

# Trajectories of Desire in Genet and Wittig

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## Introduction

At their most extreme Jean Genet and Monique Wittig stage revolutionary desire through their practice of language as material, embodied productivity in scenographies that decentre the 'human' through a volatile mix of semiotic violence and iconoclastic eroticism. In fact, both writers strategically universalise homoerotic desire, plotting its trajectories to disrupt, deconstruct, or explode in parodic hilarity the cultural practices subtending patriarchal imperialism. This paper will be looking at the ceaseless productivity of desire in their texts as it moves through abjection and animal-becoming, and finds serial ignition throughout its metonymic relay, arousing obstruction itself as its medium. Evidently these tropes and the concept of desire as productive come from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (2008a, 2008b). While these subversive poetics are inseparable from the project to storm and overthrow what Timothy Mathews (2000) calls the 'image-fortresses' of patriarchal imperialism, they are less about utopian arrival than about the endlessly renewed performance of desire as metamorphic.

## Rites of desire in Jean Genet's theatre and film work

In Genet's mature theatre and film writing, what narratologists like Gérard Genette (1980) and Mieke Bal (1997) call the *diegetic* (story) and the *mimetic* (performance/representation of action) tend to be collapsed into one: by the time of *Les bonnes* (*The Maids*, 1946 [2001c]) there is nothing beyond the performance but death; the performance is framed by death;

the actors act as actors; their roles are endlessly reversible, as long as they are ritually locked in their mirroring games. On the other hand, you can say with David Bradby (1997) that the dramatic context merges increasingly with the theatrical performance itself. But this is what invests each gesture with such desiring charge, and, variously, with such weight or with such levity. Such theatrical intensity is at least in part due, I'd hazard straight away, to Genet's early experience of both the church and the detention centre: of Christian ritual and of abjection inside the panopticon.

Whether or not, accepting Edmund White's sober readjustments, you view with corrective scepticism Genet's self-mythologisation, consecrated by Jean-Paul Sartre in his *Saint Genet: comédien et martyr* (*Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, 1952 [1966]), the compelling evidence from the exhaustive research behind *Genet: A Biography* (White 1993) is that Jean learns early what it's like, not simply to be an outsider as an abandoned illegitimate child from Paris, what the kids derisively call a 'cul de Paris', a 'Paris bum' in foster care in the village of Alligny-en-Morvan. Later, as a serially recidivist petty thief and vagabond, the adolescent Jean Genet is incarcerated in the Children's Colony at Mettray and learns what it is to be cast onto the social scrapheap. From this accursed share he seeks to reclaim a degree of sovereignty within abasement and abjection. The panopticon, as Genet's earliest works demonstrate, well ahead of Michel Foucault's analysis (1977) and no doubt enriching it, is not just a scopic regime of control; it proliferates sites of resistance and desire where every glance, every lingering gaze, every furtive gesture is freighted, just as it is counterfeited, for the intimate projection of the fragile communicant.

In fact it's hard to avoid the hypothesis that the prison experience at Mettray Children's Colony, and later at prisons like Fresnes, La Santé, and many other lockups throughout Europe, at least in part prepared Genet's development as one of the most radical and imaginative dramatic poets of the spatial in twentieth-century theatre. Genet's protracted apprenticeship in observation as an outsider and his cultivation of extreme passivity arguably fed a theatrical vision, which in some ways answered Antonin Artaud's call in *Le théâtre et son double* (*The Theatre and its Double*, 1938 [1962]). It's a theatre that knows

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political power to be based on spectacle, on image, costume, movement, and gesture, a theatre that rules by exalting the place of the humiliated, mutilated, or sacrificed body. Following Sartre's identification of the Christian Passion as a model, which Genet converts to subversive purpose, Laura Oswald (1989) argues that this is a theatre in which the ritual rehearsal of self-as-other leads inevitably to its sacrifice, to its evacuation before the mask of alterity: suicide becoming the same as death dealt by the other. In his plays Genet has the dispossessed improvise for themselves a counter-theatre in which they parody power's strutting extravagance, and he shows through their ceremonies of ludic and cruel confrontation the exact equivalence of all creatures before death (Genet 2003), which is always waiting in the wings, culminating in *Les paravents* (*The Screens*, 1956-61 [2007]) by breaking through the screens of 'imaging' onto the stage. The scenographic imagination, which already informs the inverted neo-classical structure (Pucciani 1972) of *Les bonnes* is played out to its entropic finale in the last, vertiginously baroque poem of death that is *Les paravents*. The force of parody, as it becomes spatially active, shifts from the inversion of classicism of *Les bonnes* to the staging of multiple and complex parodies of the discourses of power as they interpellate, in carnivalesque manner, subjects of colonial politics, the army, the police, and the church, and their abjected others, the disinherited amongst the colonised. What has this got to do with desiring lines, with trajectories of desire?

### *Les paravents*

The way by which the subject is interpellated: as strutting supremo or as his subjugated, abject, and powerless other; as guarantor of the law or as the body through which it marks its power; as prison warden or prisoner, never puts them out of the circuitry of desire. The early work is erotically charged in direct proportion to its claustrophobic containment, investing the cell walls themselves in *Un chant d'amour* (*A Song of Love*, 1950), for instance, with erotic charge. In this early short silent movie, a veined male forearm reaches out from one barred cell window to the emergent fingers at the adjoining cell window; or the aroused companion inmate in turn blows smoke via a straw through a gimlet hole through his cell wall into the next. In the neo-classic continence of *Les bonnes*, the servants' desire to

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overthrow or supplant Madame, their Mistress, reaches its limit on the lounge room balcony as their nocturnally repeated ritual finds almost onanistic orgasmic expression in Solange's fantasised uprising; but by the last great episodic and arguably orphic (Mathews 2000, 153-191) work for the theatre *Les paravents*, whose ultimate eponymous subject is the skin or 'hymen' of representation itself, the desire of the protagonist Saïd, borne of his poverty, and expressed through the martyrdom of abasement, finally breaks through the screens' 'skin' on which the actors have spray-painted their insurrectionary desires, to pitch towards the consecrated realm of Death itself. Desire's arrow is to be poised here on the brink of death, a crossing which is rehearsed but never fulfilled until this last work. But just as importantly, as I will try to show, it is the strategic translation of all relations into homosexual desire which flamboyantly pitches all towards dissolution and death.

What makes Genet's oeuvre pre-eminently theatrical is the fact that there's no interiority, no inner voice, no subjectivity beyond what can be translated into the sensorium, into visual, auditory, olfactory, and kinesic terms, because this is a synaesthetically raucous theatre; rather than interiority, there is always the *mise en abyme* of the performance. What counts is what happens between the actors and between actors and props in the charged scenographic space. Even in *Les bonnes*, what seems like interiority finding its expression is more like an extraversion of what festers and flowers in the folds of the imposed language of power; it might be an impoverished dreaming, that of a prisoner on death row, as it is in *Haute surveillance* (*Deathwatch*, 1944/1949 [2001b]), or of a *bonne à tout faire*, a maid of all work, but in the theatre of Genet the gesture with which an actor mimes the proffering of a cigarette or the putting on of rubber gloves can make claims to an evanescent sovereignty, which in turn relays the current of desire. What makes *Les bonnes* as conceived by Genet more troubling is that the relay of non-coincidence between actor and 'character' is vertiginous: for instance, a male actor masquerading as a woman plays Solange playing Claire, whose own 'reflection' comes from the male actor in drag playing Claire playing Madame. Of course the Maids breaking their games and reverting to their 'Maidness' have their 'lesbian' moments, based, as they were initially, on aspects of the story of the Pépin sisters, whose hyperbolically brutal murder of their employers had all of the Parisian

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intelligentsia abuzz with analyses from Lacan to Sartre and de Beauvoir. However, their tenderness and erotic connection are corrupted by the Maids' abject state: with one mirroring the other's servitude and dependency on what she is not (i.e., powerful and rich) for a sense of being. Where the political in Genet resides, even at his most erotic moments, is the way he shows how the outsider's desire is written, i.e., troped by her or his very abjection. It is necessarily a poverty-stricken repertoire with which one has to figure the relation to the Other, and thus one's desire: this is the challenge.

Here, the recurrent warning is, as in *Le balcon* (*The Balcony*, 1955) and *Les nègres* (*The Blacks*, 1955), of keeping distances: for reverence, for hierarchy to be maintained; for performance not to contaminate reality, the abject must be kept separate from the sublime, the Maid's black pump from Madame's designer shoe, the gob of spit from the spray of diamonds, the fan from the washing-up mop, the fable of Monsieur from his reality as sordid little thief or from the Milkman, object of the Maids' lust beyond their implied lesbian connection. But each order keeps parasiting the other, as it were: one realm crosses chiasmatically into the other, as in mirror reversal. As Oswald argues (1989, 60-61), the Maids tend to speak like poets and Madame, their Mistress, speaks more like the Maid: 'filth' has to test itself against luxurious beauty. There is, throughout Genet's work, this constant chiasmus between the argot of the marginalised and the speech of the upper classes, which a conservative realist aesthetic would regard as a serious fault and indeed, has done so (Lauwick 1992). It is due to the imbrication of the poetically charged slang 'enamelling', as Genet puts it (White 1993, 81) set in virtually Racinian syntax that gives his work its transgressive frisson and is in part accountable for its subversive force. As Claire says, '*La crasse n'aime pas la crasse*' (Genet 2001c, 48), 'Filth doesn't love filth': it has to see its reflection in glittering splendour, be this through linguistic or material simulacrum.

