpreted as meaning "it is said" or "it is told." The phrase has become more assertive in nature and indicates a pronouncement made by a speaking subject—or rather, subjects. In other words, it denotes taking possession of an act of speech. This is in itself an important victory. Indeed, the central victory . . . that is won in *Les Guérillères*. (37)

I would like to argue, however, that merely speaking is not enough and that one's speech and writing must make a stronger claim than simply existing; that is, one must speak as a subject. To become a recognized speaking subject is a victory, for it is an entry into the universal. The presence of female protagonists instead of male ones in the epic is not sufficient for radical change, yet it prepares the way for women to represent the universal.

Wittig's transformation of myths is crucial for her project, since she challenges the way in which meaning is constructed in a manner that is more sophisticated than a mere switching of female characters for male ones. Wittig aims to revolutionize what we know, especially the symbols and mythic construction that inform and shape this knowledge. She attempts to clear a space for reflection and representation that is specifically female, but that is part of a larger strategy to use the particularity of a female-centered myth to join a larger ensemble of voices. The need for a specifically female space is the historical consequence of patriarchal oppression; once that is gone, that need is no longer the same.

The first myth clearly links the female body to a system of signification that is based on imagery of the female body:

> Elles disent que les féminaires privilégient les symboles du cercle, de la circonférence, de l'anneau, du O, du zéro, de la sphère. Elles disent que cette série de symboles leur a donné un fil conducteur pour lire un ensemble de légendes qu'elles ont trouvées dans la bibliothèque et qu'elles ont appelées le cycle du graal. ... Elles disent qu'on ne peut pas se tromper sur le symbolisme de la table ronde qui a présidé à leurs réunions. (61-62)

This passage shows two currents in Wittig's work: the reformulation of the Arthurian myth and the application ofthe women's sexual organs to interpretation of legends, texts, and knowledge. In the first portion of the text, the women over-apply their new-found symbolism and affirmation of the vulva. Their sexed bodies, specifically the gaping O, are at the center of their lived experience. The significance of this passage lies in their interpretation of legends based on their anatomical model; it is mainly for this reason that they laud the Arthurian myth of the round table. Their bodies inform their conceptualization of knowledge in a powerful way. At this point in the text, there is still an affirmation of this endeavor; Wittig, however, is slowly moving the reader to a rejection of the circles and of a translation of experience and knowledge based entirely on the construction of women's anatomical bodies.

Wittig also reworks the Adam and Eve creation myth in very significant ways. The quest for knowledge is a solitary one for Eve, named Sophie Ménade, who resembles Medusa; the garden is hers and hers alone:

> Une femme nue y marche. Son beau corps est noir et brillant. Ses cheveux sont des serpents fins et mobiles qui produisent une musique à chacun de ses mouvements. ... Orphée, le serpent préféré de la femme qui marche dans le jardin, sans cesse lui conseille de manger du fruit de l'arbre du milieu du jardin. (72)

Wittig's description is a negation of the castrating figure of Medusa, for these snakes produce music (hence the allusion to Orpheus who played his lyre). Wittig allies the snake with the woman in the garden and presents the quest for knowledge as hers alone. The author does not posit the composite image of Medusa and Eve in negative relation to men as do the traditional tales; the woman is alone with her nakedness and cannot be blamed for the downfall of man. Wittig also creates an intertextuality of myths in this version, combining the Garden of Eden story with the Greek myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.[12]

Wittig plays with explicit imagery of female sexuality in her alteration of the Sleeping Beauty fairy tale. She writes:

> Il y a aussi les légendes où les jeunes femmes ayant dérobé le feu, leurs vulves en ont été les porteuses. Il y a l'histoire de celle qui s'est endormie cent ans pour s'être blessé le doigt à son fuseau, le fuseau étant donné pour le symbole du clitoris___ Elles disent qu'elles ne comprennent pas qu'on l'ait appelée la belle au bois dormant. (62-64)

Perhaps they do not understand the term Sleeping Beauty because they do not understand what an objectifying gaze might be. Wittig evokes an autoerotic image of the woman touching the clitoris and in turn being hurt by it. What is curious is how Wittig ends the episode: there is no prince to save the woman, she will pass her hundred-year slumber due to the effect of a powerful sexual event.

Wittig's allusion to tales situates her transformation of them in order to evoke a certain expectation or memory of the former tale. As in the case of the Sleeping Beauty story, Wittig skillfully manipulates the Brothers Grimm fairy tale "Snow White and Rose Red." In the original German version, Snow White and Rose Red were two daughters of a widow who lived in a cottage in the forest and had two corresponding rose plants. The two girls were very different in disposition, but despite their differences, were close and vowed never to leave each other and to share everything. One day, they saved a bear from a mean-spirited dwarf. Much to Snow White and Rose Red's astonishment, the bear turned into a prince! The king's son explained that the bear had stolen his treasure and put a spell on him. He would only be free if the dwarf was killed. Snow White married the prince and Rose Red wed his brother and they all lived happily ever after (with the mother taking up residence at the castle with her two rose plants).

