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Un séjour en enfer : feminist and queer approaches to the translation and reception of Monique Wittig's *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* in English, French and Italian

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UNIVERSITÉ
DE GENÈVE

FACULTÉ DE TRADUCTION
ET D'INTERPRÉTATION

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UN SÉJOUR EN ENFER:
FEMINIST AND QUEER APPROACHES TO THE
TRANSLATION AND RECEPTION OF MONIQUE
WITTIG'S *THE STRAIGHT MIND AND OTHER ESSAYS* IN
ENGLISH, FRENCH AND ITALIAN

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*To my grandmother and
to my mother,
my “guérillères”*

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Introduction

The dissertation “*Un séjour en enfer: Feminist and Queer Approaches to the Translation and Reception of Monique Wittig’s *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* in English, French and Italian*” stems from a personal interest in the field of Translation Studies and gender theories, focusing in particular on the work *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* by Monique Wittig. The book is a collection of essays written by the French writer between 1978 and 1994, some in French, some in English. The title of the book comes from the main essay in the collection, “The Straight Mind”, based on a talk delivered by Wittig at the Modern Language Association conference in New York in 1978. *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* is one of Wittig’s most famous works and the testament to her feminist theory. Monique Wittig was in fact not only a writer, but also a feminist theorist who developed her own lesbian materialist philosophy. This dissertation aims to focus on the revolutionary impact of her writing production and theory on the social and literary landscape of the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Italy. For the material of my analysis, I have selected the following versions and translations of Wittig’s book: *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (1992a)¹, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (1992b), *La Pensée straight* (2001), *La pensée straight* (2018), *Il pensiero eterosessuale* (2019a)², and *Il pensiero straight e altri saggi* (2019b)³. The dissertation is divided into four chapters, each of which seeks to place Monique Wittig’s theory and work in relation to the historical, social and geographical context in which they circulated in order to highlight how she has been misunderstood and criticised, paradoxically determining the very success the materialist feminist received for opening up a new dimension of lesbian subjectivity and writing.

The first chapter investigates the nature of the gender categories of woman and man and their relations, taking them as constructed rather than natural. Feminist theorists engaged in a strong objection to the ways in which women were portrayed as cultural products, relegated to a position of inferiority, oppression and alienation in relation to the phallogocentric discourse of Western tradition. The “Holy Trinity” of French feminist authors, Hélène Cixous,

¹ 1992a refers to the American edition of Beacon Press, whereas 1992b to the British edition of Harvester Wheatsheaf.

² Both Italian translations were released on April 18, 2019. The decision to list and analyse *Il pensiero eterosessuale* by Federico Zappino before *Il pensiero straight e altri saggi* is purely due to the fact that the second one is the only online version of the book, and I have therefore preferred to analyse the printed versions of the book first. In no case does this imply a secondary consideration of the text of *collettivo della lacuna*.

³ The title has not been italicised to show that the term “straight” is already in italics in Italian.

Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, contributed to the circulation of feminist ideas and strategies in the Anglo-American context. Monique Wittig proposed her own materialist theory about the oppression suffered by the class of women and how they can escape it. According to Wittig, women form a social class of oppression and exploitation, a concept that the French theorist elaborated from Marx and Guillaumin, which is produced by virtue of a specific social relationship between women and men, which places the former in a position of inferiority to the latter. For the lesbian writer, the only ones who have escaped this condition are lesbians, precisely because they have rejected the very category of women, i.e. one in which women still recognise themselves within a binary, oppositional dialogue of woman vs. man. Although Wittig left France and moved to the United States in 1976, she has been included among French feminist theorists, but Wittig has elaborated a theory that has nothing to do with French feminism in France or “French feminism” in North America, let alone with Anglo-American feminism. For Wittig, language is in fact conceived as a subversion of traditional Western literary canons and presents itself as a war machine, the so-called “Trojan Horse”, for the universalisation of the lesbian subject and the destruction of the *straight* regime. At the heart of Wittigian theory and work lies the elaboration of the concept of “the *straight* mind”, a political rather than sexual regime that presents itself as natural, naturally organising the social order and naturalising the oppression of minority subjects such as lesbians.

Monique Wittig’s works have been extensively translated. Chapter two presents the publishing history of all publicly available⁴ versions and translations of *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, in particular the very first publication of the book by the US-based Beacon Press publishing house in 1992. The book was published in the UK by Harvester Wheatsheaf. It was translated into French and published first in 2001 by Éditions Balland and then in 2007 by Éditions Amsterdam, with two subsequent reissues in 2013 and 2018, the latter being the edition that has been considered for dissertation. In addition, I decided to specifically analyse Wittig’s editorial diffusion in Italy and how lesbian feminism and the author’s unconventional works have entered the Italian social and literary scene. In Italian, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* was translated by Federico Zappino for ombre corte and by a collective of lesbian feminists, *collettivo della lacuna*, in an online version, both translations coming out in 2019.

⁴ Neither the 2007 first edition of *La pensée straight* by Éditions Amsterdam nor the 2013 reissue could be retrieved.

In the third chapter I analyse the reception of Monique Wittig's lesbomaterialist theory in the United States, France and Italy, especially in view of other feminist currents of thought present in each country. I highlight how Wittig has influenced critical and philosophical thinking itself, even contributing to shape later theories such as queer studies. There have in fact been numerous criticisms of the lesbian theorist and different interpretations of Wittigian theory, and this has been highlighted in the chapter through the prefaces and afterwords present in the various versions of the book, mainly by the translators themselves. Nonetheless, it is this much-criticised lesbianism and lesbian subjectivity that has found recognition and a means of dissemination in some French and Italian theorists and activists alike. The chapter aims to highlight how the scope of universalising the lesbian subject and the production of literary texts bearing this subject echoed even after the author's death and continues, indeed, to be more inspirational than ever.

Chapter four investigates the reasons that led to the condemnation and invisibility of Monique Wittig's work and theory, especially in France and Italy. In fact, Wittig's presence on the French and Italian literary and social scenes initially occupied a thorny space, ostracised by French feminists, and relegated to a space of invisibility by Italian feminists. Hence, I explain the reasons why Wittig suffered such a fate in France, her homeland, and in Italy. The fact that her thought found no place in France led Wittig to move to America, and I explain how this translated into the very foundation of her theory and her work as a writer. However, her move to the United States was perceived as an exile by Wittig, determining her nature as a translingual writer, which allowed her to write in English, in a process of self-translating. Nevertheless, some of the English articles in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* were translated by Sam Bourcier for the French version of the book. Ultimately, I analyse two excerpts from two articles in the book, "The Straight Mind" and "Homo sum", from the point of view of translation choices around the term "straight", in all the versions of the book. Given the feminist nature of the book, I decided to take into account feminist translation practices, because Wittig herself, Sam Bourcier and *collettivo della lacuna*, presented themselves as writers who made stylistic choices in line with a feminist approach to translation. Federico Zappino, the other Italian translator of the book, is a queer activist and his approach to the translation was also considered in view of his social and theoretical stance.

1 *Aux portes de l'enfer*

1.1 Down the rabbit (w)hole

At the beginning of what was later called Second wave-feminism, between the 1970s and 1980s, the question of gender became the focus of critical attention and fierce debate. Gender is something we do and not something that is inborn (West and Zimmerman in Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2013, p.10): it was referred to as the sociocultural construction of the male and female sexes (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 2013, p.10). Simone de Beauvoir stated: “On ne naît pas femme : on le devient” (de Beauvoir, [1949]⁵ 1976, p. 5). The “Holy Trinity” of French feminist theorists, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, strongly objected to the ways in which women were portrayed as cultural products, relegated to a position of inferiority and alienation in relation to phallocentric discourse. Simone de Beauvoir’s *Le deuxième sexe* (1949) lays the groundwork for our understanding and feminist explorations of the sociocultural construction of woman, revealing the sexual politics at work in modern patriarchal discourse, which depicts man as Subject and Self and woman as Object and Other. This separatism provides the basis for all the binary divisions and oppositions upon which Western culture is founded. Woman was theorised as the invisible thread that holds the patriarchal social fabric together and permits its perpetuation. Western philosophy played a fundamental role in the creation of an establishment of social hierarchies employing the rhetoric of biology.

Feminism, which means “female be-ing” (Daly, 1984, p. 194), represents the reclamation and vindication of women’s potential: “For Womankind must once again discover Fire” (Daly, 1984, p. 194). Woman’s commitment to her essence is an act perceived as a defiance of civilisation by “father Freud” (Daly, 1984, p. 360), according to whom the deviation from the norms of the “father-land” (Daly, 1984, p. 359) is what made women retarded as civilised persons. Freud founds his whole theory on female psychology on “penis envy” (Millett, 1972, p. 179). The subsequent definition of woman is clearly negative as she is considered “the result of the fact that she is not a male and ‘lacks’ a penis” (Millett, 1972, p. 180) and “to be born female is to be born ‘castrated’” (Millett, 1972, p. 180). The moment of discovery of this castration during childhood was believed by Freud to be “the key to

⁵ I have put the year of publication of the original in brackets as the book is very famous and the version I have consulted is a republished one.

feminine experience” (Millett, 1972, p. 181). Therefore, the girl rejects her own sex and the Oedipal stage and “the Freudian ‘family romance’, domestic psychodrama more horrific than a soap opera” (Millett, 1972, p. 184) can begin. Viola Klein, in her critique of Freud’s theory on women, asks rhetorically why “one half of humanity should have biological reasons to feel at a disadvantage for not having what the other half possess (but not vice versa)” (Klein in Millett, 1972, p. 183). Freud chose to circumvent the issue that woman’s inferiority was a societal and cultural construct, relegating instead it to infantile distorting perceptions and anatomy. The only function accorded to women by Freudian theory is reproduction, and moreover, her progeny is her only hope to acquire a penis as the child represents indeed a penis (Millett, 1972, p. 184).

The analyst Jacques Lacan claimed in fact that man has the Phallus, whereas woman is the Phallus, and defines the phallus as the privileged social signifier, unrelated to human sexual organs. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose in their book *Female Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne* (1982) justified the idea that Lacan was actually “a fellow traveler of feminist theory” (Mitchell & Rose in Vanheule et al, 2019, p. 5), yet he failed to disconnect the phallus from the meaning it holds in a male-oriented culture. Lacan’s statement that “woman does not exist” (Rose in Mitchell & Rose, 1982 p. 48) involves the concept that something regarding her, her “otherness”, escapes the phallic primacy, which refers to the fact that all humans are subjected to the symbolic order.

1.2 Am I that name?

French feminists reintroduced the notion of gender with its implications in their works under the name of “écriture féminine”, a concept developed by Hélène Cixous. The “Holy Trinity” has sought to expose the gender dichotomy on which the entire Western tradition and society are based. They investigated the historical and symbolic roots of patriarchy in language in order to dismantle discursive constructions of sexual identity, as language was considered to be a communicative/manipulative tool, thus being an instrument of subjugation. The dichotomy of gender has led to the birth of gender stereotypes that Suzanne Romaine defines as “sets of beliefs about the attributes of men or women, such as that men are stronger and more aggressive, women are passive, talk more than men, and so on” (Romaine, 1999, p. 4). To stereotype someone means to judge an individual’s personality or attitudes within parameters of “common-sense” as pointed out by Deborah Cameron (Cameron, 1992, p. 8). Talbot states that gender stereotypes produce “naturalized gender differences” (Talbot in

Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003, p. 472) and “in doing so, they sustain hegemonic male dominance and female subordination” (Talbot in Holmes & Meyerhoff, 2003, p. 472).

Hélène Cixous recognises the biological determinism which divides people into the categories of man and woman. Women’s liberation from phallocentrism does not negate sexual difference, and she rather calls for the establishment of a relation of equivalence between the two sexes through bisexuality, “on which every subject not enclosed in the false theatre of phallogentric representationalism has founded his/her erotic universe” (Cixous, 1976, p. 884)⁶. On the other hand, Luce Irigaray reveals the absence of a female subjectivity and of a true sexual difference in Western patriarchal culture. Irigaray’s meditation in *This Sex Which is Not One* (1985)⁷ aims to release woman from her position as tool to perpetuate a male dialectic in which female sexual identity is “conceptualized on the basis of masculine parameters” (Irigaray, 1985, p. 23). Woman is a mystery, she cannot be either one person or two, “and her sexual organ, which is not *one* organ, is counted as *none*” (Irigaray, 1985, p. 26), the reverse and the negative of the only possible sexual organ, that is the male one. Woman is an entity in continuous movement and not a single, unified self, “‘She’ is definitely other in herself” (Irigaray, 1985, p. 28), depicted as “a body-matter marked by their signifiers, a prop for their souls-fantasies” (Irigaray, 1985, p. 96). In order to escape their position as “objects for and among men” (Irigaray, 1987, p. 189), women have to explore love for other women. Female homosexuality “is recognized only to the extent that it is *prostituted to man’s fantasies*” (Irigaray, 1985, p. 196), however, if women establish an economy between themselves, this lesbian poetic ought to liberate them from a horizon of servitude.

Irigaray challenges Freudian and Lacanian theories of the masculine “subject’s formation of itself as a self” (Assiter, 1996, p. 45) through the reflection of the body in the mirror. Therefore, a mirror is needed to reflect man’s image and repeat it as “same” (Irigaray, 1987, p. 54), and this specular/speculative tool is woman, “*the living mirror*” (Irigaray, 1987, p. 221). Alice’s journey in Wonderland constitutes the perfect metaphor for woman’s search for “the Other Side” (Irigaray, 1985, p. 9), a place beyond the “dominant specular economy” (Irigaray, 1987, p. 102) of patriarchy, and where woman can find her subjectivity. When Alice falls into the recesses of Wonderland, she reaches the other side, the trapped invisible essence of female subjectivity comes to the surface through its connection with visible masculine

⁶ The original text is *Le Rire de la Méduse* (1975). I report the English version of the essay as I could access only the English translation. The same has been done for the citations from *Speculum. De l’autre femme* (1974) for which I use the 1987 English translation *Speculum of the Other Woman*.

⁷ The original text is *Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un* (1977). I have decided to use the English translation because, as I had numerous quotations, the text would have been more heterogeneous and fluid.

subjectivity (Irigaray, 1993, p. 71). Man “will have to be expelled from this speculum, from that still specular cave, so that no possibility of a self-portrait may remain” (Irigaray, 1987, p. 292).

The psychoanalytic discourse that revolves around the Phallus recognises sex as what gives the body cultural intelligibility. Woman lacks the Phallus and is the inverted mirror of the phallic subject, that is man. The law of the Phallus relegates women to a position of non-existence, bound to be addressed to as anti-subject abjections. The concept of abject, suggested by Julia Kristeva, refers to socially constructed individuals that are also simultaneously excluded by the norms, the unintelligible Other (Kristeva, 1982, p. 1). Abjects have yet to become subjects and dwell in the domain of abjection, whose boundaries change and migrate. The domain of intelligibility is defined by the discourse of the Phallus where subjectivity refers to the ways individuals are subjected by the dominant economy. The identity of woman is then a subject position that has to be assumed. The “‘Alice’ underground” presented in the chapter entitled “The Looking-Glass, from the Other Side” from *This Sex Which Is Not One*, is a girl who refuses to be named according to the rules of patriarchal dialectics. After all, Alice in *Through the Looking-Glass*, when asked who she is, “all she could say [...] was: ‘L, I know it begins with L’”.

No doubt this is the moment Alice ought to seize. Now is the time for her to come on stage herself. With her violet, violated eyes. Blue and red. Eyes that recognize the right side, the wrong side and the other side: the blur of deformation; the black or white of a loss of identity. Eyes always expecting appearances to alter, expecting that one will turn into the other, is already the other.

(Irigaray, 1985, p. 10)

That being said, another current of feminism was making its appearance in France in the 1970s, namely materialist feminism, whose leading exponents were Monique Wittig, Christine Delphy, Nicole-Claude Mathieu and Paola Tabet. They claimed that belonging to a sex class means being part of a sex group produced by a specific social relationship, that is to say the one between men and women, which implies a position of inferiority, appropriation, and exploitation of women by men (Garbagnoli et al. in Guillaumin, 2020, p. 9). The concept of materialism in this feminist current alludes to Marxian and Hegelian theories that social groups, in this case those of women and men, are the result of relations of domination and exploitation. The adjective “materialist” was chosen in 1970 by Christine Delphy to refer to the new feminist current of thought she was developing (Delphy, 1980). “Feminism” refers to

the subversion of the class division with the objective of eliminating the very existence of the class of women by exposing the system of oppression in which they find themselves (Garbagnoli et al. in Guillaumin, 2020, p. 9).

For there is no sex. There is but sex that is oppressed and sex that oppresses. It is oppression that creates sex and not the contrary. The contrary would be to say that sex creates oppression or to say that the cause (origin) of oppression is to be found in sex itself, in a natural division of the sexes preexisting (or outside of) society.

(Wittig, 1992, p. 2)

According to feminist materialists, men and women are categories that do not exist prior and independently to their social relationship (Wittig, 1992, pp. 5-6). Sexes do not have “natural” properties and are societal constructions that serve to establish and perpetuate women’s servile position. The category of sex is perceived as “natural” and is the basis of heterosexual society and ultimately rules it (Wittig, 1982, pp. 5-6). It represents the appropriation of women by men, which occurs through “the reproduction and production of women and also their physical persons by means of a contract called the marriage contract” (Wittig, 1992, p. 67).

The category of sex is the product of heterosexual society that turns half of the population into sexual beings, for sex is a category which women cannot be outside of. [...] Some lesbians and nuns escape but they are very few, although the number is growing.

(Wittig, 1992, pp. 7-8)

Christine Delphy also argues how marriage is in all respects a labour contract, in this case servant and master are woman and man, which gives the man the right to have control over the woman, a true condition of slavery (Gimenez, 2000, p. 24). According to materialist feminism, sex is a fetish, “the *mark* imposed by the oppressor” (Wittig, 1992, p. 11), what Simone de Beauvoir named “the myth of Woman” (de Beauvoir, 1956, p. 24) which must be destroyed:

This is why we must destroy it and start thinking beyond it if we want to start thinking at all, as we must destroy the sexes as a sociological reality if we want to start to exist. [...] I say: it is about time to do so.

(Wittig, 1992, p. 8)

Women are a community of oppression, a socio-economic and political construct that exists only in their relation of servitude to men (Wittig, 1992, p. 20). The only society to have abolished what Colette Guillaumin defined as “sexage” (Wittig, 1992, XV), the condition of women’s slavery (*esclavage*) and servitude (*servage*), is a lesbian society.

At this point, let us say that a new personal and subjective definition for all humankind can only be found beyond the categories of sex (woman and man) [...] Lesbian is the only concept I know of which is beyond the categories of sex [...] because the designated subject (lesbian) is *not* a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. [...] We are escapees from our class [...].

(Wittig, 1992, p. 20)

1.3 Why “men” does not mean “humankind”

The term “gender” was used by the Greek philosopher Protagoras (Cameron, 1992, p. 89) to classify nouns into masculine, feminine and neuter, introducing grammatical gender, which “means that nouns are placed in classes not according to their meaning but according to their form” (Simon, 1996, p. 16) and “this form determines the way the word will behave grammatically” (Simon, 1996, p. 16). That said, English has “natural” gender, meaning that gender is attributed by meaning, whereas French has two genders, which are masculine and feminine. According to Simon, “grammatical categories belong to the structural obligations of a language” (Simon, 1996, p. 16). However, Roman Jakobson has shown that grammatical gender takes on meaning, especially a symbolic one, in cases in which “language is turned away from its instrumental or communicative functions and used in poetry and mythology” (Jakobson in Simon, 1996, p. 17). Grammarians believe that gender markers are merely a conventional aspect of language, whereas feminist theoreticians aspire to a “reinvestment of meaning” of the latter. A “thought experiment” (Simon, 1996, p. 17) by Deborah Cameron showed how differences in equivalence operating through “semantic” gender represent the unspoken foundation of gender disparity in modern culture. The following series of word pairs was presented to the participants in the experiment: knife/fork, Ford/Chevrolet, salt/pepper, vanilla/chocolate; and for each word the participants were asked to say whether they thought it was masculine or feminine.

Strangely enough, people were able to perform this bizarre task without difficulty. Even more strangely, there was near total agreement on the ‘right’ classification. Knife, Ford, pepper and chocolate were masculine, while fork, Chevrolet, salt and vanilla were feminine.

This phenomenon is called ‘metaphorical gender’ [...].

(Cameron, 1992, p. 82)

The experiment indicates “that the concepts ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ are infinitely detachable from anything having to do with ‘real’ sexual difference” (Cameron, 1992, p. 82). Human thought has been strongly influenced to think in terms of binary opposites and thus gender presents itself as relational and an extension of this thinking structure. Distinctions based on gender continue to be present and, indeed, they mark the work of grammarians who present the masculine as an “unmarked” form, the simple form of the word, a form which can be used generically, and with relative neutrality of meaning (Cameron, 1992, p. 97). The apparent grammatical gender neutrality in English is contradicted by the constant identification and association of humans with the male specimen, and in its place takes shape the “psychological” or “metaphorical” gender (Simon, 1996, p. 18).

The concept that gender is shaped by society, that distinctions between males and females stem from social conventions, not biological realities, was a significant revelation that arose in the early stages of second-wave feminist research. Nigerian scholar Dr. Oyèrónké Oyewùmí has shown that the category of “women” and the category of “men” did not exist in Yorùbá culture before European colonisation and were instituted by the colonial authority. Furthermore, she criticises how within Western societies gender categories are considered universal and a fundamental organising principle, woman being in opposition and subordinated to the category of “man”, and man a privileged being (Oyewùmí, 2001, p. 31). On the other hand, in Yorùbá society the primary means of social hierarchy was age and not gender. The invention of the category of woman was instrumental in fixing the subordination of people who had previously exercised autonomy and freedom: women were excluded from all colonial structures, worsening gender inequality and leading to their economic dependence (Oyewùmí, 2001, p. 124). Doctor Oyewùmí has succeeded, through the example of Yorùbá culture, in demonstrating how the “gendered gaze” (Oyewùmí, 2001, p. 83) that perceives and organises identities in terms of dichotomies has created the concept of “woman”, one of the most accomplished inventions of men and a fiction to hand down to posterity.