Genet insists on the prestige of the abject in the theatre: 'One rule which under no circumstances should be transgressed: The man, woman, attitude or speech, which in life appear to be abject, in the theatre must fill with wonder, always, astonish, always, by their elegance and their power of appeal' (240). In fact, the festive triumph of the lowly and the abject in *Les paravants* is nothing short of exorbitant. I'd like to look at how Genet exploits

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montage in his scenography to stage this metamorphic desire in this last great theatre work. From an apparently desultory beginning, tracking the descent of the male 'Arab' protagonist Saïd further and further into abjection, the epic jumps to scenes of colonial self-congratulation, with a satirical take on the benefits of 'civilisation', the orange orchards, the rose plantations, the cork-oak plantations, the rumours of uprising against the colonials, and the consultation with the dead leader of the uprising against the colonials, Sli Slimane, finally to the breakthrough of death itself, and as Clare Finburgh argues convincingly (2004, 205-224) in her analysis of the stagecraft in *Les paravents*, the dissolution, and virtual destruction, of the set itself.

While it is impossible to disagree with Jacques Derrida's assertion in *Glas* (1974), reprised by Finburgh (2004, 212-215), and by Mathews (2000), that this work shows the equivalence of all subjects and ideologies before death and the relentlessness of history, that the play is about the ruination of any thesis, it is the levity of clowning, and the poetry salvaged from the scrapheap of colonial ambition that is arguably the play's great triumph and its enduringly subversive thrust. This is never as strong as in the characters of La Mère, the Mother of the impoverished young Arab Saïd, and in Leïla his wife, who is purportedly so hideous that she has to bury her head in a black hood, a *cagoule noire*. It is especially the *allégresse*, the levity of spirit that struck Maria Casarès the great French actress, who performed the role of La Mère in Roger Blin's first production at l'Odéon in 1966, and who had this to say as she was rehearsing the part:

I don't think I've ever had a text so alive, also one that requires so much from the actor, which demands so much of her. It's not so much a matter of a text that's more or less arranged ... Each word has to live, each object has to take on its weight ... and I don't know whether the moon exists but it must exist for the actor who speaks of it. You can't put [the moon] in a sentence but at the same time this kind of demand keeps in you an incessant taste for invention ... so it's that ... it's terribly alive in the hand, it's like a living matter that doesn't stop moving and that you've got to take with you at the same time, of course, to incorporate in yourself ... And then you've got to have ... a kind of lightness, of levity, even in the strongest bits, if not tragic, because, although tragic ... but even in

the blackest things there's a kind of levity as if you were chomping enthusiastically into things (Casarès 1966, n. p.).

This levity comes across straight away in the opening tableau in which La Mère accompanies Saïd on foot to the hovel of his bride, Leïla. They are carrying a battered cardboard suitcase and refer to its precious contents in quasi-amorous tones; in their clowning it flies open and is revealed to the audience as utterly empty. This is making a fiesta out of poverty, but as Casarès says, it is a gaiety won from blackness; it is hardly a sentimental celebration of indigence. The mother in her violet rags and her painted face and her heaped up voodoo doll hairdo breaks into a wild dance, commanding the stagehand to play the five-panelled screen like an accordion to accompany them. She and Saïd make barnyard cries, a kind of jubilant eulalia (Genet 2007, 93), which is later taken up between Saïd and Leïla. Animal cries are a counter-discourse of defiance to the logorrhoea-affected colonials. Particularly striking is the use of space in the Sixth Tableau, in which La Mère confronts the village women who will not admit her to their mourning circle for the hero of the uprising, Sli Slimane, because she is mother and mother-in-law to thieves. One of the women says that without particular chagrin for the dead she can go about her work 'en douceur', quietly ... And like the Queen of Hearts in *Alice in Wonderland*, La Mère takes up this word 'douceur' (as a substantive it means 'gentleness' and as adverbial phrase en douceur means quietly, slowly or surreptitiously) and gives it a vicious twist – she says, fuck 'la douceur', send 'la douceur' off to the cemetery ... Now that she is lubricated for insults she launches a curse and promises to –

visit the women with nightly dreams in which they will steal escalopes and chickens ... [and that she] will recite to their inner ear one hundred and twenty-seven times one hundred and twenty-seven insults ... [and that] each insult will be so beautiful that they will be illuminated by it ... (69).

This can be said to inscribe the poet's revenge on a culture whose imaginary has abjected him. With his image-power he will seduce the spectator likewise to commit criminal acts, to perform insurrectionary gestures in their dreams, where he argues we all become monsters (2001d, 269). This, then, is one way in which desire is relayed. Following this hyperbolic

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threat La Mère becomes, as it were, the mangy cur that they have chased from their mourning ceremony: she goes into a barking match with Leïla (2007, 69). Then there ensues the most remarkable concentration of power: as if by this invocation of the invasion of the women's dreaming psyches by La Mère, the stage has become quite simply the dream space, which is now her claim, her territory, a mock colony to counter the French colonial claim to Algeria, an energetic field which she now charges with her becoming-dog insurrection. This is the transgressive scenography at work through a reclaimed and promoted abjection, one that needs no scintillating riches (as it did in the world of *Les bonnes*) to endorse it, only the improvised poetry – arising from the gratuitous jubilation of those who have nothing to lose. Genet notates the transformation with his superb vision of embodied space: they stop for a few seconds, and one can hear, coming from the wing where the women disappeared, the lowing of cows. The barking has effectively transformed the departing mourners into cows since it has incited in dialogic rejoinder the sonic manifestation of this metamorphosis. In the next pause to La Mère and her daughter-in-law's barking, the audience hears distinctly the amplified stampeding of a herd of cattle.

As this roars and then recedes, La Mère and Leïla's gazes rise from the wing of the mourners' disappearance, and sails up to the ceiling beams, where, on the elevated screen, a full moon appears. The weight of their looking thus creates and confers gravitas to this painted moon. This is the moment of magical realisation that Casarès refers to in the testimony cited above. A silence marks this uncanny apparition. The moon is provoked as it were by the becoming-animal of the women. Becoming-animal is a major trope in the attack against humanism and the arrogance of anthropocentrism in general. It is also a celebration of the animality of humans, and of that very animality against the abstractions of post-enlightenment thinking, implicit in practices of the carnivalesque from Aristophanes and Petronius, in short in the western counter-tradition that continues via François Rabelais through to Franz Kafka to Angela Carter and on to Marie Darrieusecq.

The space of the wings is, as always with Genet, humming with a transformative tension and marauding with the agents of death, just as it is with the neo-classical Jean Racine; it is also a

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field of imaginative empowerment of a 'character', a furious resistance, through which metamorphosis becomes dangerous contagion. Becoming-dog incites becoming-cow, which in turn incites moon-magicking. If we look at the montage of scenes organised in the Eleventh Tableau we get a sense of the semiotic machine Genet makes through the dual use of screens as communicating surfaces and disjunctive separators, as semiotically charged spatial partitions.

The two three-panelled screens (recalling altar triptychs and the implicit hypostasis: three-in-one and one-in-three) downstage represent the prison; it is a little ambiguous from Genet's stage directions whether one or both of these have the word 'Prison' written on them, but they represent the partition of cells and the fact that the sleeping warden acts as a kind of commentator, connecting, legislating, and regulating at once their 'song' through the night, their love song of abjection, celebrating their increasingly outlaw status. It is significant that the prison warden participates in the nightlife of the prison, being asleep on his chair at the scene's opening and thus registering the dialogue of Leïla and Saïd as if in his own dream-work, as if he were a conduit for their songs of lament, confession, and desire to outdo these as a mode of devotion and perfectionism. In this case, the descent to the bottom, through Leïla's epic journeying from 'crime to crime' from 'prison to prison' becomes a sublime attainment. The Saïd-Leïla exchange takes on a kind of exalted tenderness in its registration of Leïla's progressive abjection, expressed through her broadcasted stench. The warden complains that their song flows through all the prison walls filling the night itself. When, intermittently, Leïla and Saïd's spaces are in darkness, we have other zones lit up. Upstage right, the elevated blue screen is rolled in, coincident with the arrival of the legionnaires who are setting up a portable altar and helping the Lieutenant prepare himself for battle, putting on the costume along with the rhetoric. The sky-blue screen suggests the space of the immaculate virgin, the space of religious transcendence and hypostasis, but Genet brings to this his parodic subversion by the mixing of discourses of sex, religion, and warfare. The ideologies subverted through their interfusion thus find their comic 'hypostasis' in this imperial moment.

After the tender dialogue celebrating Leila's abjection there come disembodied voices from the wings: '*Une voix: les hosties et le latin à peine avalés...*/'A Voice: Barely were the host and the Latin swallowed ...' (2007, 123) Here, as often in Genet, we have a syllepsis, a yoking together of the Latin of imperialist religion and the physical manifestation of hypostasis (God's body cannibalistically swallowed through the bread and wine of Holy Communion). The ceremonial objects of the mass are unpacked ritually before the five kneeling legionnaires: portable altar, the surplice, the crucifix, the chalice, and the ciborium. Brought into collision are the codes of role-rehearsal marking the opening tableaux of *Le Balcon*: religion, sex, war, all entwined with the promise of death. As he ceremonially slips on his white gloves, the Lieutenant gives an exalted invocation of tumescent soldiers: 'Filled to the brim, and hard. Swollen and hard'. He wants to be able to send their families 'their bracelets and their medals besmirched with dried blood and even cum' (2007, 123).