Snow White and Rose Red act very differently in Wittig's version: "Blanche Neige court dans la forêt. ... À un moment donné, elle donne un coup de bâton à Rose Écalarte endormie au pied d'un chêne et ressemblant à une grosse racine, rose comme une rose rose" (64-65). Snow White runs through the forest being chased by Rose Red. In the end, the tables are turned and Snow White hits Rose Red over the head with a stick. The former is no longer the passive character and in fact acts aggressively and violently. There is no mention of a prince nor of marriage. What is most significant about the transformations of all of the above tales is the manipulation of a traditional myth or tale to suggest a wider range of human experience. From Greek mythology to the Christian creation story, Wittig challenges the knowledge or truth portrayed in these stories by rewriting them. She does not merely substitute female characters in different roles, she alters their very beings and how they think and act by foregrounding them in the stories.

The power of naming in Wittig's text indicates a larger universal act of naming which is a different strategy from that of transforming the myths and legends. According to Ostrovsky, the lists of the diverse names of women all over the globe and over time, suggests universalization and timelessness; cultural, historical, and legendary delineation is blurred. Her argument is made too easily. If the names suggest universality, how do we then recognize them as specifically women's names? Wittig enumerates: "Flore Zita Julienne ... Desdémone Raphaële Iris" (21) and "Phèdre . . . Louise Coralie Anémone Tabitha Thelma" (5 1 ). These names suggest diversity (some are well known, some not), but also a collectivity. The lists of women's names serve, rather, a function similar to the pronoun elles. Yes, these names are women's names, just as elles is a third person plural pronoun to designate a group of women which Wittig uses with the aim of universality. There is a specificity present (i.e., they are women's names), but the names need to have a universality about them; that is, they are all women's names and not just French women's names. The vast quantity of names also contributes to a sense of universality, of being general.

Wittig aims to shake these signifiers from their roots in representing women or the female; however, the names need to be bound as recognizable, distinct groups, subsets to be on hand for another purpose. The names need to be recognized simultaneously as uniquely individual and as women's names of various groups (mythic, American, French, etc.) in order to be used to compose the universal.

In order for the women to represent the universal, Wittig changes her strategy in a significant way. In the middle of the text, she abandons the early symbolism of the circle and the glorification of the vulva. She almost makes a mockery of these representations and distances herself from the metaphor ofthe female sexual organ:

> Elles disent qu'elles appréhendent leurs corps dans leur totalité. Elles disent qu'elles ne privilégient pas telle de ses parties sous prétexte qu'elle a été jadis l'objet d'un interdit. Elles disent qu'elles ne veulent pas être prisonnières de leur propre idéologie. Elles disent qu'elles n'ont pas recueilli et développé les symboles qui dans les premiers temps leur ont été nécessaires pour rendre leur force évidente. Par exemple elles ne comparent pas les vulves au soleil à la lune aux étoiles. (80-81)

The key concept here is the one of totality, for they reject the ideological notion of women's fragmented bodies and refuse to be entrapped by this limiting ideology. Wittig makes this shift so that the pronoun elles can become the universal signifier, can do the work that Us currently does. She rejects the language that celebrates the vagina and reproductive functions to the exclusion of other aspects of women, since this strategy is no longer useful. First, they see their bodies in their entirety and not just as fragmented sexual organs, they understand that this view of themselves as only essentially bodies (rather than situations) could imprison them. They realize that the vulva is not the primal shape that informs the external world and that symbols derived from it are empty. There is not a specific causal moment in the text that brings about this realization; rather, the women gradually undergo a figurative transformation.

Wittig does not posit a gender-neutral corrective that replaces female embodiment, rather the women's change in attitude implies the possibility and the attempt to represent all people, the general, specifically as women, neither as engorged vulvas nor as gender-neutral beings. Susan Suleiman argues, however, that Wittig has merely created a structure of reversal, one in which women have replaced men:

> *Les Guérillères* ... combines a massive feminization of culture, history, and language, with a Marxist vision of class struggle followed by the abolition of all conflict. But the fact that only "nous toutes" are left suggest not so much a decategorization of masculine/feminine as the assimilation of one category by another, which is what traditionally happens with the use of masculine forms of universals. Here, the assimilation is reversed: the universal becomes female. (132-33)

I maintain that the universal does not become female, but rather the women begin to represent all of humanity just as much (or as little) as men. They do not negate their specificity as women, but question the usefulness of the vulva imagery for interpretation of all of their lived experience.