1.4 Jesus was a feminist

It is no coincidence that Western society is founded on a misogynistic and patriarchal narrative of women. The emerging self-recognition by women is in fact in contrast with

orthodox beliefs upon which our society is based. Religious myths have also helped diffuse a malignant representation of the figure of woman and of male-female relationships, which are still deeply imbedded in contemporary social theories and retain their hold over society. Radical feminist theorists, such as Mary Daly in *Beyond God the Father* (1973), accused the theological imagery of being intrinsically sexist and support a patriarchal dialectic of the relations between women and men in society. The myth of the Fall, for instance, has perpetuated the image of the female evil. Eve was not only created from man's rib but was also blamed for his downfall and all the miseries that came after, instilling in her "daughters" a sense of guilt and self-hatred. She was the primordial "Other", the category into which Christian tradition had a tendency to place women. Hence, this religious myth is nothing but "a prototypic case of false naming" (Daly, 1985, p. 47), and when women start to recognise the biased, phallic nature of what they have always considered their "original sin" (Daly, 1985, p. 49), they can exorcise the interiorised presence of the "masculine subject ('male chauvinistic pig')" (Daly, 1985, p. 50) and heal.

A logical consequence of women's liberation and emancipation is the loss of credibility of "a uniquely masculine image and language for divinity" (Daly, 1985, p. 71). Christ was considered more a divine legitimation of male superiority than humankind's saviour. Leonard Swidler admirably tried to reinterpret the figure of Jesus as a feminist (Daly, 1985, p. 73). Nonetheless, such an affirmation contains an implicit need to find adequate models in tradition. As claimed by Hélène Cixous, "the future must no longer be determined by the past" (Cixous, 1976, p. 875), and women do not have to search for a guidance to follow with blind affection. Jesus was defined by Thomas Szasz as "mankind's most illustrious scapegoat" (Szasz in Daly, 1985, p. 75), passing the "role" onto woman, "the Other". Despite being coercively immolated for the sins of men, "women are deprived of the 'credit' for sacrifice" (Daly, 1985, p. 77), as was the case for Jesus.

1.5 Towards a change

Western society has not always been able to see *straight*. French feminist Monique Wittig was one of the fiercest critics of the heteropatriarchal discursive economy and her work is situated within the framework of materialist feminism with the adoption of a lesbian perspective. The entire Western tradition is erected on the assumption and presumption that heterosexuality, which means to feel an attraction of a sexual nature toward a person of the opposite sex, is the fixed norm governing relationships between individuals and that is

necessary for the maintenance and continuation of civilisation (Fischer, 2013, p. 501). It was only around the 1970s that the first critical approaches to the concept of heterosexuality were made, resting “on the key premise that heterosexuality is socially constructed; it is not a natural, universal, or an ahistorical phenomenon” (Fischer, 2013, p. 502). However, if we look back in time, according to Aristophanes’ myth, also known as the myth of the androgyne, found in the famous Platonic dialogue *Symposium*⁸, there were once three sexes: man, woman and the androgyne. Individuals were paired and physically bound, and they had two heads, four arms and four legs. To punish them for their pride, Zeus divided them, and from that day each half has been searching for its other. This myth is nothing but an ancient history of gender fluidity and in particular of the existence of homosexuality since the dawn of civilisation.

Heteronormativity indicates the belief that heterosexuality is normative and indeed deemed righteous of a superior moral status. Applying a critical approach to the understanding of heterosexuality involves viewing it as a social construct that elicits gendered and sexual power dynamics between women and men, as well as between sexual minorities (Fischer, 2013, p. 501). In a reality in which women found self-expression only in relation to their relationship with men, as wives and mothers for example, heterosexuality, “which rests on the submission and the appropriation of women” (Wittig, 1992, XIII), is “a political regime which must be overthrown” (Turcotte in Wittig, 1992, IX). Monique Wittig challenged heterosexuality, a pillar of Western civilisation, which previously no feminist had ever dared to question or dismantle. For Wittig, the *straight* mind is all that scaffolding of concepts and assumptions that permeate both scientific discourse and common sense and according to which sexes are “natural” and heterosexuality is the glue that holds together and shapes society, thought and language. The adjective “straight” in English has multiple meanings, of an “honest” person, of an “immediate” response, of a road “without curves”, of a “heterosexual” person, and it is precisely because of this polysemy that the adjective lends itself perfectly to legitimate the existence and perpetuation of the category of sex and the heterosexual contract. Wittig elaborated a formidable subversive proposition of feminism.

Having said this, it is important, in order to understand the distinctiveness of Wittigian theory, to expound on the feminism that was most widespread in France in the 1970s, namely the feminism of sexual difference. The theorists from this current of feminism employed the particular “feminine” to deconstruct the universal “masculine”, the opposite of what Monique

⁸ Original work from the 4th century B.C. I have not used any source text as the topic had been dealt with in high school in philosophy class.

Wittig wanted to do. For them, the act of writing is a continuous questioning of both “Self” and “Other”, in which normative linguistic gender representations have to be deconstructed and woman has to reconstruct “herSelf” by dismantling patriarchal expressions of her essence. However, according to Wittig, transformation in language can only occur through a political revolt against both the masculine and the feminine. The fetishisation of the penis by patriarchal society has condemned and relegated the female body to oblivion, and “woman’s writing” aims precisely to rescue it from the depth of repression. Hélène Cixous sees a woman’s relation to her body as central for her liberation and uses it as a means and a metaphor for the act of writing. Wittig, on the contrary, while also recognising the vital role that plays the body, does not consider the metaphor a useful tool, but rather an obfuscating device. French feminists before Wittig “merely” reclaimed woman’s true essence, recognising “that she has been starved by men” (Wenzel, 1981, p. 275), and that she is the so-called “Other”, that is, her true essence free from the phallographic constraints of a patriarchal society. On the other hand, Wittig’s radical works do not aim to recognise and value the existence of a difference of sexes, but rather to recognise “the political use of an ideology of biology [...] to politicize ‘woman’ into the social class women” (Wenzel, 1981, p. 275) and destroy it.

Elles disent qu’elles ont appris à compter sur leurs propres forces. Elles disent qu’elles savent ce qu’ensemble elles signifient. Elles disent, que celles qui revendiquent un langage nouveau apprennent d’abord la violence. Elles disent, que celles qui veulent transformer le monde s’emparent avant tout des fusils. Elles disent qu’elles partent de zéro. Elles disent que c’est un monde nouveau qui commence.

(Wittig, [1969]⁹ 2019, p. 116)

1.6 French Feminism and “French Feminism”

Women writers investigated and revealed the oppression they encounter in man-made language, with the intent to create a language that would suit a specific woman’s experience and lead to change. A substantial feminist production on language and gender started to emerge in the United States as well as in France. Anglo-American feminist writers were focused on dismantling the traditional and symbolic structures of patriarchy, while their French sisters were more philosophical, concentrating on the politics of gender. Cixous had already developed the idea of “écriture féminine” wherein “feminine” can be translated both

⁹ For future citations of this work, *Les Guérillères*, I will only quote the year of publication of the book I am consulting. The date of publication of the original has been included because such a recent publication of the French text could have raised perplexities. The same will be done for other works presenting the same issue.

as “feminine” and “female” in English, with a slightly different meaning, whereas in French the word refers both to gender (feminine) and sex (female). As we read in Toril Moi’s article “The Adulteress Wife” on de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex*, “feminine” refers to a woman that has accepted her patriarchal construction as the “Other”, while “female” refers to “being woman”, which makes her deviant from the human (male) norm (Moi, 2010). Cixous’ essay “Le Rire de la Méduse” (1975) served to canonise the phenomenon of what the Anglo-American academy later came to refer to as “French feminism”. Jane Gallop states that “‘French feminism’ is a body of thought and writing by some women in France which is named and thus constituted as a movement here in the American literary studies” (Gallop in Penrod, 1993, p. 45). Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva were identified as the main feminist theorists of French feminism, yet they did not even believe there was such a thing as a woman’s gender identity. However, “French feminism” as known within the English-speaking academic world was very different from what was perceived as a feminist movement in France. “French feminism” is actually an Anglo-American invention with the purpose of commodifying and appropriating this continental ideology for domestic consumption. “French feminism” is “a body of comments by Anglo-American writers on a selection of French and non-French writers: Lacan, Freud, Kristeva, Cixous, Derrida and Irigaray are the core groups. But there are others” (Delphy, 2000, p. 172). During the 1970s in the United States, French theory was making its first appearance in the form of translated texts (Cusset, 2008, pp. 54-60). Journals, “whether more academic or more openly political” (Cusset, 2008, p. 64), constituted the main means of disseminating French theory in the US, for example the feminist journal *Signs* was the first to publish translations by Cixous and Irigaray between 1975 and 1980, and *SubStance* published writings by Kristeva and Derrida between 1971 and 1973. French feminism as it was understood in the States was paradoxically neither French nor feminist (Gambaudo, 2007, p. 94). Christine Delphy’s article “The Invention of French Feminism: An Essential Move”, claims that “‘French Feminism’ is not feminism in France [...] Most feminists from France find it extraordinary to be presented, when abroad, with a version of their feminism and their country of which they had previously no idea” (Delphy, 2000, p. 166). It is therefore legitimate to call into question the fact that Americans insist on considering Cixous, Irigaray and Kristeva as French feminists, “three women who have become household names in the Anglo-American world of Women’s Studies” (Delphy, 2000, p. 168). According to Delphy, “the main reason that its inventors invented their brand of feminism as “French” was that they did not want to take responsibility for what they were

saying” (Delphy, 2000, p. 186).

1.7 Anglo-American Feminism

The term “Anglo-American feminism” was coined by Toril Moi in her *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985), making an official division between French feminists and Anglo-American feminists. Anglo-American feminists, such as Kate Millet and Elaine Showalter, were engaged in a struggle for the acknowledgment of women’s gender that they had been denied. The general tendency is to categorise Anglo-American feminism as activist and French feminism as theorist, though Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron explain that they “do not wish to suggest that all French feminists are theoreticians and that all American feminists are activists. That would be a gross oversimplification of what has been and is happening in each country” (Marks & de Courtivron in Penrod, 1993, p. 10). However, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in the essay “The Mirror and the Vamp” (1989), attack the Trinity for practicing “the arts of vamp” (Gilbert & Gubar in Penrod, 1993 p. 42). The vamp is “delectably sensual and transgressive” (Gilbert & Gubar in Penrod, 1993), she not only “suck(s) the blood of male theory” (Gilbert & Gubar in Penrod, 1993, p. 42) but “the drama of seduction and betrayal that she enacts in her foray against patriarchal structure may end up being as seductively treacherous to women as to men” (Gilbert & Gubar in Penrod, 1993, p. 154). French feminists were essentialists, focusing on the theory that gender cannot be based merely on biological essentialism.

1.8 Wittig’s writing production

Monique Wittig’s materialism was accused of being (essentially) essentialist as it will be exposed in more detail in Chapter 3. She was ostracised by French feminists in France and was not even included in the American feminists. She was a radical lesbian feminist who left France, her native country, to settle in the United States in 1976. She was not only a materialist feminist utopian writer and philosopher but also a bilingual *nouveau romancier* in political exile in the US (Anderson, 1994, p. 90) as it will be illustrated in Chapter 4. She taught in several colleges and on Professor Leo Bersani’s invitation she took up a position as visiting professor at the University of California at Berkeley when she first arrived in the States with her partner Sande Zeig, an American film director and writer. She delivered various political texts at national conferences in English, such as her most famous essay “The Straight Mind”. Wittig made her debut on the literary scene in 1964 with *L’Opoponax*,

published by Éditions de Minuit, a renowned leading publisher in France. Éditions de Minuit is a French publishing house of cutting-edge works with a legacy of resistance, in fact its foundation dates to the Nazi era. *L'Opoponax* acted as the catalyst for Wittig's feminist ideology, it was "myopically received and reviewed as a *nouveau roman* about 'everybody's childhood'" (Wenzel, 1981, p. 264). It was translated into English in the UK in 1966, and it is Wittig's least-known work, probably due to the fact that it was published before the advent of the women's liberation movement (Wenzel, 1981, p. 265). Nevertheless, the book was awarded the "Prix Médicis" and translated into many other languages and earned Wittig a reputation as a promising young talent. Her most acclaimed book is *Le Corps lesbien* (1973), published in 1973 by Éditions de Minuit. It is an erotic female version of the *Song of Songs*. With Zeig, Wittig co-authored *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes* (1976) published by Éditions Grasset, a more mainstream publishing house. The book was translated into English by Wittig and Zeig as *Lesbian Peoples: Material for a Dictionary* in 1979 and published by Avon. In 1969, Éditions de Minuit published *Les Guérillères*, which is a "mythic utopian epic" (Porter, 1989, p. 93) on "a monosexual society of women" (Porter, 1989, p. 93). The novel was written in France during the student and worker revolt of May 1968 and was translated into English in 1971 by David Le Vay, and it was "hailed as a feminist manifesto" (Wenzel, 1981, p. 265) in the United States.

1.9 *Un jour mon prince viendra (ou pas)*

Wittig was not considered an American feminist, but precisely in the American context she was considered a French feminist, although, as will be seen, her feminism found no place among French feminism in France. Her materialist feminism had been an uncomfortable presence within the French context, in fact, her theory differed from the one elaborated by the feminists of sexual difference: "political questions of social and economic inequality are eclipsed in French feminist discourse by the overriding obsession with writing the feminine" (Zerilli, 1990, p. 152). French feminists invoked the reappropriation of a woman's original essence detached from the phallocratic constructions of the dominant discourse of patriarchy. In 1975, "Le Rire de la Méduse", had become "the manifesto of those women writing under the rubric of *écriture féminine*" (Wenzel 1981, p. 266), but contrary to Wittig's *Les Guérillères*, Cixous did not address the historical and material reasons for women's oppression. Wittig's materialist feminist ideology was a radical discourse distinct from "*écriture féminine*" and ultimately represented a challenge to it. According to Cixous,

the language of the body does not signify to write “in milk instead of ink” (Ward Jouve, 1991, p. 96), but refers to a “Self” that produces verbal constructions that provides corporeal weight, in society as in contemporary debates. The call to women to write about themselves and their body has allowed the rediscovery of an alienated subject that had hitherto been addressed only through stereotyped terms, such as mother, lover, holy virgin or whore. Therefore, “woman’s writing” constitutes a liberatory act, a way out from the glass coffin where she had been put to sleep, because only through writing she will be able to reclaim the specificity of her sex (Cixous, 1996, p. 66). Despite that, Wenzel claims that “écriture féminine” fails to perpetuate the myth of woman as natural and women’s material condition of oppression by glorifying the essence of the “Self”: “Rather than the male writer, we now have the female writer returning to the cosmic womb (or the cosmic vulva), denying in this retreat the fullness of her human, undifferentiated potential” (Wenzel, 1981, p. 269). At the Conference of 1979 in New York, Cixous significantly marked the difference between American and French feminists by stating “I felt I had to question the use of the negative approach to what you call feminism; we’ve got different words in France” (Cixous in Wenzel, 1981, p. 271). Monique Wittig was also present at the conference, and she exclaimed indignantly amidst the 800 other women who were there, “What France? This is a scandal” (Wittig in Wenzel, 1981, p. 271) when Cixous affirmed that lesbian had “a negative connotation in France” (Cixous in Wenzel, 1981, p. 271). For Wittig lesbians were separate from women: a lesbian is “a not-woman, a not-man” (Wittig, 1992, p. 13), able to escape that heterosexual scaffolding that governs and organises reality.

L'action est peut-être pour demain. Et s'il faut mourir, tends à ce bonheur souverain,
vile créature à qui rien sur cette terre n'appartient, sauf la mort. N'est-il pas écrit que
c'est en la risquant que tu cesseras d'être esclave?

(Wittig, 1978, p. 39)

Monique Wittig has often been a lone, but nevertheless unique, voice among French feminist theorists, and her works have been mostly neglected due to “the presumed ontological categories of heterosexuality which organize, legitimate, and give meaning to the political relations of society” (Zerilli, 1990, p. 146).

Under the subversive pen of Wittig, *bildungs-roman*, epic poem, Bible, and dictionary – all powerful tools of patriarchal discourse – contribute to the genesis of another language, from which another culture is already clearly emerging.

(Wenzel, 1981, p. 285)

Wittig's main objective was to strip the female body of its deforming representations created by male imagery. Her political writing seeks to reappropriate Western phallocratic discourse and correct it: in other terms, it "simultaneously critiques language while inventing it anew to set the utopias she creates" (Anderson, 1994, p. 90). The feminine for Wittig is "the hole in men's signifying economy" (Irigaray, 1985, p. 50) and the masculine represents the general (Wittig, 1992, p. 60), hence it "is not the position from which women might claim the universal status of the subject" (Zerilli, 1990, p. 147). Wittig's words operate like "the Trojan Horse" (Wittig, 1992, p. 68) because they enter the mind of the reader as something which is seemingly familiar and innocuous, when in reality they possess the power to inhabit and disrupt the universal subject, which is the oppressor – man.

Any work with a new form operates as a war machine, because its design and its goal is to pulverize the old forms and formal conventions. It is always produced in hostile territory. And the stranger it appears, nonconforming, unassimilable, the longer it will take for the Trojan Horse to be accepted. Eventually it is adopted, and, even if slowly it will eventually work like a mine.

(Wittig, 1992, pp. 68-69)

Wittig's literary production can be defined as what Edith Clowes defines "meta-utopian":

'the meta-utopian imagination searches out the linguistic, psychological, and political structures that inform the process of generating and realizing social dreams. [...] it entertains a variety of Utopian scenarios and seeks to expose their common, underlying motivations and assumptions.'

(Clowes in Anderson, 1994, p. 90)

Wittig's writing is an experiment with nouns and pronouns, which gives her the opportunity to dismantle traditional modes of literary production. The worlds that the lesbian writer create are "sex-segregated worlds, where the question of sex differences categories is irrelevant [...] creating a quasi-utopic 'free zone'" (Wenzel, 1981, p. 276). A lesbian society and lesbianism represent the only way for women to live free (Wittig, 1992, p. 20).

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. À propos de cette histoire, elles font beaucoup de plaisanteries sur la maladresse de celle à qui les précieuses indications d'un féminin ont manqué. [...] Elles disent qu'elles ne comprennent pas qu'on l'ait appelée la belle au bois dormant.

No prince in sight, and no fathers' name can control the future to come.

1.10 The Lesbian Horse

Wittig's work has been extensively translated. However, works that were "Trojan horses in French [...] when rendered into English [...] became harmless hobby horses" (Anderson, 1994, p. 96), and this is most likely a clear reference to David Le Vay's 1971 translation of *Les Guérillères*, in which, providing a mistranslation of the pronoun "elles", he dismantled the entire theoretical scope of the book. Nonetheless, one of Wittig's works in particular, the essay collection *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, met a positive response from the public when Beacon Press published it in 1992. Ryn Etter on *Booklist*, which provides critical reviews of books, wrote at the time: "The first collection of 10 major essays by one of the most influential political philosophers of the French women's liberation movement. Wittig's works are crucial for a number of current feminist analyses, and it's a critic's delight to have them finally gathered in one volume" (Ryn Etter, 1992)¹⁰. Other feminist theorists, such as Judith Butler, also welcomed Wittig's book: "Wittig's theoretical insights are both precise and far-reaching, and her theoretical style is bold, incisive, even shattering" (Judith Butler, n.d.)¹¹.

That being said, resuming Wittig's concept of the Trojan Horse, on the homonymous Greek myth it has to be said that there is a theory according to which the stratagem employed by the Greeks to breach the walls of Troy and conquer the city was actually a ship. In other words, the Trojan Horse was not a horse. This is what Francesco Tiboni, Italian naval archaeologist and PhD researcher at the University of Marseille, has asserted (Cionci, 2017). The age-old misconception supposedly stemmed from an error in the translation of texts following Homer, which were the inspiration for Virgil's *Aeneid*. According to Tiboni, the artifact was a type of Phoenician ship called a "Hippos", which had a horse head at the bow. Wittig's novels suffered practically the same unfortunate fate as the mythical horse-ship: lost in translation. The riddle, one could say, is the fact that a lesbian language was still missing, "that powerful ancient language of letters and numbers that we lost so long ago in the clouds of obfuscation, still destined for recovery in some future Glorious age" (Anderson, 1994, p.

¹⁰ For Etter's review, which is contained in the Beacon Press folder at the Wittig's archives, see [Figure 4](#). The figures in the Annexes have been placed in chronological order and not in order of appearance in the text.

¹¹ For Butler's comment on *Booklist*, also contained in the Beacon Press folder at the Wittig's archives, see [Figure 5](#).

100). Wittig's language gives true consistency to something that has never been written before: she "establishes the lesbian body in its place as a new primary signifier in a new nonphallogentric Symbolic order" (Shaktini, 1989, p. 90).

But whatever one chooses to do on the practical level as a writer, when it comes to the conceptual level, there is no other way around – one must assume both a particular and a universal point of view, at least to be a part of literature. That is, one must work to reach the general, even while starting from an individual or from a specific point of view. That is true for straight writers. But it is true as well for minority writers.