I want ... Preston! ... my revolver ... I want the visor of your caps to outshine my boots, more varnished than my nails. ... I want your buttons, buckles, catches, hooks, chromed like my spurs... War and love, I want sewn into your pictures of naked chicks icons and the Immaculate Virgins of Lourdes, around your necks chains of gold or of gold leaf... in your hair brilliantine and ribbons in your pubic hair – those that have it, but in the name of God every soldier must be hairy – and handsome! ... Don't forget. Good warriors, brave warriors, probably, but first of all beautiful warriors. Therefore: perfect shoulders, rectified by artifice if necessary. Muscular necks. Work on your necks. By: torsion, tension, contraction distortion, suspension, pressure, flexion, fluxion, masturbation ... Thick hard thighs. Or apparently. At the level of the knees, under your pants ... Under the pants take bags of sand to swell out your knees, but look like gods! ... Shine my boots up more so they dazzle, Peston! I want war and love in the sun! And guts in the sun. Got it? (123-124).

As with the scene with Leila and La Mère at the cemetery, language draws the Lieutenant up on its cresting wave and as he is captivated by the homophonic chain, by the slippage through alliterative and assonantic approximation, and meaning begins to disintegrate just as his pleasure pitches. No doubt this kind of work, eroding national myths of the virile

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heterosexual warrior with this paean to gay desirability, celebrating the virgin with the whore, confounding heroism with costume and prosthetic device, provoked all the more outrage at the premiere performance because the wilfully parodic discourse of military drill is delivered through this kind of linguistic entropy, breaking into the ejaculatory, as it were, as the 'thick hard thighs' are conjured.

Watch how the agent of the law/surveillance becomes the medium of a parody of conjugal connection, a weird kind of desire that launches both Saïd and Leïla to the brink of utter exclusion even from the other colonised, the scintillating realm of absolute abjection, but beyond their incarceration, the warden becomes the sounding board for all the music of insurrection: of acts of arson, of generalised sabotage:

They come and they go, they flow into my ears and the ears of the thieves and the pimps lying on their straw mattresses. Let the night have a little rest for a moment. It also needs silence. From one end to the other of Muslim territory, there's murmuring in the shadows, noise of broken branches, lighter flints striking, an olive tree bursting into flame, prowlers that leave a scent of roasted flesh, revolts ... and you two in your rags ... you don't stop ... singing (128).

Then, like a grotesque throwback to *Haute surveillance*, we hear the song of the matricidal death row prisoner, exalting the pink womb of his mother, which in the thrall of his crime he carved to pieces. The lyrical invocation of matricide striking at the womb itself is a shocking effect, rising through the prison night. Thus Kathy Acker in her wicked poetic compression of Genet's *Les paravents* in *Blood and Guts in High School* can refer to 'being in prison [as] being in a cunt' (1984, 135). Leïla and Saïd fall asleep again, the elevated central screen upstage is illuminated, and Monsieur Blankensee and Madame Blankensee the orchardists appear in front of the window painted on the screen. It appears that Monsieur is letting himself go and no longer putting on the padded girdle which gives him an impressive 'belly and bum'. There follows a parody of the discourse around conjugal love: 'A whole life of love based on sin, my great grandmother used to tell me. That love should begin by a betrayal was perpetuated like the secret wound of an order still respected' (Genet 2007, 132-133).

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Here Genet is amusing himself, conferring his own values of betrayal as perpetuation of a solitary 'woundedness' upon the colonial couple's nostalgic reminiscence.

The fluidity with which the lighting effects transitions in the montage of scenes in the Eleventh Tableau presents as interdependent, and inter-permeable, the theatres of war, religion (portable altar in front of, i.e., a screen for the brothel), conjugal domesticity (Blankensee's Balcony), commercial sex (Brothel), incarceration (Prison Cells of Leïla and Saïd), and surveillance (the surveillant, the prison warden). Their metonymic relations also suggest a virtual simultaneity, an ongoing polyphony. These are all of course eminently transportable as sites of discourse, and also sites of struggle. Each is bounded by the possibility of transgression. This scene is a celebration of the transgressive voices in relation to the sites where they erupt or are secreted. Writing and imaging are performed as a material extension of the body, an effective, dynamic prosthetic taking place in the public arena, the stage. In the same space as the soldiers fart the Marseillaise, and conjure an epiphanic windscape of the home country for their dying Lieutenant, the revolutionaries scrawl in livewire images their incendiary crimes.

Genet's theatre reaches its paroxysm to reveal the void at its core, the artifice behind social categories: colonial soldier and his prisoner alike are brought to the threshold of all-equalising death. All is caught up in its metamorphic wave: the ancient Mother, her son and her hideous daughter-in-law, empowered in her hood of invisibility, are inserted in one carnivalesque continuum with the sergeants and the grotesque panoply of colonisers, and their ideologues, the academician, the missionary, the photo-journalist, the banker along with the soldiers and politicians: desire courses through libidinous rhythms and anarchic punning in the language, flares through the material images and gestures, as in the Lieutenant's dressing ceremony, or through the song of Leïla and Saïd traversing the body of the warden, its most festive and ejaculatory moment being reached by the dance of the silent fluidly moving Arabs spray-painting their crimes on the screens: but this desire does not deliver its subjects to a new order, which will always institute another regime of repression: rather, it exhausts its fires in the festivity of extinction before the realm of the

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dead. In the end the traitor Said is alone caught between the living and the realm of the dead; still abjected, still liminal, he finds the radiance of eternal exclusion in the wings, from whence he will not emerge. 'So Saïd, where is he?' La Mère asks after he's shot down like a dog: 'In a song?' 'Maybe ...' comes the reply. Of course the 'song' is Genet's play.

From the intransigence of this self-elected exclusion from human dreams of religious and political transcendence, I'd now like to consider the economy of desire in some of Monique Wittig's work to see how the radical lesbianisation of the world, first rehearsed in *L'opoponax* (*The Opoponax*, 1964) and pushed to its limits in *Le corps lesbien* (*The Lesbian Body*, 1973), unleashes the metaphoric energies in writing to subvert the already-written in the regime of phallogocentrism.

Monique Wittig's *L'opoponax* and *Le corps lesbien*

A consideration of the entry under 'Dictionnaire'/'Dictionary' in *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes* (Wittig and Zweig 1976) points to the strategic practice of lacunae or leaving things understated or unsaid with a limit case of litotes.

The arrangement of a dictionary allows the elimination of elements that have twisted our story/our history. ... It's what you could call a lacunary arrangement. It also lets one use the lacunae like litotes ... in which it's a matter of saying the least in order to say the most (77; translated by the author).

The repeated withholding of the utterance, of the 'inter-dit' or the forbidden can, on the other hand, mark the place of the sacred, of the measureless love. As Hélène Cixous points out (1978), the 'interdit' is what is at once forbidden and, by this repression, sung between the lines: it is the 'inter-said'; or the inter-sung. Silence is explored as censorship, as erasure, as violence and, in its positive sense here as in *Le corps lesbien*, as a refusal to speak the name of the beloved, i.e., a as mark of worship. In *L'opoponax* the eponymous term is metonymically displaced from its signified perfume extracted from a plant of this name to assume the protean capacity of marking the hidden and silenced love. As such it marauds silently and invisibly through the sites 'one', the collective subject, inhabits, making uncanny

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and at times threatening irruptions into visibility, through which the cryptic amorous declaration is hard to distinguish from the blackmailer's threat, of the kind: '*Je suis l'Opoponax*/'I am the Opoponax' (Wittig 1964, 240).

Insidiously what cannot or cannot-as-yet be said begins to insist through litotes, in paradoxical relationship with hyperbolic passion, in this case, with lesbian passion, which cannot speak its name under patriarchy. Wittig strategically puts under erasure for the lesbian subject oppressive agencies and practises constituting patriarchy. The lesbian writer, theorist, and activist who famously declared at the 1978 MLA convention, that lesbians were not women, is asserting the transgressive pitch of this category beyond the oppressive gender binary, which places the feminine always in a relation of subjugation to the masculine (2007b, 61-62). The arrangement of a dictionary allows the elimination of elements, she says, 'that that have distorted our story' (Wittig and Zweig 1976, 77).

On awarding *L'opoponax* the 1964 Prix Medici, fellow French novelist Marguerite Duras declared that the 'masterpiece ... knocked off in one fell swoop ninety-five per cent of works about childhood' hitherto published in France (2008, 283-287). Taking up the challenge from the first and amazingly bold of the 'new novelists', Nathalie Sarraute (Wittig 2007b), but also from Alain Robbe-Grillet, and probably from such Oulipo writers as Georges Pérec and Raymond Queneau, Wittig imposes the constraint of the pervasive use of the neutral pronoun 'one' (with the exception of the final inscription of 'je' or 'I' marking on the last page the enunciation of lesbian desire), and the exclusive use of the present tense, without any narratorial intervention for scene-changing, nor moral commentary, nor notation of motivation. Montage is the overall compositional principle in this radical take on the *roman d'apprentissage* or *Bildungsroman*, and, almost without exception, the language is purely descriptive or 'objective', with little marked modality beyond the declarative, except what is implied through metonymic images and suggested subtly by litotes, between the lines, as inter-dit. Time is the time of reading so that the reader observes all through a collective 'one', in what is plausibly the Haut Rhin/Alsatian region of Wittig's own youth, implied by the enumeration of crops, plants, and trees and the organic succession of seasons and rituals

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imposed on them. In the early chapters the unfolding scene is punctuated with the signifiers of World War II: a bomb crater, remnants of barbed wire, which 'one' has to draw aside, to get from field to field, and the reader is moved through the escapades implied by what passes before the eyes, or speaks pungently to touch, hearing, taste, and smell. Aligned with 'one', the collective narrator and the actant of sequences involving Catherine Legrand (who via the interface of 'one' emerges as the principal focaliser), the reader undergoes the unfolding present of children roaming in the countryside, of school lessons, of illness, of bereavements, of excursions, and the circle of seasons until adolescence laps at the brink of adulthood. The animal electricity of this observational language performs the world of childhood as it unfolds to the senses, and runs the current of awakening desire – sensual, intellectual, affective, and incipiently sexual – as if straight into the reader's bloodstream.