The change to the negative construction "elles ne disent pas" signals the rejection of the affirming phrases that supported the vulva imagery in the beginning of the text. Wittig boldly

states: "Elles ne disent pas que les vulves sont comme les soleils noirs dans la nuit éclatante" (81). Wittig continues with this construction a few pages later:

> Elles ne disent pas que les vulves dans leurs formes elliptiques sont à comparer aux soleils, aux planètes, aux galaxies innombrables. Elles ne disent pas que les mouvements giratoires sont comme les vulves. Elles ne disent pas que les vulves sont des formes premières qui comme telles décrivent le monde dans tout son espace, dans tout son mouvement. Elles ne créent pas dans leurs discours des figures conventionnelles à partir de ces symboles. (86)

The women realize that the symbols are no longer useful because they limit their mediation of experience. The shift from the former glorification of these structures and images to their rejection is powerful, since it represents a refusal to filter everything through their vulvas. These symbols are no longer helpful, so the women must find another way to express themselves. Wittig is also playfully critiquing the continued obsession with phallic symbols. She adds later: "Elles n'utilisent pas pour parler de leurs sexes des hyperboles des métaphores, elles ne procèdent pas par accumulations ou par gradations" (93). Wittig gradually lays out the development of the realization of the women. Once they question the benefit of the symbols based on vulvas, they can stop conceptualizing their genitals in metaphoric ways.

The women's letting go of past formulations suggests that representation of the universal as women and not as neutral entities is possible, since they simultaneously occupy the space with men. The devalorization of the sexual symbols is a very important step, since the women realize that they have reached a point where they must question the vulva as the guiding principle. In the latter part of the text the circles are rejected and left behind as a result of their understanding the limitations of such symbolism. The elles call for a reformulation of the body not based on absence or fragmentation, but rather on a totality of their existence:

> Elles disent qu'il faut alors cesser d'exalter les vulves. Elles disent qu'elles doivent rompre le demier lien qui les rattache à une culture morte. Elles disent que tout symbole qui exalte le corps fragmenté est temporaire, doit disparaître___ Elles, corps intègres premiers principaux, s'avancent en marchant ensemble dans un autre monde. (102)

The women are heading towards another state of existence, one in which they too can represent the universal. They are now subjects who can work with men as genuine others, since they are no longer relegated to figments of men's imagination, but are equally valuable in the community. These integrated bodies are walking toward a new world with the hope of reaching something beyond their particular situation. The women are no longer imprisoned in their subjectivity; that is, they are free from a limiting conception of the vulva. By apprehending the limiting picture of the vulvas, the women are able to leave behind this notion which is a vestige of a dead culture, one which conceived of women as fragmented bodies, as sexual parts.

The vision at the end of the text offers a possible response to questions posed by the relationship between the universal and the particular. Wittig probes the provocative claim that the elles can represent the universal, not as a signifier which has merely replaced Hs, but as representative of human experience. At the end of the text, the men have ceased to be the enemies of the women and the latter occupy a space where they are not imprisoned in their sexed subjectivity and have the freedom to do anything.

The change of verb tense at the end of the text highlights a change of perspective and an important historical shift. The present tense gives way to the past tense, the *passé simple*, which suggests that a defined event bound in time and space has occurred. Wittig ends her text with the following passage: "La guerre est terminée, la guerre est terminée. ... Souvenons-nous de celles qui sont mortes pour la liberté. Et nous entonnâmes alors la Marche funèbre, un air lent, mélancolique et pourtant triomphant" (208). It is significant that Wittig ends on a triumphant note, for her entire text has been a test of eliminating old structures and recreating new ones.

Wittig underscores the importance of the body as mode of experience while highlighting the potential limitations of an account ofsubjectivity based solely on imagery of sexual organs. Reading Wittig's Les Guérillères from a Beauvoirean perspective clears the way for women in her text to move from being inscribed by the circles to moving beyond this symbolism. Wittig's goal is for women to represent the general, just as men have always done; that is, to acquire the right to speak the truth as women, but as women whose words move beyond the rings of the vulva.