(Wittig, 1992, p. 67)

Monique Wittig was able to "lesbianise" language and the very act of writing. She appropriated and made hers that patriarchal, heteronormative and phallic bandwagon of the *straight* mind that led around the most central misogynist concepts of Western society. It could be in the guise of a wooden horse or a ship (it remains unclear), but it is another way of perceiving reality as it should be.

In desperate straits, exactly as it was for serfs and slaves, women may 'choose' to be runaways and try to escape their class or group (as lesbians do), and/or to renegotiate daily, and term by term, the social contract. There is no escape (for there is no territory, no other side of the Mississippi, no Palestine, no Liberia for women). The only thing to do is to stand on one's own feet as an escapee, a fugitive slave, a lesbian. One must accept that my point of view may appear crude, and no wonder, considering all the centuries it has had against it.

(Wittig, 1992, XIII)

1.11 Leaving the fathers' caves

Language can show the way out, and Wittig takes her readers on a journey that can be made only through the exorcism of the "ghosts" of phallogracy and misogyny and "of the stereotyped images of woman that have kept her secure and anchored in the world of the Fathers" (Wenzel, 1981, p. 275). Daring to speak is "the hope which springs when women's deep silence – the silence that breaks us – is broken is the hope of saving our Selves" (Daly, 1978, p. 22), to "leave the fathers' caves and live in the sun" (Daly, 1978, p. 8). Monique Wittig, as a lesbian writer, uses a minority point of view to express herself, that of precisely being a lesbian, which means breaking with heterosexuality. Wittig's lesbianism becomes the medium and the object of her writing, and it is in the very act of speaking that a "minority writer", that is, a writer belonging to a group of marginalised individuals naturalised by the

social order, confronts the *straight* mind (Feole & Garbagnoli, 2023 pp. 37-38). For Wittig language is among the most insidious institutional mechanisms of the *straight* order, latently transmitting and perpetuating the structure of the heteronormative world (Feole & Garbagnoli, 2023 pp. 37-38). However, Wittig's writing is like the Trojan Horse, operating "as a war machine" (Wittig, 1992, pp. 68-69) that aims "to pulverize old forms and formal conventions" (Wittig, 1992, p. 69).

[...] il y a eu un temps où tu n'as pas été esclave, souviens-toi. Tu t'en vas seule, pleine de rire, tu te baignes le ventre nu. Tu dis que tu en as perdu la mémoire, souviens-toi. Les roses sauvages fleurissent dans les bois. [...] Tu connais la peur l'hiver quand tu entends les loups se réunir. Mais tu peux rester assise pendant des heures sur le sommet des arbres pour attendre le matin. Tu dis qu'il n'y a pas de mots pour décrire ce temps, tu dis qu'il n'existe pas. Mais souviens-toi. Fais un effort pour te souvenir. Ou, à défaut, invente.

(Wittig, 2014, p. 122)

In 1978 at the Modern Language Association Convention in New York, which was dedicated to American lesbians, Wittig presented "The Straight Mind", in which she asserted that "lesbians are not women" (Turcotte in Wittig, 1992, VIII). The essay was first published in French with the title "La Pensée straight" in the French journal *Question Féministes* n°7 (1980) and then in English in the journal *Feminist Issues*, vol. I, n°1 (summer 1980). In Italy, the article appeared in *Bollettino del Collegamento fra lesbiche italiane* (IX, 2, pp. 5-14) in February 1990, translated by Rosanna Fiocchetto, one of the founders of Collegamento fra lesbiche italiane, with the title "The Straight Mind".

The English version of the article was later included in the American publication *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (1992a) by Beacon Press with a preface by Louise Turcotte, one of the founders of the feminist magazine *Amazones d'hier, lesbiennes d'aujourd'hui* (AHLA). Later the same year, Harvester Wheatsheaf published in the UK *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (1992b). The essays in Beacon's edition were published as follow: "The Category of Sex", *Feminism Issues* vol. 2, n°2 (Spring 1982); "One Is Not Born a Woman", *Feminist Issues* vol. 1, n°2 (Winter 1981); "The Straight Mind", *Feminist Issues* vol. 1, n°1 (Summer 1980); "On the Social Contract", *Feminist Issues* vol. 9, n°1 (Spring 1989); "Homo Sum", *Feminist Issues* vol. 10, n°2 (Summer 1990); "The Point of View: Universal or Particular?" translated in *Feminist Issues* vol. 1, n°1 (Summer 1980); "The Trojan Horse", *Feminist Issues* vol. 4, n°2 (Fall 1984); "The Mark of Gender", *Feminist Issues* vol. 5, n°2

(Fall 1985) and “The Site of Action” translated by Lois Oppenheim in *Three Decades of the French New Novel* (1986).

The Straight Mind was translated in French in 2001 as *La Pensée straight* (Éditions Balland) and in 2018 as *La pensée straight* (Éditions Amsterdam). The 2018 edition contains Turcotte’s preface alongside a second by the queer activist Sam Bourcier. Initially known by his birth name, Marie-Hélène Bourcier, then as Marie-Hélène/Sam Bourcier, or M-H/Sam Bourcier, Bourcier now uses the name Sam and the masculine personal pronoun. In the translation of 2001 Marie-Hélène Bourcier appears as the French translator, whereas Sam Bourcier is reported as the French translator for the edition of 2018. He translated “La Catégorie de sexe”, “Homo sum” and “Paradigmes”. “On ne naît pas femme” was initially published in French in *Question Féministes* n°8 (May 1980), “À propos du contrat social” was published in *Les Études gay et lesbiennes* (Éditions du Centre George Pompidou, 1988), and “Le Cheval de Troie” was translated by Marthe Rosenfeld in *Vlasta*, n°4 (May 1985). Marthe Rosenfeld was born in Belgium, she is a Jewish refugee of World War II and she immigrated to United States when she was thirteen, where she is currently teaching French and Women’s Studies at Indiana University and Purdue University (Rosenfeld, 1981, p. 6). She is a lesbian and is indeed indebted to the works of Monique Wittig for the rediscovery of her identity and pursues a development of lesbian sensibility in literature (Rosenfeld, 1981, p. 6). In fact, Rosenfeld has also written two papers on Wittig: “Language and the Vision of a Lesbian-Feminist Utopia in Wittig’s ‘Les Guérillères’” (1981) and “The Linguistic Aspect of Sexual Conflict: Monique Wittig’s ‘Le Corps lesbien’” (1984). The essay “Quelques remarques sur *Les Guérillères*”, which is included as the last essay in the French and *collettivo*’s versions, was published in French in *L’Esprit Créateur*, vol. XXXIV, n°4 (winter 1994). The essay “Le lieu de l’action” was not included at the behest of the author herself in the French editions, but it is present in the English and Italian versions of the book.

The Straight Mind has also been translated into Italian. The first Italian translations came out in 2019 with the title *Il pensiero eterosessuale* (2019a, ombre corte) by Federico Zappino and *Il pensiero straight e altri saggi* (2019b) by *collettivo della lacuna*. Zappino is a philosopher and activist among the most vibrant exponents of queer thought in Italy, whereas *collettivo* is a group of lesbian feminists. Their translation was published independently by them as an online version. The French versions of the essays were revised by Wittig, but she unfortunately died in 2003 before the publication of the Italian translations.

Table 1: List of Essays

TITLE	YEAR	PUBLICATION	AUTHOR/TRANSLATOR
The Category of Sex	1982	Feminist Issues, vol. 2, n°2	Monique Wittig
La Catégorie de sexe	2001	La Pensée straight	Sam Bourcier
On ne naît pas femme	1980	Questions Féministes n°8	Monique Wittig
One Is Not Born a Woman	1981	Feminist Issues, vol. 1, n°2	Monique Wittig
La Pensée straight	1980	Questions Féministes, n°7	Monique Wittig
The Straight Mind	1980	Feminist Issues, vol. 1, n°1	Monique Wittig
À propos du contrat social ¹²	1988	Les Études gay et lesbiennes	Monique Wittig
On the Social Contract	1989	Feminist Issues, vol. 9, n°1	Monique Wittig
Homo sum	1990	Feminist Issues, vol. 10, n°2	Monique Wittig
Homo sum	2001	La Pensée straight	Sam Bourcier
Paradigm ¹³	1979	Homosexualities and French Literature	George Stambolian
Paradigmes ¹⁴	2001	La Pensée straight	Sam Bourcier
The Point of View: Universal or Particular	1980	Feminist Issues, vol. 1, n°1	Monique Wittig
Le Point de vue, universel ou particulier ¹⁵	1982	<i>La Passion</i>	Monique Wittig
The Trojan Horse	1984	Feminist Issues, vol. 4, n°2	Monique Wittig
Le Cheval de Troie	1985	Vlasta, n°4	Marthe Rosenfeld
The Mark of Gender	1985	Feminist Issues, vol. 5, n°2	Monique Wittig
La Marque du genre	1992a	The Straight Mind and Other Essays	N/A
Quelques remarques sur les <i>Les Guérillères</i> ¹⁶	1994	L'Esprit Créateur vol. 34, n°4	Monique Wittig
Le Lieu de l'action ¹⁷	1984	Diagraphe, n°32	Monique Wittig
The Site of Action ¹⁸	1986	Three Decades of the French New Novel	Lois Oppenheim and Evelyne Costa de Beauregard

¹² The essay was first read in occasion of “Rencontres internationales sur les cultures gay et lesbiennes”, organised by *Revue parlées* of Centre Georges Pompidou on June 23 and 27, 1997. This essay is a rewriting of “On the Social Contract”.

¹³ The original text in French has gone lost. The English translation was published in *Homosexualities and French Literature* by George Stambolian and Elaine Marks. This essay is not present in the English versions of the book as well as in the Italian translation by Federico Zappino. It is present in the translation by *collettivo della lacuna*.

¹⁴ The French essay is based on the English translation by George Stambolian.

¹⁵ The text was published as a foreword for Djuna Barnes’ book *La Passion* (Flammarion).

¹⁶ It was initially published in French in 1994. This essay is not present in the English versions of the book, but it is present in the Italian translation by *collettivo della lacuna*.

¹⁷ This essay is not present in the French versions of the book. It is present in the Italian translations.

¹⁸ The essay was first published as “The Place of the Action” in *Three Decades of the French New Novel* (University of Illinois Press) by Lois Oppenheim. The essay is present in the English editions of the book.

2 *Le voyage sans fin*

2.1 Publishing houses

The history of books is considered by Robert Darnton an important discipline (Darnton, 1982, p. 65). Darnton proposes a model to analyse the way in which books take shape and are spread throughout society: “it could be described as a communication circuit that runs from the author to the publisher (if the bookseller does not assume that role), the printer, the shipper, the bookseller, and the reader” (Darnton, 1982, p. 67). According to Darnton, the reader is placed at the end of the circuit and completes it as they influence the author before and after the book is composed (Darnton, 1982, p. 67). Moreover, the authors are readers themselves as they are influenced by the works of other authors or by the criticism that can be levelled at their work (Darnton, 1982, p. 67). The circuit thus works as a continuous cycle, what are forms of meaning that the author tries to convey, are transformed back into thought at the end of the circuit, and that is why its components must be taken as a whole when outlining the story of a book (Darnton, 1982, p. 67). This dissertation has taken into account the elements of Darnton’s circuit and analysed how their profiles contributed to shaping a precise history of Wittig’s book *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*.

Publishers play a key role in the communication circuit according to Darnton, and they are in a close relation with the author (Darnton, 1982, p. 75). The American publishing house Beacon Press was the first to publish Wittig’s book. Beacon Press, established in 1854 by the American Unitarian Association, is an American non-profit book publisher with a left-wing orientation. It operates as a department of the Unitarian Universalist Association, a progressive religious movement embarked on a visionary mission to produce and circulate books and pamphlets that not only convey their theological perspectives, but also advocate for societal and justice-related ideals. Beacon Press is renowned for its publication of works by notable authors like James Baldwin, Viktor Frankl, Martin Luther King Jr and Mary Oliver, along with significant releases such as *The Pentagon Papers*. In 1983, when Wendy Strothman assumed the role of director at Beacon, she encountered a press in need of both financial stability and editorial direction. Recognising the potential of the publisher’s existing catalogue, Strothman aimed to instil a sharper focus (Wilson, 2004, p. 36). She initiated the formation of Beacon’s first advisory board, comprised of scholars and industry professionals, to provide strategic guidance, and she sought new authors and titles while strengthening past

publications such as some of the major books on Beacon's backlist (Wilson, 2004, p. 36). As she neared the end of her tenure in 1995, Strothman succinctly articulated Beacon's guiding ethos: "We at Beacon publish the books we choose because they share a moral vision and a sense that greater understanding can influence the course of events. They are books we believe in" (Strothman in Wilson, 2004, p. 37). On the site of Beacon Press, the mission of the publishing house reads as follows:

The mission of our publishing program is to affirm and promote these principles: the inherent worth and dignity of every person, especially historically marginalized people, economically disadvantaged people, BIPOC people, LGBTQQIA+ people, and people of all abilities, ethnic heritages, and gender identities; justice, equity, compassion and inclusivity in human relations; acceptance of one another, and of multiple perspectives, to better engage new audiences with progressive ideas; a free and responsible search for truth and meaning; the importance of scholarship and credible journalism to address misinformation and strengthen democratic citizenship; the right of conscience, the value of religious pluralism, and the use of the democratic process in society; the goal of world community, free from oppression, with peace and justice for all; respect for the interdependent web of all existence; especially in a world facing global climate change; the importance of free speech and a free press, and of literature and the arts, in democratic life.

(Beacon Press webpage, n.d.¹⁹)

As for the UK publisher Harvester Wheatsheaf, not much is known. Nonetheless, it can be stated that the two English versions of *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* are identical. The books contain the same essays, in the same order, and there is an "Acknowledgments" page, a "Foreword" by Louise Turcotte, translated by Marlene Wildeman, and a preface written by Wittig herself. Marlene Wildeman, who has lived in Montreal since 1978, is an accomplished fiction writer and translator hailing from British Columbia. She has a diverse portfolio encompassing short stories, poetry, articles and book reviews. Some of her most notable works include *One Became a Roofer* featured in the anthology *Dykeversions: lesbian short fiction* by The Women's Press in 1986 and *Lesbian Lovebirds and Their Ways* published in *The Guide to Gracious Lesbian Living* by Lilith Publications in 1988. The insightful preface of the book is authored by Louise Turcotte, known for her association with the bold Quebecois publication *Amazones d'hier, Lesbiennes d'aujourd'hui*, where some of Wittig's works have been featured. The journal evocative name suggests a profound connection between contemporary lesbians and the ancient Amazons,

¹⁹ Retrieved March 10, 2024.

who prioritised their own community and were therefore marginalised by the prevailing phallogocentric ideology (Shaktini, 1994, p. 212).

There are likewise two French editions of the book: *La Pensée straight* (2001), Éditions Balland, in the “Modernes” collection, and *La pensée straight*, 2018, Éditions Amsterdam. Éditions Balland was founded in Paris in 1967 and is a generalist publishing house. The “Modernes” collection includes books such as *Manifeste contra-sexuel* (2000) by Béatriz Preciado, *Discours Saphique* (2001) by Béatrice Doucede and *Le Miroir bisexuel* (2002) by Catherine Deschamps. Éditions Balland is known for publishing works that span various topics, and *La Pensée straight* was published under a collection of works of insightful and thought-provoking content. The Éditions Balland book features a note regarding the publication of the various essays, Wittig’s preface and Louise Turcotte’s foreword.

Éditions Amsterdam was founded in 2003 by Charlotte Nordmann and Jérôme Vidal and is dedicated to the translation and publication of philosophical, historical and social science works, along with critical essays and political discourse. Notably, they have introduced prominent figures from the Anglophone world to French readership and delve into fields like cultural studies, gender studies, postcolonial studies and Atlantic history. Since 2016, guided by a new editorial team led by Nicolas Vieillescazes, Éditions Amsterdam seeks to nurture a new wave of 21st-century thinkers while maintaining a commitment to bringing the best of English-language intellectual production to their audience. In both French editions Sam Bourcier wrote a preface “Wittig La Politique” that comes after Turcotte’s words. For the 2001 edition, Bourcier wrote under his birth name Marie-Hélène Bourcier as he was assigned female at birth.

As Darnton remarked, by consulting the archives of a publisher it is possible to trace deeper links between the publisher and the author that occur during the publication process of a book (Darnton, 1982, p. 76). The following is the publishing history of the American edition of *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, which I was able to trace through the documents contained in the Wittig’s archives²⁰ at Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University in the “Beacon Press” folder ([Figure 1](#)). From a letter sent to Wittig on January 18, 1985, by Beacon Press senior editor Joanne Wyckoff, it emerges that Monique Wittig had already started writing the manuscript entitled *The Straight Mind*, and the delivery date was set for January 1, 1985. In a letter dated January 13, 1986 ([Figure 2](#)), Susan Wolf, Wittig’s

²⁰ The author kindly acknowledges Professor Sandra Daroczi for the consultation of the material relating to the Beacon Press edition of *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* contained at Wittig’s archives. In the [Annexes](#), there are some of the photos that Professor Daroczi took at the archives.

assistant and representative, wrote to Ms. Wyckoff to inform her that the manuscript *The Straight Mind* would remain unfinished and that Wittig wanted to propose a collection of her theoretical essays. On February 19, 1987, Joanne Wyckoff wrote to Wittig's agent that Beacon Press was very interested in considering a collection of Wittig's essays to replace the manuscript for *The Straight Mind*. On June 28, 1990, through the exchange between Andrew Hrycyna from the editorial department at Beacon Press and Monique Wittig, we understand that Wittig was in the final stages of the preparation of the introduction to the collection of essays *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. Furthermore, we understand that Beacon Press expected Wittig's new work some time in July as she was expected to have completed it by then. The book would then appear in the Spring 1991 publishing season. In the same exchange, Mr. Hrycyna informed Wittig that he had had a phone call with Judith Butler, at that time at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton, who had heard of the forthcoming book. Butler was looking forward to its publication and even offered to help in any way in the publication of the work ([Figure 3](#)). On March 13, 1991, Wittig received a letter containing some amendments to the contract dated December 28, 1982, for the publication of *The Straight Mind* that had become an untitled collection of essays delivered in acceptable form in February 1991. A meeting was held on March 29, 1991, that brought together Beacon's marketing, editorial and production departments officially "launching" the book into the publishing process. Carol Leslie, the managing editor, informed Wittig about the manuscript editor who had been working on the book. Lori Foley, the design and production manager, assigned the book cover and interior to a designer. Beacon's marketing department, led by Margaret Lichtenberg, had already begun to make preliminary plans for publicising and promoting the work. The publication was tentatively scheduled for February 1992, and prior to that, the book was to be announced in Beacon's annual catalogue and in the one of Beacon's distributor, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, which later sold the book directly to bookstore buyers around the United States. Dan O'Connell, Beacon's publicity manager, sent out a limited number of advance page proofs to book reviewers at top newspapers and magazines several months before publication, and book copies to potential reviewers four to six months before the publication date. Laura Ayr, the advertising and promotion manager, looked for relevant places to advertise the book, though the letter indicates that some of the major national media were out of range of Beacon's budget. The production and marketing meeting went extremely well, and people were receptive and enthusiastic. Moreover, Mr. Hrycyna informed Wittig of the conclusions and questions that came out of the meeting. To keep the

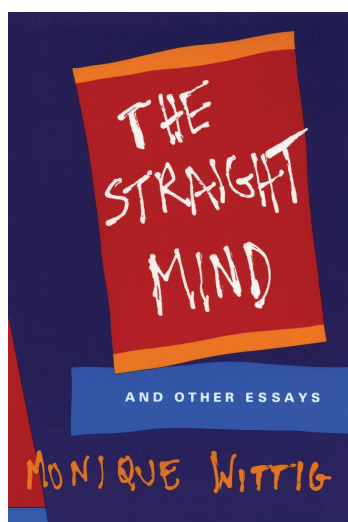
price down and reach the widest audience early, Beacon Press had decided to publish the book both in cloth and paperback editions at the same time, and that the paperback would be significantly less expensive than the hardcover. The same letter enclosed the jacket design commissioned for the book which, according to everyone at Beacon Press, was terrific, distinctive and appealing. The received manuscript was in order, comprising of the essays, Wittig's preface, and Louise Turcotte's introduction, which Beacon Press decided to call a "Foreword" with Wittig's later approval, as well as the bibliography listing Wittig's other works. The critical bibliography, however, contained many entries that were not English language publications. Since many of them were book reviews that were not easily obtainable and since their subject was not the book itself, Beacon Press decided to omit the critical bibliography from the volume. On March 29, 1991, *The Straight Mind* went to the copy editor as Monique Wittig had submitted the work, except for the acknowledgments and the bibliography that were retyped for clarity by Mr. Hrycyna. The assistant editor also edited the new preface and Turcotte's foreword to make certain passages clearer and more idiomatic as he thought that the translation was inaccurate, especially the one of the foreword. Everything had to be approved by Wittig. The same letter indicates that Hrycyna wanted Wittig to attend the Modern Language Association event to launch her work, which was expected to be ready in early December. He concluded the letter expressing Beacon Press enthusiasm in publishing the book as it had been in preparation for a long time. On a letter dated June 21, 1991, Hrycyna informed Wittig that the book jacket was being revised. The jacket redesign was the topic of a letter dated June 27, 1991. Hrycyna enclosed the alternate version, with a typeface replacing the hand-lettering of the original jacket. On November 25, 1991, Beth Heidenreich from Beacon Press publicity sent a letter to Wittig enclosing a written interview for her to respond to. From the archives, we know that Jackie Jones, senior acquisitions editor at Harvester Wheatsheaf, was in contact with Wittig on January 10, 1992, to inform her that the publishing house had just acquired the British and Commonwealth rights to her book. Ms. Jones handled the British edition of *The Straight Mind*. The work already featured on the new Harvester Wheatsheaf Literature catalogue on page 15. Ms. Jones wrote that Harvester Wheatsheaf made every effort possible to promote the book widely through academic institutions, libraries and bookshops as well as in the media. Furthermore, she affirmed that they were anticipating considerable review coverage and strong sales. To enable the marketing department to make full use of Wittig's publicity statement, Ms. Jones invited the author to complete the enclosed "Author Statement" present in the letter. Harvester

Wheatsheaf planned to publish their edition of Wittig's work in February. On January 20, 1992, Hrycyna wrote to Wittig including an early review of *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* on *Booklist* and adding that they were expecting reviews in the general and academic press after the book official publication in early February. Furthermore, a selected list of academics in women's studies and literature, as well as a list of the Modern Language Association's gay and lesbian studies section, had received a letter directly from Beacon Press offering a small discount on the book and describing the examination copy policy for possible course use. From this exchange we also understand that Wittig was in touch with her agent regarding the issue of allowing Harvester Wheatsheaf to sell its edition in France. In the last letter from the archives, dated April 16, 1992, we know that *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* was finally finished and a full-fledged Beacon Press book. Moreover, Hrycyna concluded the letter saying that he had spoken with the editor Douglas Stallings at Sanford Greenburger literary agency in New York that wanted to transfer French rights to Beacon, also urging the American publishing house to approach Jerome Lindon at Éditions de Minuit for the French publication. The original contract did not give Beacon Press a share in the French rights.