While the eponymous 'opoponax' hovers in its mysterious promise on the horizon of reading, as a word that can signify a perfume, with its interruptive manifestation in the text itself, it marks the site of silence drenched with this giddy unknown, of that which cannot as yet speak its name. This is the Opoponax. As mentioned above, it is uncanny in its metamorphic power to induce the shiver of the return of the repressed; in parapraxis, for example: when there's something blocking 'one's' desktop lid and 'one' cannot shut it under the gaze of the presiding nun, it's the Opoponax. These notes in 'vermillion paint' are sent by Catherine Legrand (the joke is perhaps on Catherine the Great) to be read by another, Valérie Burge, in the same time, the time of textual unfolding, as they are read by the reader. As in Genet's work, the inscription of desire is all the more intense for coursing subversively as a material 'interrupter' through the institutional space (Wittig 1964, 179-182); it draws its sparking fuse amongst the pupils and through the lessons of grammar and poetry during recreation, and disturbs the serried ranks of pew-perched girls in the chapel and in the after-school study. Notes are passed, erasers thrown, pebbles retrieved by the Catholic college girls burrowing between legs, between pews. Desire traces its sinuous pathways through such metonymic subterfuge, as is hinted by the tension just invoked between pen and eraser, between writing and erasure. As suggested, the narrative discourse is deadpan, free on the whole of any evaluative or affective language, unless one takes into account the growing insistence and frequency of focus as with the onset of one's implied

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puberty: Valérie Burge comes more and more into the sightlines as she is sought out by the questing gaze of Catherine Legrand. However, for much of the work pleasure is tactile and olfactory and generalised in the discoveries of the subject, collective and singular at once, 'one' of childhood: of making mortar with one's saliva for example, making an arsenal for one's store of apples plucked in orchard raids, of freely roaming the countryside, punctuated by disciplinary rituals. The reader's desire hums in the disjuncture between the observed fragments of Valérie Burge's body, through branches, through a forest of catholic girls' limbs, or is rendered ambiguous in the play of shadows; all of these glimpses of the (implied) beloved, in inverse proportion to their fragmentation, carry a heightened intensity of charge.

The enumeration of all the proper names of the college students works interestingly then in terms of litotes, the reader, who, aligned with 'one', scans all the lists on the rollcall, which at one moment Catherine Legrand shouts out loud as she walks in the fields, only withholding as sacred in the lacuna of silence the name of the beloved. To desire Valérie Legrand is to imagine her through this silence and, as yet, unattainability:

One watches Valérie Burge who is looking straight ahead and who is elsewhere, one doesn't know where. One quietly asks Valérie Burge where she is but she doesn't hear so one tries to reply for her, one sees that she is in the darkness of a night so dark that it is without end, one says that she's lying face down on a wild black horse white grey the colour doesn't matter, because one can't see it, one says that her loose hair is floating on the wind, one sees her fingers caught in the mane and her bare knees covered in sweat, one sees Valérie Burge going without knowing where, her mouth open, her teeth bared, taking the fresh air. One says to oneself that probably she is elsewhere, drawn by the movement of stars, she is straying, one sees her go further away, it's a brilliant freeze which one watches turning on itself, she is travelling within a galaxy. When one is sick of envisaging like this where Valérie Burge is one sees that Our Mother of St John has come to the cases when one replaces the reflexive *isea id*, that the Latin lesson hasn't advanced, that Valérie Burge is still in the same position looking straight ahead, that one doesn't know what to do, one can only tap on the table to accompany the table to accompany the tune one has in one's head for *tento me torquet amore*, one says that torments me but one doesn't know. One is in the 4.30 recreation (216).



Here the hallucination is notated with the same graphic precision as the immediately observed. After witnessing sensual intimacies which are described as they meet or elude the eye but are never generalised in an act of judgement, there is this irruption:

... one can see in turning around a little that Anne-Marie Brunet has let go of Valérie Burge's hand and that she's crossing the courtyard to go to ring the bell. I am the Opoponax. One must not annoy it all the time. As you do. If you find it hard to comb your hair in the morning you mustn't be surprised. It's everywhere. It's in your hair. It's under your pillow when you go to sleep. Daylight arriving behind the window will enable you to catch glimpses of the Opoponax sitting on the sill. You will write to it and you will put the letter behind the piano of the study. Valerie Burge turns in all directions the piece of paper that she has just found in her desk. The writing is strange made up of circles and acute angles. One can see that it's done in vermillion paint (230-231).

This new code has surreptitiously been rehearsed through the writing practised by the younger Catherine Legrand with sticks in the sand. She has in fact invented a new mode of writing, which is the incarnation of the Opoponax. This performative writing literally calls into being the inscription of lesbian desire, introducing the unsounded-unnameable as uncanny disturbance through the economy of the schoolyard. At an earlier stage, but perhaps only retrospectively activated by the reader, 'one' is alerted to the protean nature of the Opoponax as a form of writerly imagination: 'She tries to represent opoponax but nothing works. So she writes in capitals at the middle of the top of the second page opoponax and a colon followed by, can stretch' (179). This is enacted materially by the double spacing of the letters in the text. Wittig shows the very material performativity with this kind of metatextual interruption. This is the radical step towards encompassing all writings in this new writing of desire. This break-out from the patriarchal symbolic order by chanting the names of girls, or by creating an alternative language of desire in the materiality of the signifier, is a subtle rehearsal for what we see explode in *Le corps lesbien* where lesbian desire is not only universalised, but is so in a world which knows nothing but lesbians and where animal, plant and mineral realms are all interconnected in one great energetic field animated and fuelled by the cauldrons and volcanos of lesbian desire. Here

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the vast intertextual inheritance of Western patriarchy is revolutionised by the lesbian desire.

Macrostructure and salient stylistic features of *Le corps lesbien*

To start with the title was meant 'sarcastically', as a 'hilarious' joke (2005b, 46) which curiously many Anglo-American commentators seem not to have heeded. The work is far from the putative essentialism many of its critics humourlessly attributed to it. If there is 'the' lesbian body it is only in its protean metamorphic power, the endless multiplicity by which it produces ever more singularities.

By reactivating in *Le corps lesbien* through pastiche and parody a poetic tradition condemning female subjects to the 'feminine', by dismantling and reassembling in alternating sadomasochistic frenzy and poignant lament or love song, Wittig effectively shows how textual practice can rehearse a radically new sexuality, beyond the oppressive cast of patriarchal binaries. First of all, the textual practice here is conceived as re-writing what has been read; as was the case with *L'opoponax*, time in the work confines itself to the now of the reading rather than unfolding a represented duration or temporal mimesis; the preterite or past historic of mimetic illusionist fiction is banished and all proceeds in the present of unfolding perception.

Macrostructurally, it can be noted at a glance that the 'scenes' are interrupted by eleven double-page lists of the names of body parts and body productions, which are magnified to around thirty-six point font. Significantly LE CORPS LESBIEN occurs in the first and last entries of the first and last fragments of the list, taking the reader full circle. According to Erika Ostrovsky's numerological research, this has high significance as 11 signifies an excess, an overflowing of 10; showing also, in the Arabic numerals, the two-as-one (1991, 73). The main body of the American translation is comprised of 111 prose partitions and again, according to Chevalier and Geerbrant (74), this structure repeats the principle of *une partie qui forme un tout dans le tout* (a part that forms a whole within the whole). As in the cover of the

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Éditions de Minuit edition, in the first list fragment in *Le corps lesbien* the word to follow immediately *Le corps lesbien* is LA CYPRINE, a formal and exotic term for vaginal fluid, but of which the most common association was 'issued from Cyprus' (72). Ostrovsky also argues (73-75) that the relationship of the three '1's in '111' with the triple-headed goddess invoked in *Le corps lesbien* (Wittig 1973, 165) is itself an overcoming of *la stupide dualité* of patriarchy. Whether or not the arcane numerological symbolism was authorially intended, Ostrovsky is right in attributing this degree of semantic investment in the formal architectonics; as already noted, the formal constraint has great appeal to Wittig as an artist and significantly she offers herself a new formal challenge with every work.

As interrupters, these lists span, like enjambment, the prose poems between them, often breaking on a definite article and resuming with the suspended lexical item in the subsequent list. The lists work by parataxis, the simple juxtaposition of substantive nouns, without argument. Just as Genet's Arab revolutionaries spray-paint hieroglyphics of their crimes on the screens, so the shouted assertion of these nouns in something like 36 point font is a performance. The naming performs, deforms and un-forms, reminding us of Wittig's assertion in her earlier novel, *Les Guérillères* (1969), that 'the language you speak is made up of words that are killing you' (162).