**Conclusion – Belonging to the universal**

In the beginning portion of Wittig's Les Guérillères, the women speak their bodies by celebrating their vulvas—their multiple lips speak together. The women in Wittig's text must leave behind the strategy of expressing themselves through their bodies because it can at best lock them into a straightjacket of traditionally sexed subjectivity. Through reformulation of grammatical structures, myths, legends, and language, Wittig traces the struggle for women to speak as themselves and then to represent the universal alongside men. The allegory of the Amazonian women fighting for freedom is a powerful one indeed, for it captures the need for women to reclaim their silenced voices, but more importantly to show a historical process whereby women become representative of humanity, neither more nor less human than men. One ofBeauvoir's most important hopes for women is exactly the realization of the category of women to represent all human beings. Wittig's writing takes on mythic proportions as she weaves layers of form and language into her work to move toward a space where elles can represent the universal in a purely grammatical sense and then be a part of the universal in an existential one.

**Notes**

1. Erika Ostrovsky cites several critics who have viewed Wittig's fiction primarily as militant feminist writing: Sally Beauman, Laura C. Durand, Mary Beth Pringle Spraggins, NoniBenegas, Diane Griffin Crowder, Marthe Rosenfeld, andNamascar Shaktini (173)
2. She preferred living in the States where she could openly talk about her homosexuality (S. G. "Retour de la Wittig." Libération 28 July 1999).
3. Wittig's bibliography is as follows: L'Opoponox (1964), Les Guérillères (1969), Le Corps lesbien (1973), Le Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amants (1975), Virgile, non ( 1 985), The Straight Mind and Other Essays ( 1 992, Beacon Press), Paris-la-Politique ( 1 999), and La Pensée straight (200 1 ).
4. Schor asserts: "In his brief essay 'Two Imperialisms of the Universal," [Pierre] Bourdieu provides the most cogent analysis of the well-documented French identification with the universal. ... That French culture, indeed French nationalism, is universalistic is the

shared analysis of some of the most knowledgeable students of French identity. That what Todorov calls 'ethnocentric universalism' is endemic to all Occidental imperialist nations is undeniable, but to deny the specificity ofthe French case is to fail to take the measure of an aspect of French culture that has a direct bearing not only on feminism, but also on a host ofinfluential theoretical texts and movements that are embedded in this culture" (5). Schor goes on to say that "France stakes its claim on its privileged historical relationship to the universal Revolution. Ringing the changes on the relationship of the particular and the universal, France's national particularity is precisely to embody the universal. . . . French feminism is shot through with French universalism" (5-6).

5. Moi asks an important question inspired by Beauvoir's Le Deuxième Sexe: "For how can we ever achieve reciprocity between men and women if women are denied the right to speak for all, to speak with the ambition of the universal, to speak with the outrageous hope that we will all agree with them, a right that men have considered unproblematically theirs for so many centuries? For women to gain the right to speak for all is, as a matter of course, also to gain the right to be philosophers, the right to define themselves at once as women and as lovers of wisdom and seekers of truth. It is no coincidence that throughout The Second Sex Beauvoir insists that one ofthe worst effects ofsexism is that it excludes women from the universal at every turn" (236-37).
6. While it is beyond the scope of this paper, consideration of Hegel's philosophy of the universal is very useful to our discussion. In Phenomenology of Spirit, he tells the story of women being excluded from the public sphere, and therefore denied a public voice, because they cannot be citizens.
7. See Christiane Makward's "Interview with Hélène Cixous," trans. Ann Liddle and Beatrice Cameron, Sub-Stance 13 (1976): 27.
8. Beauvoir writes: "Je suis; je suis en situation devant autrui et devant les situations où il se trouve lui-même" (94).
9. Wittig argues: "Gender is the linguistic index of the political opposition between the sexes. Gender is used here in the singular because indeed there are not two genders. There is only one: the feminine, the 'masculine' is not the masculine but the general" (60).
10. For a more detailed discussion of this topic, see Moi, section "'The Body as a Situation': Simone de Beauvoir" in chapter "What is a Woman?" (59-83).
11. It should be noted that 1 am using the word "sex" here as in French, where there is not a linguistic difference between sex and gender.
12. In the latter myth, Orpheus charmed mortals and beasts alike with music from his lyre. His happiness ended when his beautiful wife, Eurydice, died when she was bitten by a snake while she was fleeing the advances of Aristaeus. Orpheus sang his sorrow and vowed to bring her back from the underworld. The gods at the gate were so moved by his heart-felt sorrow that they agreed to let him take his wife away with him on the condition that he would not look at her until they reached the land of the living. When the two were almost at the precipice, Orpheus turned to look at Eurydice to reassure himself that she was still there. He looked back and broke the condition of her return, thereby sending her back to the land of the dead almost before she had a chance to utter one final farewell. In Wittig's version, the snake bears the name of Orpheus. It is also significant that Wittig links Greek and Christian mythologies; by collapsing the figure of Eve and Medusa into one entity, she calls into the question the truth of these myths and the meanings that are produced and derived from them.

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