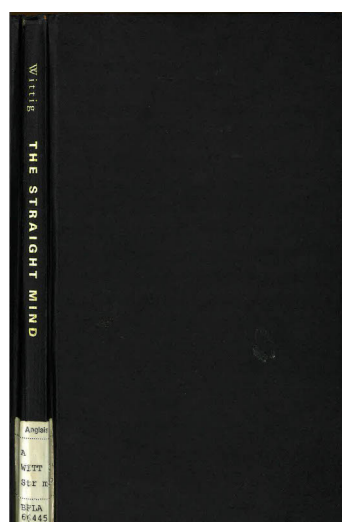
For what concerns the covers of the six editions of *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* taken into consideration in this dissertation, the publishing houses made clearly different choices in terms of visual appearance of the book. The first English publication of work, by Beacon Press, features a rather colourful and eye-catching softcover in red, orange, blue and light blue tones, with the title written in a sort of handwriting font and enclosed in a rectangle like a poster. We know from the letter dated March 29, 1991, that Beacon Press decided to publish the book in cloth and paperback versions. We also learn that the book, according to booksellers, is thought to have done best in paperback. In the same letter, we understand that the publishing house did not choose Romany Eveleigh's art in three colours for the cover, and that a type design was considered to be better. According to Marco Sonzogni, usually authors have no say in the choice of the cover of their book at the time of publication (Sonzogni, 2011, p. 4). The British edition by Harvester Wheatsheaf has a serious black hardcover and the title is written in gold only on the book spine in a classic and clean font, in capital letters. The French version by Éditions Balland has a classic and authoritative softcover, in a beige colour with the spine of the book in a gold shade. The other French version by Éditions Amsterdam has a quite colourful softcover like the Beacon Press edition and it presents the colours of the suffragettes, purple, green and white, with circular geometric

shapes intertwining with a vertical line running through each row of circles. Whether these circles might allude to the gender symbol associated with woman is unknown, but it could very well be a possible interpretation given the content of the book. Finally, as far as the two Italian editions are concerned, one is an online edition that features on the cover page with the title, a drawing of the Trojan Horse inside which are three “guérillères”. The ombre corte edition has a softcover mostly white, and like all the books in the “Testi” collection, it features a sort of red-coloured rectangle with an image of the author. The Harvester Wheatsheaf edition is the only one with a hardcover. There are, indeed, visual differences that may have contributed to the circulation of the book in the different countries where it was published because, while it is true that one should not judge a book by its cover, it is also true that it is the cover that most often attracts us to a book, to open and read it.

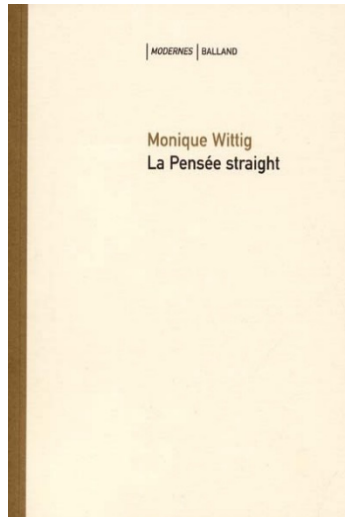
Table 2: Book covers



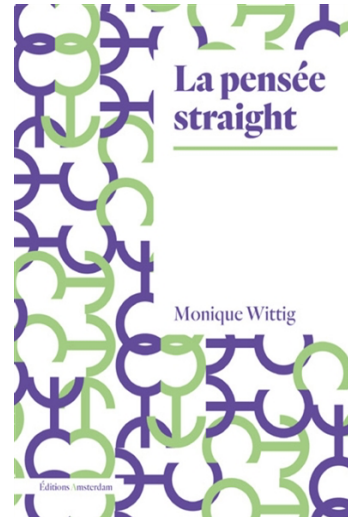
The Straight Mind and Other Essays (1992a)
Beacon Press



The Straight Mind and Other Essays (1992b)
Harvester Wheatsheaf



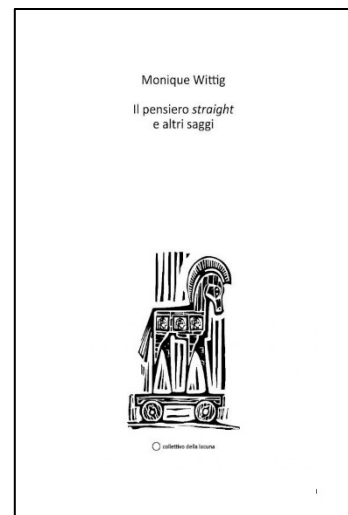
La Pensée straight (2001) Éditions Balland



La pensée straight (2018) Éditions Amsterdam



Il pensiero eterosessuale (2019a) ombre corte



Il pensiero *straight* e altri saggi (2019b)
collettivo della lacuna

2.2 Feminism and translation

Modern conditions of production and distribution of printed works have played a fundamental role in shaping modern translation activities and theories, and book historians acknowledge the role of translators in the circulation and reception of books (Belle & Hosington, 2016, p. 1). Nevertheless, the importance of translation in the cycle of a book was once rarely addressed by book historians (Belle & Hosington, 2016, p. 9). Darnton in fact proposes a revisited version of his previous article on the history of books by adding new elements of the communication circuit that he did not take into account before.

[...] the point I want to make concerns something different: the complexity built into the everyday activities of publishers. They inhabited a world we cannot imagine unless we read their archives and study their business from the inside. [...] I would like to mention some other aspects of publishing [...] that have not been assimilated, as far as I can tell, in the history of books.

(Darnton, 2007, pp. 489-499)

The new elements of the communication circuit are: Smuggling, Distribution and sales, Literary agents, Piracy, Swapping, Demand and Politics (Darnton, 2007). In particular he recognises that he failed to consider “the reworking of texts through new editions, translations, and the changing contexts both of reading and of literature in general” (Darnton, 2007, p. 504). Starting from the consideration that translation is undoubtedly a fundamental element in the life cycle of a book, I will begin by outlining the main strands of thought on texts and translation that have shaped the translation practices examined in this dissertation.

In the era of feminism, a plethora of different perspectives and attitudes on “sexual/textual politics” and translation has been generated. Christina Zwarg has defined translation as “the vehicle through which [...] meaning and language come to crisis” (Zwarg in Flotow, 1997, p. 98) as differences of sex, race, religion, economy, culture and politics were more visible and acute. Margaret Hannay has focused on women’s “choice” to turn to translation because they were excluded from education or prestigious activities intended “for men only” (Hannay in Flotow, 1997, p. 76), hence the sexualised portrayal of translation as a passive secondary activity. Women have been “spooked” by “the deadly myths of patriarchy” (Daly, 1978, p. 315) and “the necrophiliac Prince Charmings keep their Snow White spouses in the state of Sleeping Death” (Daly, 1978, p. 351). Locked in “the glass coffin of male-authored text” (Gilbert & Gubar, 1980, p. 44), women have learnt “to Spook/Speak back” (Daly, 1978, p. 318). Men feared what they could not comprehend, the “Other”, and all females who deviated from “misbegotten male” (Daly, 1985, p. 64) norms were burned alive as witches. Women speak “with tongues of fire” (Daly, 1978, p. 319) and it is their sparking that creates “gynergetic communication and confidence” (Daly, 1978, p. 320) to live in “a room of one’s own” (Daly, 1978, p. 319) that is a “dis-covery room” (Daly, 1978, p. 338).

Like Cinderellas, Hags stand among the cinders, but we know that they are cinders of our burned foresisters. We know that the cinders still Spark.

(Daly, 1978, p. 320)

Nonetheless, translation has allowed the voice of women to be heard and has given access “to the linguistic processes they adopt to influence power structures in their particular contexts” (Flotow, 1997, p. 87).

Walter Benjamin has claimed that translation is not to be considered “the sterile equation of two dead languages” (Benjamin in Bassnett, 1992, p. 65) and it “is somehow equated with the maternal principle, with caring and with giving birth” (Bassnett, 1992, p. 65). Karin Littau has provided a reformulation of the myth of Pandora, the woman who released linguistic chaos by opening a box containing all the ills of the world out of pure curiosity (Flotow, 1997, p. 46). Pandora is herself the paradigm of the translation process, a figure both negative and positive depending on the contexts, never being one and the same. Professor Susan Bassnett rejects the concept according to which translation is a secondary activity, inferior to the act of writing, that must be faithful and transparent, and proposes instead “a reformulation of the old hierarchy that placed woman lower than man. Man, the original, towered over Woman, the Translation, created (according to one of the Biblical versions of the Creation at least) from man’s rib” (Bassnett, 1992, p. 65). From Luise von Flotow’s perspective, all types of conventional language undermine women’s self-esteem, confidence, psychological development and creativity because they are controlled and manipulated by institutions ruled by men (Flotow, 1997, p. 9). The solution to this would be to raise awareness and to change the conventional language by finding a new one that could respond to women’s realities. Bassnett claims that a system “of owners and owned, colonizers and colonized, penetrators and prey” (Bassnett, 1992, p. 70) torn by a continuous struggle “not only between two characters, but also between the male and female principles, between fire and water, spring and autumn, life and death” (Bassnett, 1992, p. 72) can be dismantled only through “*an orgasmic theory of translation*” in which elements merge into a relation of mutual respect, “a metaphor for the future that might move us beyond” (Bassnett, 1992, p. 72).

2.3 Angels

Poststructuralist and deconstructionist discourses on translation studies in the last decades of the twentieth century have rendered translation a creative endeavour that conveys a significant message. The invisible subservient translator that tries to reproduce the original text in the target language has been replaced with a visibly subversive translator that shows their interventionism and mediates between languages and cultures (Bassnett, 2002, p. 9).

Jacques Derrida's revision of "key concepts in Western philosophy whose nuances were indeed 'lost in translation' has stimulated renewed interest in the work of the translator, and endowed her with the right, even the duty to 'abuse' the source text" (Flotow, 1991, p. 80). Moreover, translation has consequently been re-evaluated as a communicative practice that ensures the continuity and survival of the source text, giving it an after-life and in turn becoming an original itself in the target language. The act of deconstruction, operated on a text, exposes notions lost in the process of transcription and permits "the endless displacement of meaning" (Norris, 1982, p. 29). Poststructuralist conceptions have undermined the concept of the "original" as an established and transferable entity. Furthermore, deconstruction challenges the traditional conceptions according to which translation has to reproduce an idealised meaning transferable from one language to another and from one culture to another. If meaning cannot be repeated and if difference is the basic trait of any process of signification, the consideration of the source text as a container of the recoverable author's message, is revised. Derrida has used translation to challenge the limits of language and this "abusive fidelity" has proved to be the most useful tool in translating feminist experimental writings. Presumptions of the fidelity of translation are considered utopian and hypocritical, and the pious devotion of women has to be replaced by their "infidelity" to the "woman's place", releasing the prisoners of the chains of patriarchy. Feminist interventionism and reformation in both writing and translation have validated the right of every woman to enter history without opening her legs (Flotow, 1991, pp. 69-70). The translator (*elle* or "I") has the right and faculty to offer a different perspective on reality, to transform angels (*anges*) into angles (*angles*): that is the difference a woman can make. Jacques Derrida led the way for a contemporary and positive conception of translation as a form of inter-cultural communication and inter-temporal continuity (Bassnett, 2002, pp. 9-10). Derrida defines "the double bind" (Chamberlain, 1988, p. 470), which he refers to "as a hymen, the sign of both virginity and consummation of a marriage" (Derrida in Chamberlain, 1988, p. 469) so that translation is at the same time an original, a writing production and its transformation.

I've found that translation begins with the prefix 'trans' for a reason. Like transcendence and transformation, it requires an acceptance of progressing with uncertainty [...]. The prefix "trans" comes from the Latin word for "across." To turn to one's own writing after translating is to cross there with one's mind already in motion, and emboldened from the verbal leaps and linguistic freefall that translation demands.

To begin writing after translating is to begin airborne – suspended between languages – a reckless place I'd like to believe leaves a writer's mind particularly open to innovation [...].

(Novey, 2016)

2.4 *La coperta tirata*

Monique Wittig has consistently stood as a divisive figure in the transformative cultural milieu shaped by the women's movement in Europe and in the United States, and while she is hailed by radical lesbians, she is also viewed as a potential threat to be eradicated by heterosexual feminists (Spinelli, 2003). Long before the widespread upheaval of feminism reshaped European and North American culture, Monique Wittig had already defied literary and political norms in the 1970s as she stood out as a disruptive figure, excessively uncompromising, even among women challenging patriarchal expectations (Spinelli, 2010). Her presence proved discomforting even for emerging feminist groups she actively engaged with, notably she played a role in what is considered the inception of the Women's Liberation Movement in France, the laying of a wreath in memory of the Unknown Soldier's wife (even more unknown than him) at the Arc de Triomphe in Paris in 1970 (Spinelli, 2010). What Simonetta Spinelli calls "*la coperta tirata da tutte le parti*" (Spinelli, 2003), a metaphor for a work that has been considered and then dismissed several times throughout history, is undoubtedly *The Straight Mind*, a collection of essays by the author regarding her philosophical, political, theoretical and literary statements.

We must produce a political transformation of the key concepts, that is of the concepts which are strategic for us. For there is another order of materiality, that of language, and language is worked upon from within by these strategic concepts. It is at the same time tightly connected to the political field, where everything that concerns language, science and thought refers to the person as subjectivity and to her/his relationship to society. And we cannot leave this within the power of the straight mind or the thought of domination. [...] Besides, domination is denied; there is no slavery of women, there is difference. To which I will answer with this statement made by a Rumanian peasant at a public meeting in 1848: 'Why do the gentlemen say it was not slavery, for we know it to have been slavery, this sorrow that we have sorrowed.'

(Wittig, 1992, pp. 29-30)

In Italy, Wittig's presence is marked by periodic appearances and disappearances; knowledge of her works is sporadic and fragmentary. It is notable that each generation reads and becomes enthralled by different works, which, in turn, emerge and fade away (Spinelli,

2010). Monique Wittig predominantly lingers in obscurity, assuming an enigmatic presence that intermittently materialises and dissolves. Many have encountered her in varying degrees, and the lesbian author is frequently invoked in discussions as a provocative figure, yet what never fades is her assertion that lesbians are not women (Spinelli, 2002). This phenomenon elicits diverse explanations as it might stem from translation intricacies, given the limited translations of Wittig's works into Italian that often do not follow their original chronological sequence; it could also be attributed to Italy's inclination toward more conventional literary preferences, whereas Wittig's work challenge such norms (Spinelli, 2002).

2.5 Wittig in Italy

Wittig's writings that have been translated into Italian are *L'Opoponax* (1964), *Les Guérillères* (1969), *Le Corps lesbien* (1973), *Virgile, non* (1985) and *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (1992). The materialist philosopher's first book to be translated was *L'Opoponax*, which came out in Italy as *L'Opoponax* (1966), translated by Clara Lusignoli, in which Wittig uses pronouns, particularly the French indefinite pronoun "on", to question the order imposed by patriarchal norms and heterosexual discourse, to ultimately destroy the category of sex itself. *L'Opoponax* was published by Einaudi, a large and well-known publishing house in Italy. The book represents Wittig's first work to meet that first generation of Italian women who managed to enter universities in substantial numbers in a country where people struggled to break away from provincial realities (Spinelli, 2010). Wittig's second work to be translated into Italian was *Le Corps lesbien* in 1976 by Elisabetta Rasy and Christine Bazzin for Edizioni delle Donne, a publishing house founded by Anne Marie Boetti, Maria Caronia, Manuela Fraire and Elisabetta Rasy, four feminists from the Collettivo femminista comunista di Via Pomponazzi and by Associazione della Maddalena, with the aim of creating a publishing production understood as feminist practice and not as a mere means for publishing about women. *Il corpo lesbico* comes out in Italy at the height of the feminist movement in the country, and Italian lesbians active in feminist collectives welcomed the work of the French author with great passion. The book restored the pride and that sense of belonging in lesbians, but at the same time definitively marked a rupture between them and heterosexuals. A new translation of *Le Corps lesbien* came out recently in Italy in 2023, edited by Deborah Ardilli, a translator and scholar of political theory and history of feminist movements, published by Vanda Edizioni, which is an independent publishing house dedicated to exploring radical themes within feminist discourse. In Italy, being a lesbian or

lesbianism materialised and became concrete as feminist lesbianism. Rasy and de Lauretis offer the two perspectives through which Wittig's theory was received and interpreted in Italy. For Rasy, Wittig allowed "il recupero politico del sociale che la donna vive all'interno del proprio corpo, territorio di colonia sconosciuto e ostile" (Rasy in Spinelli, 2010), while for de Lauretis Wittig represents "una ricerca del desiderio che, proprio perché è desiderio di una donna per una donna, costruisce una diversa economia erotica" (de Lauretis in Spinelli, 2010). However, Wittig's theory on lesbianism and her literary production were relegated to literary eccentricity, reduced to a provocation, at times left to fall into oblivion and then brought out again.

In Italy, especially throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, the most widespread current of feminist thought, and the one that found the most positive response, was that relating to sexual difference by the feminist theorist Luce Irigaray (Feole, 2020, p. 71). According to this feminist perspective, women find personal legitimacy precisely as a result of being women and of their female origin. From this perspective, whose sole purpose is to build female freedom, women legitimise each other, creating a symbolic community from which lesbians find themselves excluded (Spinelli, 2010, p. 7). It was only in the 90s that Wittig came into play to restore value and give recognition to lesbianism (Feole, 2020, p. 72). On the occasion of *Prima settimana lesbica* in 1991, a group of young university women read and commented Wittig's article "The Straight Mind", translated into Italian by Rosanna Fiocchetto. (Feole, 2020, pp. 72-73). One of those young women, Cristina Gramolini, commented on the experience in an interview with Michela Pagarini in 2010:

Quell'articolo di fatto delineava un'identità lesbica diversa da quella delle altre donne, avevamo passato i mesi precedenti a leggerlo e commentarlo e durante la Settimana abbiamo provato ad articolare un discorso passando attraverso le parole di questa lesbica più grande che tanto ci avevano catturate. Quelli erano gli anni in cui imperava il pensiero della differenza sessuale, che pur non avendo molto gradimento nel movimento lesbico, faceva parte del linguaggio comune del femminismo [...]. Noi invece avevamo voluto orientarci su un'affermazione del soggetto lesbica che non emanasse dal soggetto donna. Erano i primi tentativi di dire qualcosa di noi stesse.

(Gramolini in Feole, 2020, p. 73)

In 1995, the Laboratorio di critica lesbica, a Bologna-based group for political reflection, organised a debate on lesbianism and compulsory heterosexuality with the editors of *Quaderni Viola*, a feminist journal from Milan. Among the texts that were proposed to be read and commented on was Wittig's essay "The Straight Mind" (Feole, 2020, p. 74). However, the

editors of *Quaderni Viola* accused lesbians of radicalising the debate and also of self-exclusion, of “ghettizzarsi” (Feole, 2020, p. 74) through their politics of lesbian identity. The following year, during a conference organised in Bologna by the Orlando association of the Centro di documentazione delle donne and by the University of California, militant Antonia Civarella of the Laboratorio di critica lesbica, stated that “lesbians are not women” just as Wittig had done some time before (Feole, 2020, p. 74). Lesbianism eventually found a way out of its irrelevance in Italy with the online Italian translation of *Les Guérillères*, *Le Guerrigliere*, edited by Ana Cuenca for Lesbacce incolte in 1996. The narrative strategy of *Les Guérillères* is to present an ungendered and universal subject represented by “elles”, refusing to identify the discursive universal subject with the masculine “ils”. The novel is a “mythic utopian epic” (Porter, 1989, p. 93) where Wittig universalises the collective feminine pronoun “elle(s)” in order for “elles” to stand for “the absolute subject of the world” (Wittig, 1992, p. 85). Unfortunately, the militant edition did not circulate widely in the Italian literary scene; the Italian translation of *Virgile, non* met a similar fate a good thirty years after its publication in France (Spinelli, 2010, p. 11). Rosanna Fiocchetto, who had translated the essay “The Straight Mind”, edited the Italian translation *Virgil, non* for the publishing house Il Dito e la Luna in 2005. Like Dante, Wittig also embarked on an initiatory journey, but one that was decidedly more chaotic. The guide is not Virgil, but Manastabal, a lesbian in jeans and shirt, and hell is nothing but everyday (heterosexual) reality represented by a coin laundry or a train station; lesbian bars represent limbo and in heaven angels have vulvas (Spinelli, 2010). The translation arrived too late in Italy and the text was considered too dated for contemporary debates.