I argue that even abstract philosophical categories act upon the real insofar as it is social. Language projects beams of reality onto the social body, stamping it and violently shaping it. For example, the bodies of social actors are fashioned by abstract language as much as nonabstract languages. For language works through a kind of graft on the real (2007b, 105).

There is no hierarchy in the terms afforded by simple juxtaposition, either and when, for a moment, they seem to be enunciating paradigmatic cohesiveness, they are interrupted by terms from a radically different paradigm. The lists of bodily parts, organs, secretions, and functions include deviations, deformations, pathologies, and emotions connected with them. They certainly de-romanticise the language associated with lesbian love, whose most famous twentieth-century sentimentaliser in France was Colette.

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OESOPHAGUS BRAIN CIRCULATION RESPIRATION NUTRITION ELIMINATION DEFEICATION  
REPRODUCTION [XX + XX= XX] REACTIONS PLEASURE EMOTION SIGHT SMELL TASTE  
TOUCH HEARING VOCAL CORDS CRIES ROARS MOANS MURMURS GUTTURALS SOBS  
WEEPING HOWLING VOCIFERATIONS WORDS SILENCES WHISPERS MODULATIONS  
SONGS STRIDENCIES LAUGHTER OUTBURSTS LOCOMO- (1973, 144-145).

These enumerations assert the body in all its materiality while dis-organising it, de-hierarchising so that it becomes like the Deleuzo-Guattarian take on Artaud's 'body without organs' (Deleuze 2004; Deleuze and Guattari 2008a, 2008b), the vectors of movement involving ingestion, expulsion, explosion, implosion, shedding, shredding, intrusion, extrusion, introversion, extroversion, volatility, and condensation, liquefaction and freezing, just to name a few. It is the body re-imagined in sexual ecstasy, being literally beside her/self, notating the lesbian metamorphoses of sexual transport. The words in the eleven interruptive texts (which are fragments of the one list) zoom up to the reader like cinematic close-ups. They insist on the materiality of the letter; as with the 'stretching' potency of 'Opoanax', it is the staging of the word itself. The double page spreads open like magnifying picture windows, featuring them in all their defamiliarised singularity: if the poetic function of language insists on the material aspect of the signifier, putting the emphasis on the palpable aspect of the sign, as Roman Jakobson says (1963), then here it is certainly the poetics of lesbian bodies-in-becoming that is celebrated. They create 'a new version of the *écorché*,' of the skinned, as Crosland argues wittily in her introduction to the American English translation *The Lesbian Body* (Ostrovsky 1991, 72). Each aspect, whether functional or dysfunctional, whether wart, pimple or healthily functioning organ, is given the same emphasis. This can also be seen as a destabilising infiltration, upsetting paradigms of the normative and the deviant. As mentioned, the lists proceed through democratising, the dominant syntactical and compositional technique deployed in Wittig's work. As with Gertrude Stein's extraordinary experiments or in Kathleen Mary Fallon's great work of lesbian eroticism, *Working Hot* (2001), here there is minimal punctuation, which along with parataxis, eschews the hierarchical grouping of words and maximises the reader's performative role. Greek and Latinate terms sit alongside lexemes of Frank and Gallic origin,

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or of Languedoc provenance, and neologisms or 'lesbianisation' of proper names only extant in the masculine. But, beyond the juxtaposition of the medical-scientific, anatomical and physiological terms with non-specialist names of body parts, there is no notable friction of social registers, in the sense of elevated literary language rubbing up against slang, or minority sociolects; there is no striking practice of heteroglossia here. No doubt this is explicable in terms of the project of universalisation: while Wittig will resurrect an archaic or rare denomination term to mark the place of a new or recovered concept, her poetics generally prohibit wilful obscurity or mystification. If she celebrates plasticity and the protean powers of language (for instance Isis is invoked for her ability to reunite the fragmented through language, as *pouvoir du Verbe vivant*, power of the living word (Ostrovsky 1991, 84), everywhere Wittig promotes clarity, lucidity, and rationality, aspects of post-Enlightenment thought which, like Angela Carter, she finds essential to literary practice.

Although the relative lack of the heteroglossic might point to a less than revolutionary aspect of *Le corps lesbien*, the work also hijacks the reader far from the 'eternal feminine', and while there is literally swooning lyricism here (Wittig 2007, 548; Ostrovsky 1991, 79-80), this takes place alongside the violent rupturing of the other's body, and it is especially these tonal clashes that perform a productive critique of the gender entrapment implicit in the theory of *écriture féminine*. The signifiers of anatomical parts jostle with those of sound production, with words pertaining to fluids, bones, and viscera. There is no special privileging of genital organs, except the case of *la cyprine*, mentioned above in the first list fragment; rather the w/whole body and its products (inarticulate sounds from eulalia to moans and sobs, Lev Vygotsky's pre-linguistic spread of affect [1962], and all sorts of bodily fluids from bile, pus, and vaginal juices to excreta), are subject here to dismantling and reassembly. All is eroticisable, just as it is de-constructible; all comes towards us in its magnified weirdness: these self-interrupting interrupters of the lyrical prose poem suite are defamiliarising devices above all. Word by word, one has to look at them.

Each tableau stages in the present indicative, which, as with *L'opoponax* is the time of the performance of reading itself (Wittig 2007, 548), a scene of embodied (and metamorphic) interaction. This might feature a group performing rites which includes or excludes the

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speaking-desiring subject, or else an encounter between the myriad organs of the desiring lesbian subject and the beloved-execrated, the detested-desired *tu*, the intimate 'you'. In this oxymoronic interpellation she recalls Charles Baudelaire's 'beloved, execrable muse' (1996, 110). The pastiche of and rhetorical homage to proto-feminist Renaissance poet Louise Labé of Lyon is arguably dispersed throughout *Le corps lesbien* in the hyperbolic tropes of erotic arousal and deprivation, in furnace-blazing, freezing, fainting, dying, etc. The texts appropriate classical, biblical, epic, and lyrical modes of address and, in this sense, they make pervasive and productive use of the dialogical. They pastiche tropes from Renaissance poets like du Bellay, (Wittig 1973, 16), modernist poets like Baudelaire (82), Lautréamont (67-68), Rimbaud (77-78), and Mallarmé (77-78); they deconstruct myths and legends, subordinating all to the theatre of lesbian desire. As in de Sade's erotic theatre, as in life, no desire is ever definitively satiated; desire is constantly relaunched, endlessly outward-bound. The desiring lesbian body appears to be an inexhaustibly mutating machine and, unlike Genet's maids caught in their thrall of their rites, the desiring lesbian body is not doomed to find its entropic moment. While the last scene figures a kind of *fête champêtre*, a celebration of arrival, proposing a new kind of economy of the gift against the circulation of women as signs, rather than a teleological marker of the quest's triumphant destination, this is arguably more a rite of passage, a liminal moment, leading to a new beginning.

Wittig stated with amusement that in France *Le corps lesbien* was read as a poem, whereas in the US its translation *The Lesbian Body* was received (and often tamed) as a novel with a utopian plot, and thus a telos towards the remaking of the body. The fact that the work begins with death and mourning and ends with a *mise en scène* of joyful rites at Lesbos might point to the something like the circle of life (Ostrovsky 1991, 73), but this is more like a spiralling, since with each reading the reverberations are richer, and each reading involves harrowing violence and destruction more than paeans to a 'new life' and celebration of arrival. Impossible to show passion without violence, Wittig has said:

Trying to find a new form, trying to write about that which doesn't dare speak its name, trying to write about it forcefully, that is the dilemma I had to face. It so happens that violence was doubly at the nexus and at the core of this undertaking. It's necessary to

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talk about violence with writing because it's always the case with a new form: it threatens and does violence to the older ones. ...

The second kind of violence I had to express in that book that had no existence yet was the violence of passion. The passion that dares not speak its name – lesbian passion. ... In my literary context, Colette was the best-known writer. And in this context the two poor women had to help each other – out of compassion – to pass over the peak of passion – that is orgasm – as a sister of charity helps a dying man (2005b, 45).

What is certainly apparent from the text's phonic composition is the musical scoring of the writing; there is much internal rhyme and assonance and alliteration in the French:

In this golden adored black Gehenna make your farewells m/y very beautiful m/y very strong m/y very untameable m/y very learned one m/y very ferocious m/y very gentle m/y most beloved, to what they call affection tenderness or gracious abandon. What is at stake here, not one is unaware, has no name for the moment ... (1973, 7).

The text opens with a farewell; it might be sending of the body of the beloved to the underworld (La Géhenne) but it can just as easily be read as a metatextual alert to the reader to say farewell to the old corpse of the language of gentleness, of feminine circumlocution, of sentimental avoidance, associated with what Oscar Wilde famously called the 'love that dare not speak its name' (1975, 40-48). Foremost this is a rallying cry regarding radical linguistic departure, sounding the rapture of rupture. '*Ce qui a cours ici, pas une ne l'ignore, n'a pas de nom pour l'heure ...*'/'What is happening here, no one is unaware, has for the moment no name ...' The seizure of silence will be wrenched into productivity; the white page, around which Wittig found herself circling, until she came across the great enabling joke in the titular juxtaposition of the word *lesbien* with the masculine substantive *le corps*, the un-written haunted by the searing precedents of Sappho, of which only fragments remain, becomes itself like the Rimbaudian rallying 'flag of meat' evoked at the beginning of 'Barbare' (1957, 100). The energy for take-off draws, as it does for Rimbaud, from the oxymoronic rubbing together of terms which 'normally' might be seen in opposition: the ferocious with the gentle, the gold asserted with the black, the learned with the untameable. Unambiguously and quite justifiably, Wittig affirms that the work is meant to

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be recited, and reading aloud in the French makes one aware of the incantatory magic at work. Apart from the musical effect of the assonance in the opening two sentences, (the series of *é* and *è*) and alliteration (especially of *n* and *d*), the voice has to hover from the start through the list of attributes in simple apposition with La Géhenne, first of all, and then with the constellation of epithets invoking the Unnamed beloved. This incantatory invocation acts as a retardant, keeping the reader in suspense as to what kind of severance is being invoked. It is also, above all, an imperative (i.e., a performative utterance) to 'say one's farewells' to a mode of invocation which is sentimental denial. Thus way the text announces itself first of all as enunciative severance, i.e., with a metapoetic signal.

This said, and taking into account the myriad, perhaps infinite, intertextual resonances, depending on the reader's cultural and literary repertoire, which give a sense of polylogue in the Kristevan sense (Kristeva, 1977), there is in the main body of the 111 prose poems, as I have mentioned of the lists, no riot of Bakhtinian heteroglossia, in the sense of the friction of sociolects or the struggle of minority discourses. Apart from mixing the scientific or zoological with the affective and the lyrically invoked pastoral world, there is no carnivalesque jostling of registers, as there is with the Genet of *Les paravents*. However, the colonisation of women's intimate experience by phallogentric medical constructions is performed by the material imbrication of medical-anatomical language in the language of libidinous embodiment. The scenes are evoked in relatively formal French, and unlike her earlier *L'opoponax*, *Le corps lesbien* does not stage, except in its proper names, an irruption of languages other than French. There is no concerted reclaiming of phallogentric argotic 'obscenities' as one can observe in the work of Acker or Fallon in relation to the female body. On the other hand, there is much 'laying bare of the device' by Wittig, a reader of the Russian and Prague Formalists, whose phrase it was, acquainted with all the debates from Sartre and Barthes to Robbe-Grillet, Simon and Sollers, against the bourgeois 'humanist' novel. However, any analysis of the metonymic shifts effected through the lexicon in Wittig's texts from *L'opoponax* to *Virgile, non* (*Across the Acheron*, 1985), will show how she has consistently 'despoil[ed] the word of its everyday meaning' (Wittig 2007, 100). The texts

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bear multiple metapoetic or metafictional inscriptions of reflexivity as to their own mode of production, and to the politics of representation.

The first obvious feature of ideological critique is graphically performed by the splitting of the integrity of the pronoun. Wittig shows her ironic awareness in her author's note to the US edition of *The Lesbian Body* (Wittig 1975, ix-x) that she is thereby staging ironically the Lacanian subject, always being in excess of signification, the split that occurs with entry to language. This is, of course, with the possible aim that this fracturing will be made over in claiming a new language. Wittig also argues that to write 'I' or *je* as a woman is to confront a language that refuses to constitute her as a subject: 'J/e is the symbol of the lived, rending experience which is m/y writing, of this cutting in two which throughout literature is the exercise of a language which does not constitute me as a subject' (2005b, 45). However, despite the irony of Wittig's stated intention, the forward slash splitting j/e (which I translate into English as I/I to show the same split and to use the stutter as an interruptive device), can be seen as a strategic fracturing, a productive breach, just as much as a protest, allowing endless metamorphosis for the embodied lesbian subject. As Ostrovsky argues, it is indeed a 'kind of war machine' whereby Wittig 'affirms the desire to do violence by writing to the language which I [j/e] can only enter by force' (1991, 77). As what can be called a neographism, the slashed first person pronoun is foremost self as aperture, as vocation for mutation, the space of writing opening up the possibility of re-signification and transformation. With the wake for the deceased beloved, which opens the work, the pronoun becomes the site of re-writing. *Le corps lesbien* can be said to form the third book in the 'pronominal' trilogy (Shaktini 2005, 15), all observing the formal constraint of a single pronoun marking the place of the invested narrative voice. In *L'opononax*, as I've tried to show, marks the site of the subject of enunciation (one cannot exactly say 'narrator' because the pronoun marks an ungendered presentational aperture); it asserts its anti-subjectivity, 'on'/'one' registering intensities of sensual impression rather than filtering affective response. *Les guérillères*, Wittig's next move in radical deconstruction, stages a feminist appropriation of the epic (especially the *chanson de geste*) and uses the collective subject *elles* to mark the place of evacuated 'psychological' heroines.

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Taken as a book-length love poem (Ostrovsky 1991, 78-79), *Le corps lesbien/The Lesbian Body* is a multi-dimensional intervention, recasting the body as lesbian (neither that of 'woman' nor 'man', but promoting the lesbian as the standard [Wittig 1973, 61] in all its multitudinous variations, mutations, lability, and ductility). Like Lautréamont's *Les chants de Maldoror (Songs of Maldoror, 1963)*, and making multiple knowing gestures to him as forerunner, Wittig's text manifests an inter-species propensity for fantasised coupling, amorous encounter, or social rite. These encounters are all presented in the present tense and are cast in a range of scenographies, utopian in the sense that they tend to be generically idyllic: classical Greek, variations on Cythera and Lesbos: beach, forest, field, and sea encounters predominate. Where 'city' is mentioned, it tends to be schematic, as in a de Chirico painting: an arcade is sketched, or the profile of rooftops glimpsed, for instance, or the setting is named summarily as *La place du théâtre* (Theatre Square). It is also the dystopian space; here we could say that Wittig's valorisation of the natural world against the built environment tends to the Rousseauesque. In foregrounding the second person intimate (*tu*) as beloved addressee, Wittig uses the predominant mode of address implicit in the lyric love poem, but the reader is of course aligned with this inscribed *tu* and thus is also, by implication, endlessly ductile and mutable. An impressive zoological range (horses, sharks, protozoa, insects, squid and ray-like animals) have their erotic encounters in this circus of desire. Mythic, historical, and legendary, these 'characters' are without exception labialised and addressed as beloved or, just as often, as lamented, or execrated, or feared (as mentioned above, the latter at times is reminiscent of Baudelaire's sadomasochistic invocation of his muse: *m/y darling, m/y beautiful, m/y exorable muse*) from Ulysses, the lesbianised Ulysses (Wittig 1973, 16), to Christa, the lesbianised Christ (30). The modalities of address range from religious invocation, the prayerful, the amorous, the tender, to the sadomasochistic and, if the 'pornographic' cannot be said to prevail, there certainly is a celebration throughout of the polymorphous perverse, as against the post-oedipal valorisation of genitalised sexuality. The writing is resolutely anti-romantic in its insistence on a certain violent and predatory energy as well as the embrace of the abject in love. It is

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this aspect that is perhaps the most radical: a concerted deconstruction of all associated with the feminine, as soft, tender, gentle.

There is an emphasis on fragmentation, extending to pulverisation and even volatisation. Interestingly, at a time when anti-pornography writers like Andrea Dworkin (1981) were lamenting fragmentation as a dehumanising aspect of the pornographic representation of women, important feminist writers like Wittig, Carter, Acker, and Fallon draw significantly on some of the conventions of so-called pornographic representation. Wittig's divided subjects display a giddy, promiscuous propensity to eroticise any site in the body of the beloved: digestive organs, skeleton, endocrinal system, nervous system, and the whole constellations of orifices, the 'good' products jostle with those abjected as waste: sweat, snot, and excrement are invoked along with saliva and vaginal fluids, *la cyprine*. The couples engage in radical dismantling of each other's bodies, skinning, carving, de-boning, prolapsing, inverting, exploding, cannibalising, ingesting, vomiting out – from ear to intestine, from anus to mouth, from vulval lips to cerebellum. The text performs an unrelenting anatomisation of the body; it is a constant process of dismantling and of altering reassembly, never stabilised but subjected to endless mutation, remobilisation, and de-stratification.

If anyone says your name I/I think that my ears will fall heavily to the ground, I/I feel m/y blood becoming hotter in my arteries I/I suddenly perceive all the circuits that it irrigates, a cry comes to m/e from the depths of m/y lungs bringing m/e to bursting point, I/I can barely contain it, I/I am suddenly the place of the darkest mysteries, m/y skin crawls and is covered with blotches, I/I am the pitch that burns the head of assailants, I/I am the knife which severs the carotid of new born lambs, I/I am the machine gun rounds that perforate intestines, I/I am the red-hot tongs that tear at the flesh, I/I am the electric current that strikes like lightning and tetanises the muscles, I/I am the gag that gags the mouth, I/I am the blindfold that hides the eyes, I/I am the straps which bind the hands, I/I am the frenzied executioner galvanised by the tortures and your cries which drive me all the crazier for their being held back. At this point I/I call for your help Sappho m/y incomparable one, give me thousandfold the fingers which soothe wounds, give m/e the lips the tongue the saliva which draw one into the slow the sweet the poisoned country from which no one can return (Wittig 1973, 8).

Thus, on the second page, at the sound of the name of the beloved deceased, j/e becomes the site of the 'darkest mysteries', the site in which they are written, in which weapons of sacrifice and torture are exercised. While at one level this is a gesture in the direction of Baudelaire's sadomasochistic 'L'héautontimorouménos' ('I am the knife and the wound / I am the blow and I am the cheek / I am the limbs and the wheel, / The torturer and the victim!' [1975, 99]), it prepares the work for the cannibalistic invasion, dismantling and redistribution of all the organs of the lesbian body. The sound of a name tears open the breach whereby the metamorphosing potential of language can happen. As Penelope Engelbrecht (1997) argues with respect to the work of another highly inventive lesbian writer, Canadian Nicole Brossard, and as Judith Butler (2007, 519-533), revising a previous position charging Wittig with essentialism, also proposes, what happens on the page for Wittig is material practice. The sound of a name raises hackles and the crawling skin becomes spotted, leopard-like – the sound of a name is a magical propensity for bodily change.