That being said, the year 2019 in Italy marked the rediscovery of Wittig’s thought as two versions of *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* came out (Feole, 2020, p. 75): the translation by *collettivo della lacuna* and the one by Federico Zappino. What is immediately apparent is the difference in the translation choices for the title: *collettivo della lacuna* opted for *Il pensiero straight e altri saggi*, whereas Zappino decided for *Il pensiero eterosessuale*. Wittig herself for the title of the French version, *La Pensée straight*, had chosen to use the English adjective *straight*, which has precisely a double meaning, that of being heterosexual and that of being ordinary (Feole, 2020, p. 76). Furthermore, the two Italian versions differ for the number of essays present in the book: the *collettivo*’s version contains two essays that are not present in Zappino’s translation, “Paradigmi” and “Qualche osservazione su *Le Guerrigliere*”. Ombre corte edition presents the same exact number and order of essays of

Beacon's edition. The preface to the translation by *collettivo della lacuna* is also another element that distinguishes the two Italian translations. It is an interesting acknowledgement to Wittig's work for giving voice to minority subjectivities such as lesbians. The very recognition of a lesbian subjectivity, as will be explained in more detail in Chapter 4, found no little obstructionism in the Italian feminist context. Wittig's presence oscillates in Italy between obscurity and resurgence, and when faced with uncertainty in choosing a guiding figure, amidst the saturated landscape of revered icons, lesbians, gay men and transsexuals often find themselves reconnecting with Wittig (Spinelli, 2003).

3 *Une lesbienne en enfer*

3.1 The Gay/Lesbian Bar

Manastabal, my guide, says:

(You may have left Hell, Wittig, you haven't yet reached Paradise, far from it. For here this is Limbo, that is to say an intermediate zone which resembles both Hell and Paradise. It's a good thing this place exists, however limited it is, but there's all the more competition to enter it, and hunger reigns here. So those who live here are not angels but franchises who pay for their liberty by starving. This will explain why their mood might be affected and why they might kill each other in their exasperation and impotence. All the same they're very courageous and even full of endurance, too, when they have no choice apart from living like bandits.)

(Wittig, 1991, p. 11)

Monique Wittig's writings have played a pivotal role in numerous discussions within gay and lesbian studies, encompassing various sexual practices and body technologies, prompting the need for new approaches in theorising the connections between language, sexuality, gender and feminism (Woodhull, 2006, p. 149). When Wittig read "The Straight Mind" in 1978 at the Modern Language Association, American feminists had already recognised and accepted the biological determinism around the concept of sex and, through the alteration of the gender bias, were determined to end women's oppression (Griffin Crowder, 2007, p. 489). The gay liberation movement, alongside feminist and socialist intellectuals, was developing a profoundly non-assimilationist and non-essentialist perspective on sexuality, and it is precisely in this context that Wittig's assertion that lesbians are distinct from the category of women gains significance (Griffin Crowder, 2007, pp. 489-490).

Wittig was at least fifteen years ahead of what would become queer theory. And, like most prophets, Wittig has been often ignored in her own 'country,' in this case not France but queer theory.

(Griffin Crowder, 2007, p. 490)

The notion of queer theory made its entrance on the academic scene almost as a joke thanks to Professor Teresa de Lauretis, who coined it to serve as the title of a conference on lesbian and gay sexualities that she held at the University of California, Santa Cruz in February 1990 (de Lauretis, 1991, iii). The term "queer" was proposed to de Lauretis at a previous conference

she had participated at, and “she had the courage, and the conviction, to pair that scurrilous term with the academic holy word, ‘theory’” (Halperin, 2003, pp. 339-340).

‘Queer’ is such a simple, unassuming little word. Who ever could have guessed that we would come to saddle it with so much pretentious baggage—so many grandiose theories, political agendas, philosophical projects, apocalyptic meanings? A word that was once commonly understood to mean ‘strange,’ ‘odd,’ ‘unusual,’ ‘abnormal,’ or ‘sick,’ and was routinely applied to lesbians and gay men as a term of abuse, now intimates possibilities so complex and rarified that entire volumes are devoted to spelling them out.

(Halperin, 2003, p. 339)

According to de Lauretis, lesbians and gay men should be conceptualised as two distinct social and cultural forms and homosexuality is not to be seen as deviant or opposed to a natural form of sexuality, that is, heterosexuality (de Lauretis, 1991, iii).

The terms “lesbian” and “gay” referred to specific communities, discourses, sexualities and habits; however, “Queer Theory” emerged precisely from the attempt to sidestep such distinctions aiming to both challenge and surpass them and take a critical distance from the established formula of “gay and lesbian” with reference to “homosexual” (de Lauretis, 1991, iv-v). Such theory rejects what is considered normal and natural “in favour of what the straight mind finds monstrous, if not unthinkable” (Griffin Crowder, 2007, p. 493). Sue-Ellen Case defines “queer” as a form of activism that aims to counteract the dominant discourse, “a taboo-breaker, the monstrous, the uncanny” (Case, 1991, p. 3). Teresa de Lauretis argued that this terminology obscured the specific experiences of lesbians and maintained a silence around lesbianism within the broader discourse of “gay and lesbian” identities and that the aim of queer theory was precisely that of addressing this failure of representation (de Lauretis, 1991, vi-vii). Queer theory represents a kind of resistance against the heteronormativity dialectic upon which Western society has been erected (Hennessy, 1993, p. 971).

On the other hand, for Wittig, resistance lies in the cognitive subject that re-evaluates and reorganises society from the point of view of the oppressed (Wittig, 1992, p. 18), which is a lesbian subject.

I will say that only by running away from their class can women achieve the social contract (that is, a new one), even if they have to do it like the fugitive serfs, one by one. We are doing it. Lesbians are runaways, fugitive slaves; runaway wives are the same case, and they exist in all countries, because the political regime of

heterosexuality represents all cultures. So that breaking off the heterosexual social contract is a necessity for those who do not consent to it. For if there is something real in the ideas of Rousseau, it is that we can form “voluntary associations” here and now, and here and now reformulate the social contract as a new one, although we are not princes or legislators. Is this mere utopia? Then I will stay with Socrates’s view and also Glaucon’s: If ultimately we are denied a new social order, which therefore can exist only in words, I will find it in myself.

(Wittig, 1992, p. 45)

Gay men and lesbians united under a common front bearing the name “queer” in the wake of the AIDS national emergency and the rise of the right following the Reagan revolution that occurred in the 1980s in the United States (de Lauretis, 1991, v). Queer theorists recognise lesbian subjectivity as a challenge to the natural conception of gender categories; however, they “argue that the political force of queer identity lies not in the way lesbian identity *escapes* gender, but in the way it *deconstructs* gender” (Burwell, 1997, p. 173).

3.2 They’re here, they’re lesbians, they’re coming for your children

What differentiates Wittig and queer theory is the fact that lesbians have gained subjectivity precisely because they are no longer inscribed in the dialectics of the *straight* mind, whereas the latter seeks to dismantle gender relying on those same categories that it tries to subvert (Burwell, 1997, p. 168). Thus, if Wittig envisions lesbians as escapees *from* the heterosexual economy, queer theorists affirm that lesbians and gay men should abolish the categories of female and male acting, but nonetheless remaining, *within* the said economy. For the French materialist writer, lesbianism is the norm and a society based on the principles of heteronormativity and patriarchy is a living Hell. Furthermore, in the essay “Paradigm”, which was initially printed in *Homosexualities and French Literature: Cultural Contexts/Critical Texts* (1979) before its translation into French by Sam Bourcier for *La Pensée straight* (2001), Wittig claims that lesbianism constitutes another dimension of the human as it is not established on sexual difference (Wittig in Stambolian & Marks, 1979, p. 118).

The fundamental difference, any fundamental difference (including sexual difference) between categories of individuals, any difference constituting concepts of opposition, is a difference belonging to a political, economic, ideological order. All categories that conceal and dissimulate this political, economic, ideological order issue from idealist thought that accepts in nature, or by divine will, differences that are given a priori, that are already there before any sociality. The difference between men and women is

dependent on this thought. The difference established between heterosexuality and homosexuality is also dependent on it, even if this difference does not present itself in the same way. The idealist argument makes heterosexuality a 'natural' sexuality and homosexuality a sexuality in opposition to 'nature'.

(Wittig in Stambolian & Marks, 1979, p. 115)

According to Griffin Crowder, heteronormativity already positions gay men and lesbians in the categories of "queer", "monstruous", and even "damned souls" as Wittig defines the oppressed in *Across the Acheron* (1987), and the fact that they act upon the very category they are placed in by the system ultimately leads only to the replication of the roles and natural order imposed by the societal world (Griffin Crowder, 2007, p. 496).

Judith Butler states that compulsory heterosexuality poses itself as the norm, the original, reality, and that being lesbian represents only a mimicry (Butler in Fuss, 1991, pp. 20-21).

It is important to recognize the ways in which heterosexual norms reappear within gay identities, to affirm that gay and lesbian identities are not only structured in part by dominant heterosexual frames, but that they are not for that reason determined by them. They are running commentaries on those naturalized positions as well, parodic replays and resignifications of precisely those heterosexual structures that would consign gay life to discursive domains of unreality and unthinkability. But to be constituted or structured in part by the very heterosexual norms by which gay people are oppressed is not, I repeat, to be claimed or determined by those structures. And it is not necessary to think of such heterosexual constructs as the pernicious intrusion of 'the straight mind,' one that must be rooted out in its entirety.

(Butler in Fuss, 1991, p. 23)

Gay men and lesbians for Butler have been traditionally pointed at as "impossible identities, errors of classification, unnatural disasters" (Butler in Fuss, 1991, p. 16), but to the accusation of unnaturalness in these identities Butler replies that heterosexual identities are a performance too, thus exposing the falsehood of the supposed naturalness of gender categories upon which heterosexuality is founded (Burwell, 1997, p. 174). Butler's influential work *Gender Trouble* (1990) introduced Wittig to a broader audience outside of lesbian and feminist circles, and effectively mainstreamed the lesbian writer as a French feminist thinker in the North American context (de Lauretis, 2003). Butler disagreed with Wittig's radical stance, misinterpreting that "Wittig's lesbian-feminism appears to cut off any kind of solidarity with heterosexual women and implicitly to assume that lesbianism is the logically or politically necessary consequence of feminism" (Butler, 2002, p. 162). In fact, contrary to

Butler's belief, for Wittig lesbians were not in contrast with heterosexual women (Griffin Crowder, 2007, p. 495). Thus, Butler failed to grasp the figurative and theoretical nature of Wittig's concept of "lesbian" and its epistemological implications (de Lauretis, 2003). What Butler saw as the problematic nature of Wittig's proposal of a lesbian subject that transcended the heteronormative binarity of gender categories, was the fact that she did not criticise "'the subject' as invariably masculine according to the rules of an inevitably patriarchal Symbolic" (Butler, 2002, p. 26), proposing "in its place the equivalent of a lesbian subject as language-user" (Butler, 2002, p. 26). Furthermore, for Butler the concept of a sexual subject which has managed to free themselves beyond the category of sex in which they were inscribed, fails to acknowledge "the ways in which power relations continue to construct sexuality for women even within the terms of a 'liberated' heterosexuality or lesbianism" (Butler, 2002, p. 39).

Nonetheless, Wittig's materialist feminism claims that "sexuality is not for women an individual and subjective expression, but a social institution of violence" (Wittig, 1992, p. 19), and her materialist feminism aims exactly to destroy the social system of heterosexuality which is based on the relation of oppression of men over women (Hennessy, 1993, p. 970). Butler, in her work *Gender Trouble* (1990), dedicates an entire chapter to Wittig's philosophy entitled "Monique Wittig: Bodily Disintegration and Fictive Sex". The American philosopher understands that, according to Wittig's ideology, woman exists only in connection with man and the relationship of opposition of heterosexuality that binds them (Butler, 2002, p. 143). A lesbian rejects heterosexuality, she is neither woman nor man, and has no sex, and thus a lesbian has refused and escaped the categories of sex (Butler, 2002, pp. 143-144). For Butler sex is a "citational practice" (Butler, 1993, p. 2) that is carried out following a rigid code, which is defined from the heterosexuality of desire and those, such as lesbians and gay men, who do not fulfil a coherent relationship between sex, gender and sexual practice are qualified as less than human and unreal (Feole, 2020, p. 67-68). Eva Feole, PhD researcher in contemporary French literature and feminist activist, affirms that Butler's theory is just a pretext to criticise Wittig's anti-essentialism, as for Butler Wittig is not a materialist feminist but an essentialist in her affirmation of an existing human subject that transcends heterosexual norms and the categories of sex (Feole, 2020, p. 68). Wittig's project to universalise the lesbian subject is perceived by Butler as a way of rendering lesbian the entire world as only through this act can compulsory heterosexuality, which regulates the societal world, be dismantled (Butler, 2002, p. 153). Butler misinterpreted the anti-essentialist nature of Wittig's philosophy, which was actually what anticipated queer theory.

That being said, there is an aspect of queer theory “that is arguably at the greatest remove from Wittig’s philosophy” (Griffin Crowder, 2007, p. 497), which is the fact that Wittig did not believe that the heterosexual system can be subverted by citing the categories in a different way, as those categories are what they are for the said system, hence they are still inscribed in it (Griffin Crowder, 2007, p. 497). Lesbians and gay men, from this angle, are therefore instruments of the *straight* mind. For Wittig, gay men can release themselves from the constraints of the heterosexual regime as lesbians have done, if they renounce their masculine privileges which derive from their “imprisonment” in the category of men (Griffin Crowder, 2007, p. 496).

It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those other identified as outside the structures, in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. *For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.* They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.

(Lorde, 2007 p. 142)

A phallocratic society acknowledges the necessity of the ontological existence of the bias different/other upon which all its sets of beliefs are outlined to establish the *straight* mind (Wittig, 1992, pp. 28-29). This last one constitutes the structure through which the world and society are perceived, something Eva Feole and Sara Garbagnoli have referred to as the mirror that enables us to see the eyeglasses we wear to see (Feole & Garbagnoli, 2023, p. 25). The *straight* mind represents heterosexuality as a fact of nature, the basis of every possible form of society, culture and subjectivity, presented as natural concepts that are indeed constructed by the very regime of heterosexuality. The heteronormative system disguises sexual difference between gender categories as having an ontological foundation when in fact they are effects of relations of power and oppression between “naturally” constructed social groups (Feole & Garbagnoli, 2023, pp. 27-28). The differentiation into the categories of “woman” and “man” has nothing ontological about it as these categories exist only through their political relation of antagonism (Wittig, 1992, p. 29). To live in society means to live in heterosexuality – in other terms, the situation in which people live within the social order is what Wittig calls the social contract and, in this contract, gender categories are categories of the heterosexual contract (Wittig, 1992, pp. 40-44). Heterosexuality, in these terms, cannot be reduced to a sexual orientation as it is rather a social system based on the oppression of the class of women

by the class of men, justified by the principle of difference between the two sexes that produces the social contract (Wittig, 1992, p. 20). As Adrienne Rich exposed in her essay “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence” (1980), “lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life” (Rich, 1980, p. 649). What lies at the core of the *straight* mind are the concepts of heterosexuality, sexual difference and the concept of the other/different (Feole & Garbagnoli, 2023, pp. 32-33). Wittig states that if lesbians and gay men continue to conceive and speak of themselves as women and men, they will only participate in maintaining and perpetuating heterosexuality and in nurturing the patriarchal models (Wittig, 1992, p. 30). The function of difference is to conceal the relations of antagonisms produced by the *straight* mind, and thus it appears evident as to why Wittig considers the vindication and exaltation of alterity by some parts of groups of oppression a perpetuation of the *straight* mind (Wittig, 1992, p. 56). Central to Wittig’s philosophy is the liberation of oppressed classes that occurs through the comprehension of being in a state of oppression and becoming cognitive subjects (Wittig, 1992, pp. 18-19).

Sitting at a ground-floor table, I survey contentedly the comings and goings around the bar. I feel like getting up at each new arrival in order to meet her and congratulate her on being in such a place; or else I want to stand on the table and propose a general toast to all the deserters, all the runaways, all the escaped slaves assembled here.

(Wittig, 1987, pp. 73-74)

3.3 Let me tell you a story

The misinterpretation of Wittig’s philosophy may have contributed to the under-appreciation or condescension toward Wittig’s work in gender and queer studies (de Lauretis, 2003). At the symposium “L’oeuvre politique, théorique et littéraire de Monique Wittig” that took place in Paris in June 16-17, 2001, under the direction of Sam Bourcier and Suzette Robichon, Teresa de Lauretis delivered the paper “When lesbians were not women”.

There was a time, in discontinuous space – a space dispersed across the continents – when lesbians were not women. I don’t mean to say that *now* lesbians *are* women, although a few do think of themselves that way, while others say they are butch or femme; many prefer to call themselves queer or transgender; and others identify with female masculinity – there are lots of self-naming options for lesbians today. But during that time, what lesbians were was that one thing: not women. And it all seemed so clear, at that time.

A paradox emerges when considering Wittig's position in feminist discourse as, despite being the author of the concept of women's disappearance, she found herself categorised within the essentialist or humanist framework. Some feminist and queer theorists reject the central tenet of Wittigian thought, that is, lesbians are not women (Griffin Crowder, 2007, p. 490). Judith Butler had already contributed to the categorisation of Wittig's theory and works under the philosophical current of essentialism, and Annamarie Jagose and Diana Fuss similarly critiqued Wittig's materialism. In the chapter "Lesbians Are Elsewhere" of her book *Lesbian Utopics* (1994), Jagose affirms that Wittig's placement of "lesbian" as outside the dominant discourses of phallocracy ends demonstrating "the foundational flaw in its utopic figuration: that the exteriority of the utopic category is phantasmic and conceals that category's proper position within the networks of power" (Jagose, 1994, p. 5). Hence, Jagose suggests that the subversive connotation of "lesbian" is indeed complicit in what it seeks to subvert as it is eventually unable to overthrow the categories of gender and heterosexuality (Jagose, 1994, p. 6).

On the other hand, Diana Fuss's chapter "Monique Wittig's Anti-essentialist Materialism" recognises Wittig's definition of "lesbian" as a not-woman, a not-man, socially constructed, without any natural given (Fuss, 1989, pp. 39-42). According to Fuss, "the weakness of her analysis lies in her own tendency to homogenize lesbians into a single harmonious group and to erase the real material and ideological differences between lesbians" (Fuss, 1989, p. 43). Focusing on "Paradigm", Fuss argues that Wittig conceptualises lesbianism as representing a separate culture, the only social category within which lesbians can live freely (Wittig, 1992, p. 20), and thus it is clear why Fuss wonders how lesbianism, constituting as it does another social construct, can be considered as free and not also as imposed (Fuss, 1989, p. 43). Moreover, "Wittig is caught in a paradox" (Fuss, 1989, p. 49). As a materialist feminist she emphasises the discourse around the oppression of women by men; however, she also seeks to abolish the conception of these classes as natural groups. For Fuss, Wittig's concept of the body as socially and culturally constructed "may risk throwing the baby out with the bathwater" (Fuss, 1989, p. 50) as anti-essentialist materialists often dismiss biology and psychology too quickly as essentialising discourses "often failing to recognize the irreducible essentialism informing their own theorizations" (Fuss, 1989, p. 50). Both Fuss and Jagose accuse Wittig of falling into the realms of essentialism. Fuss remarks that Wittig, again in "Paradigm", refers to male homosexuality as

[...] quite often considered with greatest respect. Eternal and powerful Sodom said Colette. That's because the fascination that masters exercise on masters is justified and even logical, for how a master can be fascinated by, and desire a slave is not very clear.

(Wittig in Stambolian & Marks, 1979, p. 120)

In Wittig's early works, gay men are both oppressed and oppressor, a category that seems to threaten the category of lesbians (Fuss, 1989, p. 46): however, in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* Wittig reinserts gay men into the category of oppressed subjects. Even Butler questions her own conception of Wittigian theory in a 2007 article "Wittig's Material Practice. Universalizing a Minority Point of View", asserting that: "Perhaps there is something called, for instance, a lesbian point of view, that in being universalized is being legislated to everyone. The consequence would not be that everyone is henceforth a lesbian, or even that everyone is henceforth lesbianized — whatever that might mean" (Butler in Epps & Katz, 2007, p. 519).

Sam Bourcier, in his preface "Wittig La Politique" to Wittig's *La pensée straight* (2018), affirms how *straight* feminism of the 1980s is also a facet of the *straight* mind, namely all those currents of "féminisme hétérocentré qui cherche à imposer l'identification femme au détriment du point de vue lesbien et qui produit du corps et de la politique *straight*" (Bourcier in Wittig, 2018, p. 32). According to de Lauretis, a recent resurgence of interest among a new generation of scholars may potentially open up new spaces for exploring lesbian thought and writing (de Lauretis, 2003). Louise Turcotte, in her foreword "La révolution d'un point de vue", translated into English by Marlene Wildeman as "Changing the point of view", likewise affirms that Monique Wittig's work has not been just a matter of replacing "woman" with "lesbian", but of making use of the position of freedom occupied by lesbians outside the dominant discourse of heterosexuality (Turcotte in Wittig, 1992, IX-X).