It all happens at this level of naming: it is by dismantling in the body of language, by paragrammatic dissemination (Kristeva 1998), and by an incessant work of reconstellation, or reassembly through semiotic interfusion, that lesbian transformations of self and other, of desire in and through language, are effected. All is a matter of metamorphosis; nowhere is identity stable or definitive; death itself is a transformative, eventful passage, and is certainly not figured as an inert state. Nowhere either is the human the norm; all animal, vegetable, and mineral states are lesbian possibilities. Thus the script for becoming blasts away from the anthropocentrism of humanism. The lover can be, for instance, experienced as a latent being, as a kind of vibratory protozoan plasmic potential, covered in wavering cilia, all receptivity:

I/I am only cyclically touched. At a given moment you change direction, you project yourself suddenly towards m/e your mass surrounding m/e in one fell stroke weighing on m/y limbs your flaps descending the length of m/y back your mouth pressing against m/y chest, it's then m/y beautiful protozoa m/y green infuser m/y virtual m/y violent one, that slowly drawn by the suction of your mouth I/I faint ... (Wittig 1973, 42-43).

It is from the suspension of the species identity of the beloved until the moment of intimate encounter, when the vertigo of suction is experienced, that its revelation derives its extraordinary impact: too late, too late: the reader has already succumbed to this unlikely seducer! The sometimes excessively reverential readers of Wittig rarely remark upon this kind of humour. It should be added that not identifying the other induces a first-encounter quality of perceptual dawning in the reader, close to the foregrounding of the sensory apprehension of phenomenology advocated by Faye and Sollers in 'textual writing'; the reader watches the performance of the language, seizes the being through the performative construct of the address.

### *Détournement*

The intertextual play here, with its joyfully Maldororian send-up of the romantic staging of love, always supposes the subject as an intersubjective nexus. The watcher at the window mutates as possible forms of the desired other become manifest outside, just as the writer as intertextual portal is endlessly and unseizably Protean. Through the many forms of critical and comic rewriting or textual *détournement* (Wark 2009) practised by Wittig, a kind of theatre is produced which stages the subject as just this propensity for splitting and endless imaginative displacements. Who is the self if not someone simultaneously posted at a window, and passing below it in all her glorious transmutations, Wittig seems to be saying: 'Who is this m/e but someone who posts her/self at her window can she say that she sees m/e going by, sweet muzzled one suckling kid cat ...' (Wittig 1973). This takes the Baudelairian desire for the passer by (1975, 114) to an entirely new terrain of metamorphosis. Who is the *moi* or the self if not this propensity for endless metamorphosis through the encounter of the other? Thus the self is depersonalised, merely 'someone' and this is the glory and austerity of the imaginative writer, sloughing off the prison house of humanist identity. The question here, 'Can she say that she sees m/e' can be read as metalinguistic: what language can this watcher summon, what j/e can utter *moi* as *autre*: what I/I can render in language the truth of I/I as the other?

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Looking specifically at cases of Wittig's recasting of myth, her Orphic *détournement* or make-over is striking, both by its refusal of Eurydice's tragic retreat and in its insistence on the poet's material power to render abjection just as she gives back life. Such is Orphée's (the lesbianised Orpheus) music that the Cerbera (Cerberus lesbianised) guard bitches of the Underworld close their huge, gaping, drooling mouths, so moved are they. However, we don't sink into the cushions of sentimentalised utopia in the lesbian reclaiming of the myth: it is revisited with a relentless, carnivalesque insistence on the abject stench of the body won back. Eurydice says, 'the stink of m/y intestines wafts around us with every move I/I make' (Wittig 1973, 12). Orphée gives Eurydice all the names of love as worms wriggle out of her anus, some crawling up Orphée's back – her flesh creeps over her shoulders. Here the sludge of representation, normally hosed away from the noble recounting of the myth, returns in blossoming putrefaction. All along all the gallery of underground caverns Orphée comes singing the joyful victory song of having found Eurydice again. Rotting flesh falls around Eurydice's knee bones:

Not once does O turn around not even when I/I begin to howl from despair m/y tears rolling down m/y ravaged cheeks to beg you to leave m/e in m/y tomb to describe brutally to you m/y decomposition, the purulence of m/y eyes of m/y nose of m/y vulva the decay of m/y teeth the fermentation of m/y essential organs the colour of their pallor. ... it is only at the point of emergence towards the trees and the forest that in one leap you face m/e and it's true that in looking at your eyes I/I resuscitate at prodigious speed ... (12-13).

Here is the return of the mythic repressed with the voiced testimony to the body's putrescence, its living-death, from eye to vulva, dripping and oozing purulent discharges of vile stench – and it is surely subversive in its Rabelaisian insistence on the materiality of death-as-decomposition-on-the-march. This is no decorous mannequin planting one poised foot after the other. But this rewrite doesn't solely draw for its impact on foregrounding the rotting under-face of seemingly resuscitation: Wittig's text insists on a further aspect of *détournement* by refusing the tragic backwards look of Orpheus and its fatal freight. Here

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the reciprocity of loving gazes in what Carter would call the 'lucid' light of the sun (2006, 96) restores Eurydice to life at prodigious speed.

On the other hand, the lesbianised rewrite of another great patriarchal myth of gender and creativity, of Pygmalion and Galatea, leaves the sculptress lamenting her creation's incarceration in the stony medium of her art. Petrification, to adopt a Richardian mode of phenomenological analysis (Richard 1955, 1961), seems like the full stop of metamorphosis, that only the intervention of a divinity can reverse. Petrification is not simply 'stiffness'; the beloved is like a voodoo doll, a bricolage of different materials, her hair of wire, her eyes, orbs of glass. There is no 'blood in veins', no 'air in breasts'. The worst is that for the beloved there is no mode of entry, no way in. 'They have shut you up forever m/y adorable Galatea' (Wittig 1973, 26). Here the lover's endless search, the enumeration of her travails, recalls that of the mediaeval quest romance, 'frost blazing sun hunger thirst'; this is long desire, long privation, but there is no telling the beloved because her 'ears are of stone'. Counter to Pygmalion, the lover implores the goddesses (26) to turn her to stone so that they may be welded together for all eternity.

Absence is embodied, weighted, with dolorous pain and grief becoming the sole tenants of the lover's body. Absence becomes, as it were, a consolidated monument for all the times that celebrations of woman as positively loving lesbians have been erased, or wilfully destroyed, as is the case with most of Sappho's poetry. Adrienne Rich's magnificent 'Cartographies of Silence' comes to mind here: 'Silence can be a plan/ rigorously executed// the blueprint to a life// It is a presence/ it has a history a form// Do not confuse it/ with any kind of absence' (2002, 140). This scene foregrounds the absent beloved as utterly present, as a hole bored in the bodily thickness of the lover. We see this also in Wittig's lesbianised rewrites of the Veronica-Christa narrative, in which the absence of the beloved materialises in the textual moulding itself, a shockingly platitudinous reduction (1973, 30). Pervasively, as it is for Carter (2006), an important function of Wittig's textual *détournement* is to show disappearance, erasure, and expulsion as a massive wipe-out, material and embodied (Wittig 1973, 66). Disappearance is textually performed as scandalous, active wound.

But the hyperbolic scale of yearning and grief is more than compensated for by the rhetoric of desire. Here the sheer scale of erotic excitement recalls and converts Achilles' rage to the clitoral furnace as a new kind of powerhouse. Achilla, she who loves Patroclea, the lover has 'muscles on fire', a 'fireball spreads heat between the ribs, all is taken in its contagion', and her clitoris becomes 'an intense sun irradiating like a blast from a forge' (30).

The rewrite of the Hera-Argus-Peacock myth involves an especially savage take on masculine scopophilic regulation of the feminine, since Argus was posted by Zeus to watch over the nymph Io, of whom he was enamoured. As already mentioned, violence is presented as an intrinsic part of passion in *Le corps lesbien*, and its performance is noted without any attribution of its intention or aim. Before the event resolutely post-Mulvey (1975), there is here an appropriation of scopophilia as intrinsic to lesbian desire: as subject and object of the hyperbolic, bulging eye. These eyes activate different parts of the I/I persona, triggering autonomous activity. Muscles are affected with jerking/jolting. There are even eyes inside the thighs of the beloved, whose anklet-eyes are winking! This is a new kind of voyeurism, plurally activating and as amused as it is amusing. There is no point of convergence in terms of sightlines or desire; it's a principle of multiplicity, of dis-organising the body, the multi-eyed lesbianised Argos Panoptes, Guardian of Io, who is an endless germinatrix of pleasure (Wittig 1973, 151). The lover is invoked as ever better-equipped than Argus with a mere hundred eyes; she is infinitely constellated with eyes like the Night herself (151-152).

The rewrite of Leda and the Swan (32-33) via the voice of the lover leaves the reader to embody the latter as she will; in whatever animal manifestation the voiced agent/subject of desire might be, her activity involves a sexing of feathers of the beloved in contact with the beak's nuzzling, the beloved's swan breast swelling in arousal.

Golden eyes. A ruffling of feathers, furrowing burrowing of beak in neck. Sowing disorder in the ordered lie of the feathers. I/I rub them against the grain destroying their sleekness. Going down: only the periscoping of head and neck about the water (32).

However, the lovers' tryst – no rape but a fully reciprocal Trista and Isolde – segues via their coupling in the black quicksand into a Liebestod, 'we won't be able to release ourselves

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because of our entwinement ... I/I've come to the song of black swans in the black hour of their death'. Thus the rape is rewritten via the conceit of the medium of coupling (black quicksand) as fully reciprocated Liebestod, which in turn invokes Gian Carlo Menotti's 1947 song (made famous by Nina Simone) 'Black Swan', with its lament: 'Old Black Swan where o where is my lover now?' Once again, it can be asserted that in her *détournement* of myth Wittig always eschews the performance of the feminine. She takes on the passion, the savage encounter – the full violence of irruption of the other within the self that is intrinsic to sexual transport. In going down together, this Leda and her Swan are melded with the black silt of their Liebestod – itself a hyperbolic assertion of *la petite mort* associated with sexual bliss.

Critical or metatextual parody

The title, as mentioned, is a metatextual marker to begin with, in its mock claim to singularity and universality. The lesbian body is nothing if not a plural and protean propensity to metamorphosis: in its infinite manifestations it turns itself inside out and shows a delirious propensity to hook, latch, couple, and plug-in at endless nodal points. I insist on the plural lesbian bodies as against the 'sarcastic' affirmation of the title, because in a non-mimetic text, which insists on the performative, why would the title not refer to the text itself rather than a particular signified body? The title is a performative utterance and a challenge at once: all of this, in its wild multiplicity, is the (open set, it is implied of the) lesbian body: all of this is coextensive with the infinite permutations and combinations of creatures in the world. This endless mutability is of course in itself a send-up of what Wittig took to be the essentialism of *l'écriture féminine*. This was seen as a revalorisation of openness, of fluidity, of gentleness, of perforability, which translated into styles foregrounding the supple, the ductile, and the fluid. One of the most amusing parodies in *Le corps lesbien*, is a fable sending up this putative essentialism of *l'écriture féminine* (Toi 1989; Grosz 2002; Holberg 1997, 1-33); it involves the scandalous and hilarious discovery that the vowels have been lost:

The first to awaken announce the pure and simple loss of the vowels. Consternation rules. Many a lamentation is heard. You have to write it down so that I/I get what this all means. Your lips your tongue modulate the new language with its guttural sounds, its consonants pronounced joltingly one against the other produce groans raucous scrapings of vocal chords, your voice inexperienced in this pronunciation accelerates and slows down but whatever you do you can't stop talking. The new effect of the movement of your cheeks and mouth the difficulty of the sounds in finding an issue from your mouth are so comical that laughter suffocates m/e I/I fall over backwards, tears steaming ... (Wittig 1973, 116).

Everywhere manifest is a rigorous constraint reminiscent of Robbe-Grillet's novel *La jalousie* (1957), an accretion of apparently forensic or dead-pan descriptions, which unfold in a perpetual now, seemingly motivated by the paranoid scopophilia of an observer-focaliser whose drive to know is never pre-emptive and never to be satisfied. As mentioned above, the direct location or circumscription of the beloved's bodily schema, 'before m/a louve /m/y she-wolf' or Christa's addressee, her abandoning Mother, or again the Galatea frozen, Medusaed inside the sculptural form, is delayed, so that the reader constantly hypothesises possibilities, as a participating and desiring sleuth, witness to her own endlessly mutable, metamorphosing desire. It is as if s/he, the lesbianised reader, were dreaming the texts, many of which in fact follow dream logic, and, as Genet suggests, 'becoming this or that in our dreams', we are 'all monsters'.

Elsewhere, desire points to the *mise en scène* of writing itself: 'I/I am living where the name of your boat will be written' is a performance of amorous anticipation in exile à la Ovid. This is a superb Mallarméan use of the future perfect opening the scene of writing (as if I/I were only emergent in the future space where your name will be written, i.e., in the scene of the other). Desire moves through this hiatus, this approach to the scene of writing. The text itself traces this pleasuring expectation at the scene of the future inscription. The obverse of the happy anticipation of the beloved's name, the prohibition weighing on the naming, is similarly experienced as a material and embodied event (Wittig 1973, 44).

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If there is not overt heteroglossia in this text, there are certainly the aesthetics of the interruptive, as manifest in the jolting shift, the tonal clash and the oxymoron. In a *mise en scène* of the goddess manifest, huge, magnificent, triumphing over all the monsters which rise up to hinder her advance – in gusts of perfume, cataracts of sandalwood and ginger, she comes in adorable precipitation. The description of song itself accompanying this arrival inscribes positively the oxymoron rescuing power from so-called feminine attributes, ‘very precise very gentle very soft very strident’, and intensity aligns contrary impulses in its own democratising logic and the j/e is ‘paralysed by the brutality of [her] apparition bedazzlement’.

Reminiscent of Loië Fuller in Mallarmé’s account (1947, 307-309), which has the American dancer’s vortex of swirling veils become the landscape in which she dances, *la cyprine*, as mentioned an archaic term pertaining to Cypress, but also to vaginal fluid, takes on an oceanic propensity here. The foaming juices are like the goddesshead itself: an aqueous emergence, an endless flux from the lips, coming in waves of gelatinous fragments, like the birth of a new medium, in ever increasing flotations. Here we have an accretion, a veritable raft, of paratactically juxtaposed elements – as if democratically floating in the mucous emission – on the page itself: the scene is the cyprine sea, a great celebration of the fluidity and of osmosis; it is as if Wittig is having fun outdoing Irigaray. It is difficult to know if this is celebration or send up of the latter’s ‘La Mécanique des fluides’ (Irigaray 1977, 104-116) – for this reader it works as both: we can say we know the limitlessness of our sexuality, and so, Goodbye Dark Continent (*Aufwiedersehen Herr Doktor Freud!*), we’re on our way to Lesbos –

As the fingers agitate there is a continuous beating and all becomes emission abundant tears running salted into the flood the blacks the golds the crystals the scales immense bodies like sea creatures in fluid inter-osmosis ... golds and reds now same consistency as clouds the rising flood flows into the sky goodbye black continent of misery and pain goodbye old towns we’re embarking for the brilliant and radiant islands for the green Cythera for gold and black Lesbos (Wittig 1973, 20).

However, lest we swoon in the romance of fluid confusion, Wittig sounds a cautionary note; the ecstatic inter-osmosis ends in violent expulsion:

You are m/e you are m/e I/I with the help of Sappho you are m/e I/I die enveloped tied held impregnated with your hands infiltrated suave flux infiltrated from my labia to my chest by the rays from your fingers my ears affected liquefy I/I fall I/I fall I/I drag you into this spiralling whistling chute I/I fall speak to m/e turbulent maelstrom cursed beloved your arms full of pleasure joy tears of joy I/I drag you down your arms around me turn around two bodies lost in the silence of infinite spheres what is the self m/e some one who comes to her window to tell m/e that she sees m/e go by, gently muzzled suckling lamb cat I/I spit you out I/I spit you out (48).

By way of conclusion

Looking at the productive writing of desire as endlessly metamorphic furnishes a counter-argument to Annamarie Jagose's claim that Wittig is entrapped in an a-historical, utopian vision, by 'essentialising the lesbian subject as transgressive, revolutionary and fundamentally or properly exterior to the technologies of power', thereby pointing to the dangers of 'that liberatory posture which serves the very regulatory systems it claims to exceed and/or overthrow' (Jagose 1994, 9). This reading also contests that of Wittig's admirers like Ostrovsky, who see the text as progressing towards utopian arrival. I posit that Wittig's intertextual transforms, her variations on metamorphosis, her rewrites or *détournement* of myth, poem and legend, her insistence on the infinite potential of becoming-other in the field of lesbian desire, give this work a highly critical charge against the crushing and deadly imposition of a patriarchally perpetuated gender system, projected as it is, onto a hierarchical model of sexual difference. In its experimentation with pronouns, with the I/I as always already breached and endlessly re-written by its encounters with alterity, it enacts a positively Deleuzian paean to embodied subjectivity as improvisational, intersubjective, and intercorporeal. As Genet uses the stage, so Wittig sexualises as lesbian the scene of writing itself, a little like Lautréamont's ocean, as if the cyprine here were the

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very semic flux from which new ways of naming and new potent modes of desire can issue, and cyprine is the rewritten tissue, far from being some extra-linguistic essentialised entity. The structure is circular or, rather, spiral and as for Genet there is no revolutionary arrival, no final achievement; there needs to be endless dismantling and endless reconfiguration: the lesbian body is, likewise, always a work in progress and never self-identical. Desire in the work of these radical French experimenters, gay and lesbian, is allied to a deeply subversive project to challenge the theatre of imperialist heteronormative representation, informing their revolutionary scenography on stage and page, their use of radical montage and an attendant refusal of mimetic time. Both magnify language and imaging as material practices that wound, mutilate, inflame, and exalt, in oppression and liberation. Both writers mobilise violence as part of their radical semiotics, insisting on abjection and animal-becoming as a kind of sovereignty inherent to life under regimes of oppression and forcefully project homoerotic desire through their work, with Wittig doing so exclusively in a universalising strategy after *L'Opoponax*.

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#### Film

- [Un Chant d'amour](#). 1950. Dir. Jean Genet. Running time: 26 minutes. France. (Full film available via YouTube; last viewed 8 March 2013.)