Avec Wittig, c'est devenu un compliment et un programme politique : non seulement nous ne sommes pas des femmes mais nous n'avons pas à le devenir. Allez viens, on s'en va ailleurs. N'oublie pas ton exemplaire du *Straight Mind*.

(Bourcier in Wittig, 2018, p. 40)

3.4 Before and After words

Tradurre, introdurre, contestualizzare *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* è un privilegio, ovvero è una forma di violenza che si ignora come tale. In colui o colei che traduce o introduce c'è un *dux*: il suo punto di vista tende, infatti, ad operare

surrettiziamente come filtro, più o meno deformante. Nel caso del libro di Wittig, oltre che il possesso di un capitale linguistico, teorico, politico e storico adeguato, la traduzione (l'introduzione) richiede la messa in opera di una vigilanza epistemologica particolarmente acuta sul punto di vista a partire dal quale è scritta. Nel caso di un libro tanto rivoluzionario che, inoltre, analizza tanto potentemente la violenza del linguaggio, la traduzione è un'opera eminentemente ardua: 'occorre passare al vaglio ciascuna parola'. Attraverso una vera e propria conversione dello sguardo, si tratta di presentare nel modo più rigoroso e chiaro possibile le analisi, le interrogazioni e la teoria che distinguono l'opera di Wittig. Tradurre e studiare *The Straight Mind* [...] è parso al collettivo della lacuna il modo più intellettualmente rispettoso e epistemologicamente fecondo attraverso cui cercare di restituire la coerenza e la radicalità di un pensiero che è stato, purtroppo, sovente deformato, mal capito, e mal tradotto.

(Non Pervenuta in Wittig, 2019b, p. 88)

The online Italian translation *Il pensiero straight e altri saggi* (2019b) by *collettivo della lacuna*, which came out in 2019, contains an afterword by Non Pervenuta, "L'eterosessualità come regime politico. Qualche nota sul materialismo di Monique Wittig". The text makes clear reference to the analysis of Wittigian theory proposed by Judith Butler in her work *Gender Trouble*. Non Pervenuta's afterword deliberately lends itself as a tribute to Monique Wittig's literary production and philosophy, which minority subjectivities owe the lesbian author (Feole, 2020, p. 77).

Noi donne, noi lesbiche, noi femministe, noi soggettività minoritarie abbiamo, dunque, un immenso debito nei confronti di Wittig (e, più in generale, nei confronti delle femministe materialiste): a lei, a loro, dobbiamo il fatto di aver denaturalizzato, storicizzato, politicizzato le credenze più saldamente e profondamente radicate nei corpi, negli automatismi di pensiero, di linguaggio e di azione.

(Non Pervenuta in Wittig, 2019b, p. 87)

The author analyses the themes and principles of Wittig's theory, universalising the lesbian point of view and rendering the division into sex classes obsolete.

Federico Zappino, who translated Monique Wittig's *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* for the publishing house ombre corte as *Il pensiero eterosessuale* (2019a), also wrote an afterword with the title "La distruzione dell'eterosessualità". The two afterwords represent precisely what most distinguishes the two Italian translations of Wittig's work, and in both cases, they were written by the translators (Feole, 2020, p. 77). Zappino's text takes inspiration from Wittig's theory for a personal reflection on topical issues such as surrogate pregnancy, sex work and pornography.

Così l'eterosessualità ingrassa, e cresce, tutte le volte in cui anziché interrogarci con pari concitazione sulle ragioni specifiche della nostra inclusione condizionale o della nostra esclusione radicale, preferiamo lottare tra noi sulla gestazione per altri, il *sex work*, o la pornografia [...].

(Zappino, 2019a, p. 124)

However, the translator is not interested in what the lesbian materialist has to say about these themes, but rather in her capacity to talk about heterosexuality as a regime of oppression precisely because the debate within the feminist and LGBT movement fails to see that the heteronormative regime is the enemy (Feole, 2020, p. 78). Notwithstanding this, both forewords recognise and denounce the social system which finds its foundations in the belief that man and woman only exist in a relationship of oppression of the former over the latter, and against which one must fight to subvert the doctrine of sexual difference that allows the perpetuation of such oppression.

As Louise Turcotte writes in her foreword to *The Straight Mind*, “the point of view had shifted” (Turcotte, 1992, VIII). Also, according to the editor of the magazine *Amazons d’hier, lesbiennes d’aujourd’hui*, for the first time Wittig examines a facet of women’s oppression that feminism had never taken into consideration: heterosexuality. Wittig’s philosophy and writings are in fact inscribed in that materialist current of feminism in opposition to the group *Psych et Po* and those feminists under the doctrine of sexual difference (Feole, 2020, p. 37). Materialist feminism arose in the early 1970s and was based on an anti-essentialist view of gender categories and found its main channel of dissemination in the French magazine *Questions Féministes* (Feole, 2020, p. 37). For materialist feminists, the division of people into gender categories constitutes the product of women’s historical domination by men and operates as a mark that the class of the oppressed (women) bear, imposed by the class of the oppressors (men) in order to naturalise the relation of exploitation which binds them (Feole, 2020, p. 38).

Nous sommes la classe la plus anciennement opprimée. En tant que telle, nous voulons commencer la lutte contre le pouvoir qui maintient cette oppression. Sexe opprimée, nous sommes les seuls humains à n’être *que* sexe, *le* sexe, ‘la proie et la servante de la volupté collective’, dit Marx.

(Wittig, 2024, pp. 39-40)

In the essay “One Is Not Born a Woman”, Wittig admonishes Marxism for considering only the conflict between proletarians and capitalists, reducing sexual conflicts to “‘bourgeois’

problems that would disappear with the final victory of the class struggle” (Wittig, 1992, p. 17). For Wittig, Marxism had not permitted women to develop a class consciousness, which in Marx’s theory did not refer to the individual or a particular subjectivity but rather to the same consciousness shared by all the individual subjects of the class (Wittig, 1992, p. 17). For this reason, Marxism did not take into account the notion that the members of a class possess the attribute of being subjects in their own singularity, and for Wittig having a class consciousness is not sufficient to subvert the societal order if the oppressed remain alienated subjectivities.

Marxism, the last avatar of materialism, the science which has politically formed us, does not want to hear anything about a ‘subject.’ Marxism has rejected the transcendental subject, the subject as constitutive of knowledge, the ‘pure’ consciousness. All that thinks per se, before all experience, has ended up in the garbage can of history, because it claimed to exist outside matter, prior to matter, and needed God, spirit, or soul to exist in such a way. This is what is called ‘idealism.’ As for individuals, they are only the product of social relations, therefore their consciousness can only be ‘alienated.’

(Wittig, 1992, pp. 16-17)

The only way to a real subversion is for the single subjectivities that form the class of women to engage in consciousness-raising about their status of oppressed and dominated by the class of men, (Feole, 2020, p. 39). The adjective “materialist” thus appears to be clearly drawn from the theory of Marx and Engels, but in addition to the principle that the social relation that bind social groups is one of domination and exploitation of one over another, there is the application of this principle to the sexual sphere in the feminist current.

According to Stevi Jackson, Professor of Women’s Studies at the University of York, Diana Leonard brought the work of French materialist feminists to the Anglophone audience: in particular, Leonard was Christine Delphy’s editor and translator as well as her collaborator (Jackson, 2013, pp. 108-109). However, in the UK, materialist feminists were accused by Marxist feminists of misinterpreting Marxism and wrongly applying its ideology and concepts (Non Pervenuta in Wittig, 2019b, p. 91). The French feminist journal *Questions Féministes* profoundly contributed to the circulation of a revolution from the point of view of the oppressed, whereas in the United States Wittig’s materialist and lesbian feminism suffered a process of camouflage under the guise of “French Feminism”, which was nothing more than an invention based on the belief in the valorisation of woman’s essence (Non Pervenuta in Wittig, 2019b, p. 91). As Delphy wrote in 1996, North American feminists privileged this

type of French feminism, linked to *Psych et Po* and in particular to Luce Irigaray's theory (Feole, 2020, p. 70). The totalitarian importance attributed to the works of Hélène Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray, and the assimilation of other feminist currents of thought to theirs, penalised the reception of the materialist current and Wittig's theory, for instance (Feole, 2020, p. 70).

3.5 *Ulysse lesbien*

Monique Wittig's materialism also applies to the sphere of language. In fact, for Wittig, language produces an effect over the minds and the bodies of the oppressed (Non Pervenuta in Wittig, 2019b, p. 92). In her writing output, Wittig reworks the traditional forms of the literary canon, as it too is masculine and patriarchal, and the narrative discourse thus contributes to the perpetuation of the division into the categories of gender by means of the grammatical mark of gender (Feole, 2020, p. 46). Language is formed inside the specific relation of domination and power of the class of men over the class of women and operates as a social contract (Feole & Garbagnoli, 2023, p. 37).

I say that even abstract philosophical categories act upon the real as social. Language casts sheaves of reality upon the social body, stamping it and violently shaping it. For example, the bodies of social actors are fashioned by abstract language as well as by nonabstract language. For there is a plasticity of the real to language: language has a plastic action upon the real.

(Wittig, 1992, p. 78)

Language for Wittig is not just an abstract matter of signs and meanings, as it has a concrete and material action on people's lives and their bodies, and it represents the principle means of transmission and reiteration of the *straight* mind (Feole & Garbagnoli, 2023, pp. 37-38). As has been said, language constitutes a social contract, and precisely in view of this, it is necessary at first to adhere to this contract; however, the terms of this contract can be breached according to Wittig (Feole & Garbagnoli, 2023, p. 38). The lesbian feminist has always defined herself first and foremost as an author, and as a minority writer who is aware that she is one, writing for her means entering an enemy arena with the intention of subverting its order. Language can become a double-edged sword for minority subjects (Garbagnoli, 2013, p. 145). Wittig identifies herself as a minority writer (Feole & Garbagnoli, 2023, p. 62) because she belongs to the class of the oppressed, lesbians in particular, and for this reason

she has to enter literature “obliquely” (Wittig, 1992, p. 62) as opposed to the universal and dominant literary field.

At first it looks strange to the Trojans, the wooden horse, off color, outsized, barbaric. Like a mountain, it reaches up to the sky. Then, little by little, they discover the familiar forms which coincide with those of a horse. [...] The horse built by the Greeks is doubtless also one for the Trojans, while they still consider it with uneasiness. It is barbaric for its size but also for its form, too raw for them, the effeminate ones, as Virgil calls them. But later on they become fond of the apparent simplicity, within which they see sophistication. [...] They want to make it theirs, to adopt it as a monument and shelter it within their walls, a gratuitous object whose only purpose is to be found in itself. But what if it were a war machine?

(Wittig, 1992, p. 68)

The Trojan Horse became the metaphor of Wittig’s literary theory and in the 1984 essay with the same name, published first in English in *Feminist Issues* and in 1985 in French in the magazine *Vlasta*, the lesbian writer presents her analysis on language (Feole & Garbagnoli, 2023, p. 62). For Wittig, the Trojan Horse is employed as a war stratagem, a set of literary devices that she utilises to break through the constructions of the *straight* language and raze traditional forms and conventions to the ground (Wittig, 1992, p. 69). Dismantling the *straight* scaffolding of language by blowing it up means eliminating stereotypical, phallocratic and patriarchal conceptions of women, femininity, and romantic love (Feole & Garbagnoli, 2023, pp. 69-70), which have taken root and become embedded in the collective imagination as universal and universalised assumptions. The lesbian writer presents herself as a modern-day Ulysses, intent on waging and winning a war against the heterosexual regime, particularly within that textual reality that she wants to revolutionise, and at the end of this arduous journey, finally reach her Ithaca, a paradise of words (Leguerrier, 2021).

According to Wittig, as she affirms in her posthumous work *Le chantier littéraire* (2010), the Trojan Horse is a unique machine of words in the history of literature (Wittig, 2010, p. 40). This book presents Wittig’s materialist theory of language, according to which language is not neutral nor impartial: on the contrary, it violates minority subjectivities, denying them full existence and recognition (Wittig, 2010, p. 112). The scope of the Trojan Horse for Wittig is to exert violence on a language and a literature that contribute to the oppression of minority groups, and to make that same language and literature say what they are not built for, that is, to give voice and corporeality to the oppressed (Feole & Garbagnoli, 2023, p. 68). Language for Wittig has to undergo a process of re-signification, so that it will

be able to talk about what it was not intended to talk about – lesbianism for instance, or the revolution of gender categories; in order to do so, it is necessary to universalise the point of view of the oppressed and make it the privileged one to redefine the universal point of view that has been confiscated by the oppressor (Feole & Garbagnoli, 2023, p. 39). This is how Wittig positioned the lesbian subject no longer as an oppressed or minority one but as a universalised subject, so that “the point of view of a group condemned to being particular” (Wittig, 1992, p. 82) would no longer be “relegated in language to a subhuman category” (Wittig, 1992, p. 82): “thus, being a lesbian, standing at the outposts of the human (of humankind) represents historically and paradoxically the most human point of view” (Wittig, 1992, p. 46). Wittig’s idea was that by adopting a lesbian point of view, women would then be able to see heterosexuality not as a sexual orientation, but as an oppressive political regime (Feole & Garbagnoli, 2013, p. 69). Only from the perspective of a minority subject, the social order and the thought and structures that constitute it can be overthrown and modified (Wittig, 1992, p. 46). Wittig’s war and journey are about dismantling the claim to universality and being universal of the *straight* mind, “diseterosessualizzare le parole, i concetti, i canoni, cambia gli automatismi muscolari, le posture corporali, le soggettività stesse” (Feole & Garbagnoli, 2023, p. 70). As Feole and Garbagnoli conclude in their book “Monique Wittig. Femminismo materialista. Pensiero *straight*. Cantiere letterario. Corpo lesbico. Cavallo di Troia” (2023), paradise, the promised land, Ithaca, are perhaps no more than a place where words abound, words that are free and that free people.

Des samares dans leur vol descendant, tels quels, les mots tombent par mille, l’air en est empoissé. Des ailes de papillon au battement doux, tels quels, ils frôlent les yeux par milliers. Des feuilles se détachant des arbres en une nuit, tels quels, ils tombent silencieux, enflant ou s’amointrissant dans leurs formes. Des flocons de dissemblable densité, obscurcissant le ciel visible entre leurs espaces en longs éclats bleus, tels quels ils s’appesantissent jusqu’à toucher terre. Jamais leur présence physique ne m’aura causé une joie plus parfaite. Je dis : (Je tends vers toi mon beau paradis.)

(Wittig, [1985] 2014 p. 96)

3.6 Yesterday’s Amazons, today’s lesbians

A literary text can operate as a war machine only if it succeeds in universalising itself, that is, reaching an audience that would have never been interested in its content before (Feole & Garbagnoli, 2023, p. 69). There have been numerous translations of Wittig’s works, and this has enabled her writing and philosophy to reach a large number of people. A little over

twenty years after her death, which occurred in 2003 in Tucson, Arizona, the French author's literary production is seeing many reprints, translations and retranslations. The effervescent editorial, philosophical and political interest and rediscovery around Monique Wittig and her texts is particularly due to the LGBTQIA+ movement's critique of the heteronormative system in recent years, which finds its roots in Wittigian theory, and it is no coincidence that Wittig is considered the forerunner of the queer movement and approach (Garbagnoli, 2023, unpagged). The activist and friend of Monique Wittig, Suzette Robichon, has been an indispensable and relentless transmitter of lesbianism and its culture, and together with the association *Les Ami.es de Monique Wittig* has profoundly contributed to the transmission of the author's thought (Garbagnoli, 2023, unpagged). On the occasion of the premiere of the play *Le voyage sans fin* performed by Wittig and Sande Zeig at the Petit théâtre du Rond-Point in 1985, Suzette Robichon and the magazine *Vlasta* printed the paper version of the play (Auclerc & Chevalier, 2012, p. 11). The publishing activity of Wittig's works, often carried out by people close to her or wishing to support her, was fundamental to the dissemination of her thought, which could not otherwise have reached us today. Moreover, Judith Butler's misinterpretation of Wittig's theory, as we have seen, paradoxically contributed to the circulation of her thought. Of fundamental importance has been the work of activists and researchers such as Louise Turcotte, Suzette Robichon, Namaskar Shaktini, Catherine Ecartot and Dominique Bourque.

What makes Wittig's theoretical position so attractive today is the radical anti-essentialism she professed. Today's public has been able to understand and embrace the Wittigian invitation to revolutionise the systems of conception of reality, "de-heterosexualizing" (Garbagnoli, 2023, unpagged) the world and society. The first conference consecrated to Wittig's memory, entitled "Lire Monique Wittig aujourd'hui"; was held on the 26th and 27th of November 2009 in Lyon. Based on this conference, Benoît Auclerc and Yannick Chevalier wrote the book *Lire Monique Wittig aujourd'hui* (2012), which collects and presents the texts discussed during the 2009 conference. Wittig's work, as widely reported through these pages, has been deeply recognised and studied in the United States, and her lesbian materialist theory has had a great influence on the feminist literary and theoretical scene of the US. Nowadays, although the lesbian author has unfortunately not yet fully entered the literary canon, her production is literally imposing itself on us and on collective thinking, just as the need to discuss her writings and disseminating their content is becoming ever stronger and more heartfelt (Auclerc & Chevalier, 2012, p. 5). In the

introduction to their book, Auclerc and Chevalier affirm that reading Wittig's work in 2012 meant to dive into a fundamental theory for the feminist movement and contemporary militant debates, it is "une forme d'évidence de lire Monique Wittig aujourd'hui" (Auclerc & Chevalier, 2012, p. 5). Her literary production, inseparable from her work as a feminist activist, according to Auclerc and Chevalier, remained to be explored in depth in France (Auclerc & Chevalier, 2012). Thanks to the French translation of Butler's book *Gender Trouble*, *Trouble dans le genre*, published in France in 2005, a re-reading of Wittig's philosophical thought was possible for a new generation of readers and that, despite Butler's criticism, has permitted Wittig's work to be finally recognised as a classic of 20th century North American literature (Auclerc & Chevalier, 2012, p. 6).

Nonetheless, and even though she was born and lived in France, Wittig's thought and work paradoxically seemed to have no home among the French public. Her writing production, such as *L'Opoponax*, did not belong to the literary canon of secondary schools or French universities, and furthermore, the press and the media were not particularly interested in the promotion of Wittig's works, perhaps because the author had been living in the United States since 1976 (Auclerc & Chevalier, 2012, p. 8). There are three main reasons, which not surprisingly are also Wittig's core values, as to why her writings have received some opposition in France: feminist, materialist and lesbian. As a feminist, Monique Wittig participated in the first protests and demonstrations of the *Mouvement de libération des femmes* (MLF), and she was in fact present at the very first action of the movement on August 26, 1970 in Paris, where together with eight other women, including Christine Delphy and Cathy Bernheim, she deposited a wreath in homage to the wife of the unknown soldier on the grave under the Arc de Triomphe (Auclerc & Chevalier, 2012, p. 9). As a materialist, Wittig strongly opposed an "écriture féminine" as the exaltation and reappropriation of sexual difference by women in opposition to men and patriarchal constructs that relegated women to the realm of otherness and inferiority. Finally, Monique Wittig was a lesbian and as such, especially in the journal *Questions Féministes*, she intended to assert the need for lesbian consciousness-raising within the feminist movement (Auclerc & Chevalier, 2012, p. 9). These "reasons of being" produced a consequent estrangement from Wittig's thought and works, for her very own theoretical, literary and political position did not find a favourable reception in the French public, much more concerned with traditional forms of literature (the Nouveau Roman), the "feminine writing" of Cixous, and the "myth of woman" of other feminist theorists (Auclerc & Chevalier, 2012, p. 10).

There are texts which are of the greatest strategic importance both in their mode of appearance and their mode of inscription within literary reality. This is true of the whole oeuvre of Barnes, which from this point of view functions as a single, unique text, for *Ryder*, *Ladies Almanack*, *Spillway*, and *Nightwood* are linked by correspondences and permutations. Barnes's text is also unique in the sense that it is the first of its kind, and it detonates like a bomb where there has been nothing before it. So it is that, word by word, it has to create its own context, working, laboring with nothing against everything. A text by a minority writer is effective only if it succeeds in making the minority point of view universal, only if it is an important literary text.

(Wittig, 1992, pp. 63-64)

Just as the flower that blooms in adversity is the most beautiful of all, so Wittig's literary work experienced an intense period of rediscovery after her death. In 2014, Wittig's partner, Sande Zeig, released a smartphone app entirely dedicated to *L'Opoponax*, with recordings and interviews that took place during the 1960s (Feole, 2017, p. 151). In 2015, the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscripts Library at Yale University acquired "an unparalleled collection of papers" (Dever, 2015, p. 299) from the radical feminist writer. It took over a decade for the library to secure the acquisition of Wittig's papers and open them to the public, as Sande Zeig, the main repository of Wittig's documentary legacy, could not bring herself to take care of the papers for the first five years after the death of her partner (Dever, 2015, p. 299).

She describes how 'she questioned [herself] about what to do with them' and talked to Louise Turcotte, a mutual friend of theirs who had written the preface to *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*. She²¹ visited Tucson 'as often as she could over the years and started the main work of categorisation'. Zeig joined her 'when [her] heart did not break'. 'Finally, Zeig says 'I managed over the years to develop the distance I needed'.

(Dever, 2015, p. 300)

Wittig had not left (or prepared) her writings with the intent to be later archived or presented to the public, as she was not fond of showing drafts of her works before they were completed (Dever, 2015, pp. 300-301). Zeig and Turcotte organised the material and Beinecke Library received 30 boxes of papers for its catalogued collection on Monique Wittig, most of the material being early versions of Wittig's work carried out in the US: the work she carried out in France in the 1960s was left back there with a friend and ended up lost. The collection nonetheless still contains some interesting letters from the correspondence with the French

²¹ Louise Turcotte

publisher, Jérôme Lindon, at Éditions de Minuit (Dever, 2015, p. 301). The creation of this catalogue coincided with a time when feminist theorists were deeply engaged in the creation of a feminist archive and in unravelling the skein of connections between politics, history, memory and posterity (Dever, 2015, p. 302). In her paper “Material Feminism: Monique Wittig’s Papers Acquired by the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University” (2015), Dever concludes that it would be interesting to see how the access to Wittig’s collection might further trouble the already complicated understanding of feminist history and future feminist archives orientations (Dever, 2015, p. 302).

Another issue central to Wittig’s rediscovery in the last years is that her novels, articles and writings highlight lesbian invisibility in contemporary society as, according to Stéphanie Arc, there are more gay men than lesbians, who are therefore more invisible (Arc in Feole, 2017, p. 154). This is why reading Monique Wittig *aujourd’hui* means fighting the oblivion to which lesbians have been relegated and giving voice back to a lesbian herself who has also been relegated to the margins of contemporary literature for too long and who is now increasingly seen as a seemingly harmless (war) machine entering our minds too long inhabited by a *straight* vision of reality. The lesbian point of view as a privileged subject, the struggle against the destruction of gender categories, the text as a weapon, make Wittig’s thought and works an instrument of subversion in current militant debates, such as demonstrated by the conference held in 2001 at Columbia University in Paris by Sam Bourcier and Suzette Robichon, where the relationship between the lesbian author and queer theory was debated (Auclerc & Chevalier, 2012, p. 10). Even if Monique Wittig was not able to witness the “nouveau monde” (Wittig, 2019, p. 116) she hoped for in the novel *Les Guérillères*, she has gained newfound fame as she continues to be an inspiration for a struggle that is still ongoing, and that is why the lesbian materialist writer has already won a victory over heterosexuality and the *straight* world (Garbagnoli, 2023, unpagé):

Pour qui en effet se refuse à penser que la littérature et les études littéraires appartiennent aux arts décoratifs, pour qui ne se résout pas à ce que leur mission soit d’illustrer l’histoire des idées’ échafaudées ailleurs par les sciences dites humaines, pour qui pense qu’au contraire peuvent s’élaborer dans l’écriture des pratiques susceptibles d’être réappropriées, de se disperser dans différents champs disciplinaires, et que le travail sur le langage est le lieu même où peuvent s’élaborer une pensée et une politique, alors lire Monique Wittig est une évidence.

(Auclerc & Chevalier, 2012, p. 19)

4 *La fin de la pérégrination*

4.1 *L'emersione lesbica*

Monique Wittig's theory can be summarised as follows: lesbians are warriors, fugitives from the oppressive class of women, who have made themselves, each in their own singularity, subjects in their own right. Wittig plays on the traditional forms of the literary canon, creating new narrative fabrics that give materiality to lesbian existence, not only between the pages of a manuscript, but also in social reality. As Simonetta Spinelli affirms, “la costruzione di sé come soggetto politico deve necessariamente inventare le parole con le quali dirsi” (Spinelli, 2002).

Elles disent, prends ton temps, considère cette nouvelle espèce qui cherche un nouveau langage. Un grand vent balaie la terre. Le soleil va se lever. Les oiseaux ne chantent pas encore. Les couleurs lilas et violet du ciel s'éclaircissent. Elles disent, par quoi vas-tu commencer?

(Wittig, 2019, p. 182)

And the words with which Wittig asserted what lesbians were (or were not), were not matched by the philosopher Judith Butler, as we have seen. Feminist theorists of sexual difference saw the reappropriation and exaltation of woman's essence and of her body as the means to free herself from the constraints imposed on her by dominant phallogocentrism. However, for Wittig, no feminist revolution could take place if women continued to remain and act within the category of sex. According to Ilana Eloït, Assistant Professor of Gender and Sexuality at the Institute of Gender Studies at the University of Geneva, Monique Wittig developed her lesbo-materialist theory in response to the marginalisation suffered by lesbians within the MLF and the increasing isolation suffered by the lesbian author in France (Eloït, 2018). In 1980, the internal dispute within the magazine *Questions Féministes* in relation to the issue of lesbianism led to the closure of the magazine on French materialist feminism and the opening in 1981 of the magazine *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, which represents, according to Eloït, the most blatant attempt to erase lesbianism in France, “with the pivotal complicity of Simone de Beauvoir and the support of the entire French feminist movement” (Eloït, 2018, p. 272). Wittig's feminism departs from institutional feminism, from what she defines as “heterofeminism” (Eloït, 2018, p. 272), that intends to convey a certain normative view of

what it means to be a woman and to fight for her recognition and rights: for this very reason it is considered monstrous (Balza, 2013, p. 85). Furthermore, it is based in fact on the rejection of sexual difference, which is the central node instead of other currents of feminism. Wittig fights for the recognition and visibility of lesbian subjectivity within the feminist movement, since for her lesbians form a class of fugitive women from the social (and sexual) class of women, the latter continuing to recognise itself as such and for whose valorisation it continues to fight. In actual fact, Wittig does not believe in the need and struggle to rediscover a women's culture, stripped of the masculinist and misogynist images of patriarchal society in order to reappropriate the true essence of woman as no longer the "Other".

Wittig formulated and provided such a reinterpretation of lesbianism and lesbian subjectivity and existence that found wide acceptance in Italy, albeit initially with not a few contrasts, especially by virtue of that feminism of sexual difference that had become preponderant in feminist thought and movement. Indeed, there was a noticeable *lacuna* with regard to the reception of the lesbian materialist author and theorist in Italy.

In Italia Wittig è soprattutto rimossa. È una specie di fantasma che appare e scompare: tutte ne hanno, più o meno nebulosamente, sentito parlare; in ogni generazione c'è un gruppo di irriducibili appassionate che ricerca le tracce del suo passaggio; viene lanciata nelle discussioni come una sfida; di lei si ricorda solo che ha scritto da qualche parte che le lesbiche non sono donne. [...]

A questo fenomeno possono essere date varie spiegazioni: nasce forse da problemi di traduzione, dato che poche sue opere sono state tradotte e non nell'ordine in cui le ha scritte.

O dal fatto che in Italia siamo abituate a leggere quello che passa il convento, e il convento Wittig non la passava.

(Spinelli, 2002)

The Italian feminist, lesbian and queer theorist and activist Liana Borghi, who was a leading figure of lesbian culture in Italy, addressed the issue of the invisibility of lesbianism on the Italian theoretical-social scene. According to Borghi, lesbians should not reduce themselves only to fitting into and recognising the tradition of resistance that permeates women's history, as it is too permeated with heterosexuality (Borghi, 1983, p. 26).

Se da una parte esiste un sodalizio vincente fra donne a favore delle donne che accetta la dialettica con il potere maschile, c'è dall'altra una tradizione di devianza rispetto alla norma del femminile. Streghe e prostitute considerate strane, puttane, amorali, decadenti o pazze; zingare, pastorelle, operaie, riformatrici e scienziate, levatrici,

guaritrici, vagabonde e schiave sono state le vittime di due culture: quella egemone degli uomini e quella subalterna delle donne.

(Borghi, 1983, p. 26)

Throughout the 1970s lesbians fell under the category of “homosexuals”, and in the 1990s the use of the term “gay” was preferred to refer to lesbians, and so the declaration by lesbians of their sexual orientation, becoming a collective practice and thus a political act, enabled the formation of a non-heterosexual subjectivity (Biagini, 2021, p. 120). For lesbians, on whom the repressive device of erasure and invisibility acts, becoming and being finally visible is thus conceived as a scope in society, especially in Italy, where being lesbian was and still is a strenuous act of recognition and acceptance (Biagini, 2021, p. 120).

Wittig was accused of “lesbian separatism” (Eloit, 2018, p. 86) and thus lesbianism was accused of retaining a status of “ghettoization” (Eloit, 2018, p. 62) within the *Mouvement de Libération des Femmes* in France, while in Italy lesbians were accused of self-marginalisation, “rinunciatarie rispetto alla ‘voglia di vincere, di esistere, di contare, in questo mondo’” (Biagini, 2021, p. 124). Wittig left France in 1975 and went firstly to Greece with her partner Sande Zeig, then to Italy, before finally settling in the United States. As Wittig herself stated, her departure from France was a consequence of her failure of establishing a lesbian position within the French feminist movement, and not a form of separatism (Eloit, 2018, p. 176). Even though Wittig left France for the reason just stated, for Audrey Lasserre, Wittigian theory would not have found a place within the French feminist current precisely because it was a foreign theory, elaborated in the United States for a North American audience, which could not have been assimilated into the other feminist theories in France (Lasserre, 2014, p. 474). It could therefore be said, as Wittig herself wrote in a series of letters present in the archives at Yale University, she was forced to leave France and to *translate* herself into English, as the only escape from what she described in France as a “séjour en enfer” (Wittig in Costello & Eloit, 2021). Liana Borghi entrusts her introductory essay for the new edition of the pamphlet *Il nostro mondo comune* (2020) with a reflection on Eloit’s claims about the ostracism and accusations of separatism suffered by Wittig in France. Borghi affirms that women represent an inalienable component of heteronormative democracy and the recognition of certain women in precise (and different) subjectivities constitute a nefarious fragmentation of the normative woman subject and therefore constitute forms of separatism that must be censured (Borghi in Biagini, 2021, p.124). Lesbians common wor(l)d was one of

absence, erosion and invisibility, yet, thanks to the words and literary worlds of Monique Wittig, lesbian subjectivity and lesbianism are finding a way to re-emerge from oblivion.

LACUNES LACUNES LACUNES
CONTRE TEXTES
CONTRE SENS
CE QUI EST À ÉCRIRE VIOLENCE
HORS TEXTE
DANS UNE AUTRE ÉCRITURE
PRESSANT MENAÇANT
MARGES ESPACES INTERVALLES
SANS RELACHE
GESTE RENVERSEMENT.

(Wittig, 2019, p. 197)

Monique Wittig's thought and work continues to circulate in the new millennium, fully occupying its deserved place among feminist theories and contemporary literary writings, thanks to the work of sociologists such as Sara Garbagnoli and Sam Bourcier, and today Wittig represents a guiding light, a reference figure for those minority subjects that found in her the recognition and expression they were searching for and were initially denied.

4.2 In this corner of the world

Sam Bourcier is the translator for the 2001 French edition of *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* and this is how he recounts his first personal encounter with the French author in the fantasy short story "Wittig la Politique" (2005).

Tucson, Arizona, 1999. Here the wind is as sharp as razor blades slamming at the bottom of the canyon. I am in a Mexican restaurant not far from the university where Monique Wittig teaches. I am waiting for Manastabal, 'Wittig's guide when she traveled across the Acheron after leaving France in 1976. I can barely see a thing with the dust masking desert horizon and city edges. Manastabal is coming to give me a hand in translating *The Straight Mind* into French.

(Bourcier in Shaktini, 2005, p. 187)

With Wittig's moving to the United States and the machination to alienate her presence, both theoretical and literary, in France, Bourcier had no choice but to fly to Arizona to understand what happened in the 1970s and 1980s back home to Wittig.

[...] I urged, hoping to find out something else, a clue, a piece of the puzzle. ‘How do you want me to translate *The Straight Mind* without knowing what happened to straight feminism in France? I haven’t traveled up to here to come back home without a single finding. This translation is starting to drive me mad. After all, your history is also my history, and I have the right to know.’

(Bourcier in Shaktini, 2005, p. 192)

By researching his history, Bourcier intended also to rediscover Wittig’s history in France, one that was difficult to piece together and, above all, deliberately forgotten.

De fait, dans le monde anglo-saxon comme en France, les féministes identifiées femme ont exclu les lesbiennes et leurs genres de leurs projets politiques pour ne pas contrevenir à la renaturalisation et à la pureté du sujet femme [...].

(Bourcier, 2003, p. 77)

Furthermore, Wittig’s theory was excluded from academic legitimacy in the French context, and it was only through Bourcier’s effort to translate Wittig into French that her works and beliefs were rediscovered and took a trip back home to France. Even so, the publication of the French translation *La Pensée straight* was rejected by several publishing houses before its official publication in 2001 by Éditions Balland (Eloit, 2018, p. 284). According to Eloit, the difficulty encountered by the French publication represents the problematic nature of prefiguring heterosexuality as a political regime of oppression in the French regime itself (Eloit, 2018, p. 284). “You may wonder what I am doing translating Wittig into French”, Bourcier states almost ironically in her short story (Bourcier in Shaktini, 2005, p. 187), “to translate a French author into French” (Bourcier in Shaktini, 2005, p. 188), but this sentence is more tragic than ironic, not to mention the fact that it is almost absurd. Sam Bourcier felt the need to translate Wittig into her mother tongue, French, and bring her back home precisely because she had been repudiated and forgotten and had ended up being Americanised. As Ilana Eloit points out in the final pages of her doctoral thesis called “Lesbian Trouble: Feminism, Heterosexuality and the French Nation (1970–1981)” (2018), in France the traces of “an original Wittig” (Eloit, 2018, p. 285) were eradicated. Manastabal, in Bourcier’s fiction, reveals that there was no original source text to be translated and that Wittig had asked to keep the English word *straight* for the title of the French translation and not to use “heterosexual” (Bourcier in Shaktini, 2005, p. 188).

Translation was the very condition of the possibility of ‘The Straight Mind’ from the beginning. Didn’t you know that ‘The Straight Mind’ was written in a language

foreign both to French and to straight language? Forget the original. The political thickness of these texts lies in their circulation in America, in English; that it is inseparable from their translation between France and the United States, and from the delocalization of both national and sexual writing.”

(Bourcier in Shaktini, 2005, p. 188)

Thus, by keeping the word *straight* in the French title, Wittig wanted to expose what Eloit defines a “scar” (Eloit, 2018, p. 08), out of which Wittig freed her story and made lesbian subjectivity visible: “[...] it is the trace of ‘La pensée hétérosexuelle’'s impossibility that conserves the memory of the open wound of forced exile. ‘La pensée straight’ is a performative that keeps this whole history alive and thus endlessly available for reactivation in the present: and this might even be Monique Wittig’s last and most enduring ruse against the straight mind” (Eloit, 2018, p. 308). It is clear why Wittig decided to keep the foreign English word instead of using a French one: she wanted French feminists, lesbians and queers to know that her work was made in forced exile, made foreign, so that it could, in the end, return home (Eloit, 2018, pp. 305-306). If Ulysses could have chosen to reincarnate and be a woman and a lesbian, it would surely have been as Monique Wittig. Wittig’s theory was made impossible in France and so was *The Straight Mind* impossible in French and in France (Bourcier, 2002, p. 30). Translation was therefore the only condition for *The Straight Mind* to exist within France. Here, Wittig’s text enters the French borders like a Trojan Horse, a foreigner, and for this very reason will never be completely assimilated, but that is precisely the place Wittig wants to occupy in the French language. She mixes idioms, creates new languages and literary forms; this is how Wittig refused to be identified as an American lesbian in the United States and how she refused to be identified as a woman in France (Eloit, 2018, p. 308). Wittig wants to remind us of the price she had to pay for her forced relocation and that a lesbian subjectivity always presupposes a translation in order to be understood (Bourcier, 2002, pp. 30-31). Through a seemingly simple and innocuous title, Sam Bourcier has helped to convey Wittig’s testament, elaborated through the fault, but perhaps also thanks, of a painful exile, made up of political resistance and animated by the desire for an overthrow of the world as conceived by the *straight* mind.

And if you remember that, let me tell you a secret: you might even know the pleasures of sharing a good laugh with the ghost of Monique Wittig.

(Eloit, 2018, p. 310)

4.3 A writer in exile

Monique Wittig considers the language of lesbians to be characterised by bilingualism, as lesbians are not women, and being on the margins of society, the only way they can make themselves understood is to translate (Auclerc & Chevalier, 2012, p. 119). Therefore, we could argue that Wittig occupied a new speaking position, and writers located in this position are “translingual writers” (Kellman, 2000, p. 8), forced by political and social circumstances to translate their selves and to articulate their narratives in a language which is not their mother tongue. According to Wilson and Gerber, migrant writers occupy a space that is, in accordance with their nature, both cultural and political, and by virtue of their nature as migrants, these writers do not intend to choose between maintaining their identity of origin or having it assimilated into a new identity: they intend to make their difference a source of power and they do not intend to hide it or allow it to be erased (Wilson in Wilson & Gerber, 2012, pp. 47-48). The literary works produced by translinguals challenge the normative staticity of literary forms and allow one to cross the boundaries and limits of expression, as well as those of one’s self (Wilson in Wilson & Gerber, 2012, pp. 47-48). They self-translate themselves, they “must narratively ‘translate’ the self that took shape in the native language in order to render it intelligible to an adoptive-language readership (Wilson in Wilson & Gerber, 2012, p. 49). The bilingual writer and critic Nicole Ward Jouve describes her process of translation as follows:

I realized that my own mental sanity depended upon my operating as two people, two writers: one French, the other English. That I did not like moving from the one to the other: in fact I do everything to perpetuate and feed the difference. [...] Every time I do that journey, I feel as if I’m going through mutations as strong as those that befall Alice when she eats cakes and nibbles at mushrooms. [...] Possibilities proliferate. [...] The perspective of having to arrive at a finished, ‘written’ object that would posit a living and perceptible correlation between the two languages is somehow unbearable to me. [...] I am perhaps not so far away from schizophrenia as I’d like to think. I can live as two people. [...] The only solution I found to translating my own stuff (I try to avoid having to translate others’) was to re-write.

(Ward Jouve, 1991, pp. 29-30)

To conclude, she says:

What is certain is that the decision to write in one language rather than another is going to lead to something different. [...] Where would I be if I could do the same thing in both?

Drowned, of course: in the grey waters of the Channel.

(Ward Jouve, 1991, p. 30)

Professor Susan Bassnett's first chapter of *Self-Translation: Brokering Originality in Hybrid Culture* (Cordingley, 2013), "The self-translator as rewriter", reports the case of Canadian author Nancy Huston who writes both in English and French, her first language being English (Bassnett in Cordingley, 2013, p. 15). Like Ward Jouve, Huston professed to feel discomfort and feel uncomfortable in both her languages, stating she would rather not choose one over the other and if she did, it was by means of an internal force linked to her identity (Bassnett in Cordingley, 2013, p. 15). For Huston, it implies, that her novels are not translated for there is not an original; rather, there are two versions of the same work, each existing separately and complementarily, respecting the other, each with its own set of meaning (Bassnett in Cordingley, 2013, p. 15). The Canadian writer admits that for her, self-translation, albeit initially a painful process to find her self, constituted the key to healing and reuniting her divided language selves, proving that she was "not a schizophrenic, not crazy" (Huston in Bassnett, 2013, p. 15), that she inhabits both English and French and tells her story in both. For André Lefevere, from whichever point of view one looks at it, self-translation constitutes an act of rewriting, precisely because the writer moves from one language to another (Bassnett in Cordingley, 2013, pp. 23-24). Bassnett's *Translation* (2014) point out that when Lefevere claimed that all translations should be referred to as "rewritings", his intention was to propose a new conception of translation that would give credit to this writing activity, free from the traditional consideration of secondary and minor literary production (Lefevere in Bassnett, 2014, pp. 163-164). According to Miguel Saénz, when a writer translates their own work, it results in a new work (Saénz, 1993). There are some cases of literary production that cannot be identified as original or as a translation: self-translation represents one of these cases. It can be the only way to produce a text that, for certain reasons, would have otherwise not been produced, thereby reappropriating canonical texts (Bassnett, 2014, p. 165).

Jan Hokenson states that it appears clear that self-translators and self-translated texts arise from socioeconomic conditions such as travel, immigration or exile (Hokenson in Cordingley, 2013, p. 40).

Bilingual writers as self-translators in dual discourse can infuse one literature with new materials from the other, using one to innovate in the other, and then reverse the process, thereby enriching and challenging the dominant in both.

(Hokenson in Cordingley, 2013, p. 40)

According to Hokenson, it is important to situate the writer in their historical and social contexts, looking at the literary work they produce, how they produce it and why they decided to self-translate, even though, the driven force behind the literary production represents a lacuna in the history of Translation Studies, probably due to a history of dominant conceptions regarding the original (Hokenson in Cordingley, 2013, p. 44). Hokenson proposes to look at the activity of self-translators from a macro-level and a micro-level, the former referring to specific historical and socioeconomic situations in a specific context, the second to the personal motivations of the writer behind their writing production (Hokenson in Cordingley, 2013, pp. 45-53).

I would argue that of course bilingual writers too seek ‘to build a literary identity and legitimacy’ in the social domain of the second language, like all literary exiles and transplants. Exilic texts that have been self-translated, however, seem to be more consciously crafted to occupy a dual position, as one original creation in both languages.

(Hokenson in Cordingley, 2013, p. 53)

Hokenson concludes that self-translators are driven to write in their second language from social circumstances and personal ambitions, which are usually literary ones, and self-translators “have a highly personal take on the canon, [...] a dynamic personal inheritance and an artistic challenge” (Hokenson in Cordingley, 2013, p. 55). One thing appears certain at the end of Hokenson’s article, that is, migration and exile have originated self-translation among translingual writers, a painful activity, yet a necessary one to avoid drowning between one’s disintegrated identities, or maybe because there is one that has stayed behind back home and is waiting for the exiled one to return.

Monique Wittig was all this, a French writer exiled in the United States and dedicated to writing in English, which she was able to produce precisely due to her condition of exiled translingual writer (Hokenson in Cordingley, 2013). Wittig knew the price of the journey, of migration, of exile, and that same price she had to pay, she returned it back, I dare say with interest, to that hetero-centred feminism, defined by her as *straight*, which had forced her to leave her motherland, go to the United States and write in English. Her most famous essay, “The Straight Mind”, the one that gave a name, life itself, and a purpose to a subjectivity that had hitherto been hidden, in fact appeared in written form in English in 1978 in the United States. Wittig created a space in which to recognise one’s lesbian subjectivity and a space of

expression for lesbian theory and studies, a way out for lesbianism from the “holy” world of sexual difference of French feminists in France: “les questions féministes ne sont pas des questions lesbiennes” (Bourcier, 2002, p. 29). What Wittig gave birth to with her theory and writings is a militant, transnational and translingual space, and as Sam Bourcier argues, reading Wittig all the way back to France constitutes a fight against the *straight* regime and heterofeminism, internalised or openly expressed lesbophobia and the vertical and hierarchical mechanisms of standardisation and repression so efficiently put in place and perpetuated in the literary canon as well as in the social sphere (Bourcier, 2002, p. 29). The English production in exile of the essays that later constituted *The Straight Mind* would not have been possible if Wittig had remained in France where she was ostracised by heterofeminists of sexual difference. In terms of Hokenson’s theory on self-translators, Wittig’s work arose from the historical and social macro-level of French feminism in France, whereas on the micro-level she was personally driven by her intention of dismantling the *straight* mind, producing a language that would give lesbian subjectivity ontological integrity and recognition. Moreover, as Hokenson suggested in his theory on self-translation, Wittig’s “exiled” work, as such, had its own literary force in both the United States and France precisely because it was able to challenge dominant social thought and literary canon in both countries.

Self-translators in particular labour to construct texts in which we can often discern, stereoscopically, two social systems and their canons set into a unique relationship, inter-echoing. Thereafter, in its original modes, their bilingual text can then often seem to be flying free, in both languages, indebted but untethered to either canon.

(Hokenson in Cordingley, 2013, p. 55)

Wittig’s literary texts have always mocked the classics of the literary canon, and intended to be a war machine that would destroy the traditionalist and normative constructs of the *straight* mind – literal ones as well as social ones. The lesbian writer brought her knowledge of French language and literature in the baggage of her journey towards exile and with them, and English as a second language and her new language of writing, she produced her Trojan horses, foreign to the American literary and theoretical landscape as much as to the French one. By translating Wittig’s essays written in English into French for *The Straight Mind*’s French edition, Sam Bourcier enabled Wittig’s homecoming, one that the author herself had perhaps already planned. Bourcier translated in particular the following essays: “La Catégorie de sexe”, “Homo sum” and “Paradigmes”. All these essays, as well as “La

Pensée *straight*”, had been reviewed by Monique Wittig herself for the French editions of 2001 (Balland) and 2018 (Amsterdam). The essay “La Pensée straight” first appeared in written form in French in *Questions Féministes* (n°7) in February 1980, and written by Wittig herself. She also wrote in French the essay “Le Point de vue, universel ou particulier” published as a foreword for *La Passion* (1982) by Djuna Barnes, and the essay “La Marque du genre”, first published in English in *Feminist Issues* 5 n°2 in the autumn of 1985.

She moved forward, and I saw for the first time a scar on her face. ‘But I think she was wrong. *La pensée hétéro, c’est ça*. When are you French people going to stop hiding your fear of identity politics behind universalism, *quand ça?*’

I realized then that she spoke perfect French. Where was she coming from? What was the native language camouflaged behind her American accent? I didn’t say anything. I was afraid to ask the wrong question.

(Bourcier in Shaktini, 2005, 188)

We have seen how in Bourcier’s 2005 article, Manastabal made it clear to the translator that there was no original text to be researched and relied upon for the French translation of Wittig’s *The Straight Mind*. However, in his preface written in New York in January 2001, later published in the 2018 French edition of *The Straight Mind*, which bears the same title “Wittig La Politique” as his earlier 2005 parodic fiction, Bourcier clarifies the matter further. *The Straight Mind* was written in a language foreign to the French language and foreign to the *straight* language, fundamental conditions for the very creation and existence of the book (Bourcier in Wittig, 2018, p. 29).

– *Straight...* Tu pourrais traduire par hétéronormatif. [...] La pensée hétéro. Il fallait bien oser la nommer et la critiquer cette pensée invisible [...]. Wittig l’a fait. [...]

– Sur ces mots, Manastabal me demanda si je voulais une autre margarita.

Non merci, lui dis-je, ici, après deux tequilas, je vois les chats grands comme des lynx.

(Bourcier in Wittig, 2018, p. 29)

As previously discussed, Bourcier knew that Wittig wanted the English adjective *straight* to be kept in French and that is what Bourcier did. In a note from the editorial office of *Questions Féministes* where the article “La Pensée straight” appeared for the first time, the adjective meant ““right, just in order”” (Wittig, 1980, p. 45) and thus referred to an idea of normality, in the sense of not deviating from the norm. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said

of the 2019 Italian translation by Federico Zappino, where the translator rendered the title as *Il pensiero eterosessuale*. The feminist collective of *la lacuna* rendered the title as “Il pensiero straight” in their Italian translation, also published in 2019. Rosanna Fiocchetto in 1990 translated into Italian the essay published in 1978 as “The Straight Mind”, even retaining the original title. Exiled from the pages of the Italian version of *The Straight Mind*, unfortunately, was not only the adjective itself in Zappino’s translation, but one could dare to say, the very understanding of Wittigian thought. We could almost go so far as to say that Wittig, when translated by a man, has never been done justice. I refer here to the translation by the British translator David Le Vay of *Les Guérillères*, in which he translated the French plural feminine pronoun “elles” as “the women”, practically drowning the entire theory laboriously and painfully constructed by Wittig in the waters of the Channel.

4.4 *Tradire o tradurre*

A world of exile and censorship is in fact that of lesbian identity and lesbianism in Italy. Rosanna Fiocchetto, a lesbian militant from the Roman separatist movement, joined Collegamento fra lesbiche italiane in 1982 and edited *Bollettino del CLI*, founded in Rome in 1981, a newsletter which was central for the story and circulation of the lesbian movement in Italy (Guazzo, 2007, pp. 28-29). Fiocchetto’s translation of Wittig’s 1978 essay was published for the first time in Italy in the *Bollettino del CLI* in February 1990. The same issue included an interview with the Canadian lesbian feminist Nicole Brossard by Suzette Triton, in which Brossard expresses how she agrees with, and indeed legitimises, Wittig’s theory on the category of woman:

‘Donna’ è una finzione dell’uomo. Wittig ha ragione, ma aggiungerò che ‘donna’ ha talmente poco senso, che ogni donna che aspira all’umanità non saprebbe identificarsi e ancor meno solidarizzare con la categoria ‘donna’ [...]. Comprendo molto bene che Wittig dica che non è una donna ma una lesbica, perché la parola donna ci rimanda o alla biologia o alle differenze che sono state sfruttate in senso inverso alla nostra energia, alla nostra intelligenza e alle nostre percezioni della realtà.

(Brossard in Guazzo, 2007, p. 35)

Nearly thirty years after this first Italian translation of one of the key essays of Wittig’s theory, we know that two Italian translations of the entire essay collection *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* were published in 2019, one online by a militant feminist collective and the other by a queer activist man for ombre corte publishing house. *Ombre corte. Scritti 1928-*

1929 is also a collection of writings of various kinds by the philosopher, writer and translator Walter Benjamin. It is no coincidence that the publishing house bears the same name as Benjamin's work, and in fact, opening the publisher's website, the home page features a citation from Benjamin's book: "Quand'è quasi mezzogiorno le ombre sono solo neri, acuti margini ai piedi delle cose in procinto di ritirarsi in silenzio, all'improvviso, nella loro costruzione, nel loro segreto. Come il sole al sommo della sua orbita, la conoscenza delinea allora i contorni delle cose col massimo rigore" (ombre corte webpage). When things, enlightened, coincide perfectly with their shadows, we can see and recognise them with the utmost clarity. Yet a shadow is present over Wittig's text translated into Italian by Zappino: whether this was a conscious choice (of what he did cover) is unknown. It seems highly likely that the translation of *collettivo della lacuna* was made and appeared in the same year as Zappino's precisely to remove that shadow and illuminate Wittig's work. In fact, the "Nota liminare" to the edition reads as follows:

Da anni lavoriamo su Wittig: leggiamo i suoi testi, spesso collettivamente, e li traduciamo. Nella speranza di restituire a Wittig la sua voce, il rigore cristallino della sua teoria, la radicalità scomoda dei suoi posizionamenti teorici e politici – e non trovando (chissà come) editore –, pubblichiamo questa nostra traduzione guerrigliera clandestina fuggitiva.

(*collettivo della lacuna*, 2019b, p. 5)

Zappino's translation was published in April 2019 in the collection "Testi". This collection also includes works by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze and the Italian politician and philosopher Antonio Negri. On the other hand, *collettivo della lacuna* did not find a publishing house for their version of *The Straight Mind*, in fact "chissà come" (how come), is an ironically straightforward allusion to the fact that a more radical and therefore more uncomfortable translation did not find editorial support in Italy, hence was published online. It is no coincidence that this type of translation in the Italian context is referred to as clandestine, unauthorised writing, and this is even less surprising if we take into account the fact that Italy has recently (again) featured at the bottom of the list of European countries supporting LGBT+ rights (Boni, 2024). A country so attached to Christian traditions and the Western literary canon was probably not yet ready to welcome Monique Wittig's manifesto work. "Io sono Giorgia, sono una donna, sono una madre, sono italiana, sono cristiana" (F.Q., 2019), those were the words spoken by Giorgia Meloni, leader of the political party Fratelli d'Italia and current President of the Council of Ministers of the Republic of Italy, on October

19, 2019, at a demonstration of the right-wing in Rome. This quotation was even given a catchy YouTube remix by MEM & J (F.Q., 2019). If Wittig had been able to come back to life and speak her mind that day, she would certainly have done so, and perhaps done a favour to that part of the Italian population who does not recognise themselves as being of the female gender, who does not see motherhood as the ultimate personal fulfilment, and does not believe in “a uniquely masculine image and language for divinity” (Daly, 1985, p. 71). That being said, having exposed the Italian social and political framework, one can understand where the intent, the necessity, of the radical lesbian collective to propose its translation of Wittig’s work came from. Melissa Gregg and Gregory Seigworth named “affects” these forces that “drive us toward movement, toward thought and extension” (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 1), and stressed the fact that “affect is born in *in-between-ness* and resides as accumulative *beside-ness*” (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, p. 2). It appears logical to assert that the activity of translation for militant purposes can bring together people driven by the same forces as in the case of *collettivo della lacuna*. Liana Borghi in 2007 said on affect in view of the gender and intercultural workshop “Raccontar(si)” that:

Affetto, allora, come processo produttivo dei corpi; come sentimento, affettività, passione; come attrattore; come effetto che si/ci crea, che investe e condiziona; che rende desiderabili oggetti e merci; che produce soggetti e relazioni, investimento nelle forme di potere, movimenti positivi o negativi verso l’altro/a – allineamenti, identificazioni, appropriazioni.

(Borghi, 2007)

Mona Baker (2013) recognised that a militant and radical group of translators engages in a form of activism that produces a narrative space that renders power to voices that would have otherwise remained silent. For these translators, like the ones from *collettivo della lacuna*, language is a space of subversion of the dominant symbolic order and of resistance. The Italian collective wrote in their translation that, even though it was fifty years (in 2019) since *Les Guérillères* came out in 1969, the struggle of minority subjectivities is far from being won and the forces of the *straight* mind are still at work. Wittig had already brought home a victory and their Italian translation of *The Straight Mind* aimed to be a gesture to remember it and above all a gesture of gratitude towards the lesbian writer who gave them the words with which they now write. This common purpose has allowed them to come together, for as Baker argues, it is translation itself that produces encounters that do not exist outside it (Baker, 2013, pp. 23-24).

As Susan Bassnett asserts, a translation may be produced in a specific time and context to reach a vast number of readers and improve or even remedy the faults of previous translations that have grown outdated or misinterpreted what was being translated (Bassnett, 2014, p. 90). Walter Benjamin claimed that a translation guarantees the survival of a text, but this is truer if we consider that since a translation is the manifestation of a translator's reading of a text, and readings change with and according to the context in which they take place, translations of the same text can, and will, be different from one another (Bassnett, 2014, p. 108). For Sandra Bermann (2014), translation is a transformative activity as every translation holds the power to produce new ideas. Canadian translation scholar Sherry Simon talks about the "transferral process" (Simon, 1996, p. 24) as a performance through which the reading subject becomes the writing subject, where feminist writing and translation merge to foreground female subjectivity in the production of meaning. Translation becomes a form of creative production, and the feminist translator brings new life to the narrative. Feminist translation developed as a result of the sociocultural situation in Canada, characterised by diglossia. Feminist translators are so called due to the fact that they wish to explore the innovative and experimenting feminist works as part of the translation process. Translations published in a feminist context are permeated by the "translator-effect" (Flotow, 1997, p. 35), that specific mark as a gendered individual that each translator leaves on their work. The feminist translator is present throughout the whole text, and if it is a feminist one, it affirms their identity and feminist values. Feminist translators produce "an extremely discontinuous textuality in which the translator inventively joins in the production of meaning, undermining conventional representations that not only subordinate translator to author, but also metaphorize authorship as male and translation as female" (Venuti, 1992, p. 12). A feminist translator addresses the issue of authority as she is "increasingly aware of her role in *determining* meaning, and of her responsibility in rendering it" (Simon, 1996, p. 12); she actively participates in the creation of meaning, flaunting her signature and manipulation of the text, "womanhandling" it, and thus the translator is placed in the same position as the author (Simon, 1996, p. 12). The process of translation, in this regard, becomes a performative and fluid production of meaning, wherein the traditional binary opposition original/translation, and, by analogy, male/female, has to be abandoned. Nonetheless, feminist translators are not passive in-betweeners, they "womanhandle" the text, and, above all, a feminist translator, "following the lead of the feminist writers she translates, has given herself

permission to make her work visible, discuss the creative process she is engaged in, collude with and challenge the writers she translates” (Flotow, 1991, p. 74).

Luise von Flotow, Professor of Translation Studies at the University of Ottawa, claims that the social and cultural context of feminism is connected with daring to confront the unspoken rules of a man-made language of translation by women in Quebec, and she ultimately proposes three practices used in feminist translation, that are supplementing, prefacing and footnoting, and “hijacking”. The strategy of supplementing compensates for the differences between the passive language of the source text and the active language of the translation, providing a “voluntarist action” on the text. In addition, feminist translators have effectively taken the role of scholars, educators and interpreters through their detailed commentaries, essays, prefaces and footnotes that accompany their translations. Feminist translation intends to be a politically interventionist act with an assertive and provocative praxis. The term “hijacking” is used to refer to this practice of translation. Thus, the feminist translator “is more than a conventional translator, she is the author’s accomplice who maintains the strangeness of the source text and seeks at the same time to communicate its multiple meanings otherwise ‘lost in translation’” (Flotow, 1991, p. 76). Mary Daly stresses the importance of language renewal and liberation from the vilified position occupied in the patriarchal horizon: for her, a “Spinner” or “Spinster” is a woman who actively participates in the act of creation, who defines herself out of the male dominion and is able to destroy the false perceptions of women inflicted by the language of Babel considered the “erection of phallocracy”. Babel derives from a term of Assyrian and Babylonian origin meaning “gate of god” (Daly, 1978, p. 4) and “when women break through this multiple barrier composed of deceptions ejaculated by “god” (Daly, 1978, p. 4) they can reach the “Gates of the Goddess” (Daly, 1978, p. 4). De Beauvoir has defined woman as “the Other” (de Beauvoir, 1956, p.16), a relative being, defined only in relation to man. Women live in a state of exile in society as well as in language, but Monique Wittig has made this condition the starting point for her war and journey to freedom, she has removed herself from the category of women and created a new language in which to find expression.

[...] the stories we tell and retell, including those we retell through the medium of translation, constitute a site where we exercise our agency, and in this sense are ultimately a tool for changing the world. They enable us to elaborate our individual and collective identities and negotiate the conditions of history in which we find ourselves, whether as lay members of society, as professionals in a particular domain or as activists who consciously exploit their professional skills to effect change at a local or global level.

For Douglas Robinson, words and translations possess a power that is performative, in the sense that they effect change (Robinson, 2003, p. 33). Depending on the audience addressed by the text, depending on the readers' generation, a translation varies in terms of aesthetics, sensibilities and expectations, just as the translator's writing choices change accordingly (Bassnett, 2014, p. 84). A translation fluctuates over time, especially if a text was written in a specific period of time and will later address in translation an audience that has changed from that of the author's period. Logically, what is at stake is also the reception of a translation, whose success or failure depends on and can be affected by the historical and social context in which it will be published (Bassnett, 2014, p. 95). Cadera and Walsh affirm that authors and their works face different fortunes or misfortunes depending on the country and on the period (Cadera & Walsh, 2022, p. 2), and the reception may be influenced by factors such as critical responses or literary prizes (Nelson & Maher in Cadera & Walsh, 2022, p. 2). Moreover, subsequent publications of a book usually vary in terms of paratexts, and it is this element which also contributes to influencing the reception of a text. For instance, a new cover or the use of a particular image on it can drive a reader to buy a book rather than not (Cadera & Walsh, 2022, p. 3).

4.5 On *straight*

My critical analysis of the various editions of *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* focuses in particular on the translation of the term "straight" in the various versions, taking into consideration factors that may have influenced the stylistic choices in English, French and Italian: self-translation, collective translation, translator's gender. I decided to propose my own critique of the translation style choices, guided and supported by the principles of feminist approaches to translation. First of all, I report below one particular extract from the book contained in the third essay of each version, "The Straight Mind" which presents the most emblematic and also the most famous assertion of Monique Wittig and which constitutes the very foundation and development of her theory. The second extract that will be analysed comes from the essay "Homo sum" and it has been chosen because it was translated from English by Sam Bourcier, while the essay "The Straight Mind" exemplifies the practice of self-translation by Wittig. The two extracts in the three languages will be reported in order of publication in the tables below (extract 1 from table 3 to table 5; extract 2 from table 6 to table 8). The two passages have been reported in full to give the context in which Wittig uses

the term “straight” in the text. The terms of interest in each language have been highlighted in bold.

Table 3: First extract. “The Straight Mind” (American version)

American version – Beacon Press 1992a²²

So, this is what lesbians say everywhere in this country and in some others, if not with theories at least through their social practice, whose repercussions upon **straight** culture and society are still unenvisionable. An anthropologist might say that we have to wait for fifty years. Yes, if one wants to universalize the functioning of these societies and make their invariants appear. Meanwhile the **straight** concepts are undermined. What is woman? Panic, general alarm for an active defense. Frankly, it is a problem that the lesbians do not have because of a change of perspective, and it would be incorrect to say that lesbians associate, make love, live with women, for “woman” has meaning only in heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems. Lesbians are not women.

(Wittig, 1992a, p. 32)

²² The British edition of Harvester Wheatsheaf was published shortly thereafter the same year, and since the two English versions do not present any textual difference, only the edition by Beacon Press has been taken into account for the translation analysis.

Table 4: First extract. “The Straight Mind” (French versions)

French version – Éditions Balland	French version – Éditions Amsterdam
<p>Eh bien c’est ce que les lesbiennes disent un peu partout dans ce pays sinon avec des théories du moins par leur pratique sociale dont les répercussions sur la culture hétérosexuelle sont encore inenvisageables. Un anthropologue dira qu’il faut attendre cinquante ans. Oui, pour universaliser les fonctionnements d’une société et en dégager les invariants. En attendant les concepts hétéros se minent. Qu’est-ce que la-femme ? Branle-bas général de la défense active. Franchement c’est un problème que les lesbiennes n’ont pas, simple changement de perspective, et il serait impropre de dire que les lesbiennes vivent, s’associent, font l’amour avec des femmes car la-femme n’a de sens que dans les systèmes de pensée et les systèmes économiques hétérosexuels. Les lesbiennes ne sont pas des femmes.</p>	<p>Eh bien c’est ce que les lesbiennes disent un peu partout dans ce pays sinon avec des théories du moins par leur pratique sociale dont les répercussions sur la culture hétérosexuelle sont encore inenvisageables. Un anthropologue dira qu’il faut attendre cinquante ans. Oui, pour universaliser les fonctionnements d’une société et en dégager les invariants. En attendant les concepts hétéros se minent. Qu’est-ce que la-femme ? Branle-bas général de la défense active. Franchement c’est un problème que les lesbiennes n’ont pas, simple changement de perspective, et il serait impropre de dire que les lesbiennes vivent, s’associent, font l’amour avec des femmes car la-femme n’a de sens que dans les systèmes de pensée et les systèmes économiques hétérosexuels. Les lesbiennes ne sont pas des femmes.</p>
(Wittig, 2001, p. 76)	(Wittig, 2018, p. 77)

Table 5: First extract. “The Straight Mind” (Italian versions)

<p>Italian version – ombre corte</p> <p>Questo è ciò che dicono le lesbiche negli Stati Uniti, e in molti altri paesi. Se non lo dicono con le teorie, lo dicono senza dubbio attraverso le loro pratiche, le cui ripercussioni sulla cultura e sulla società eterosessuale sono ancora imprevedibili. Un antropologo direbbe forse che dobbiamo attendere cinquant’anni per vederne gli effetti. È possibile, certo, se vogliamo universalizzare il funzionamento di queste pratiche, facendone mergere le costanti. Ora come ora, tutti i concetti eterosessuali vengono via via indeboliti. “Che cos’è una donna?” : panico, allarme, generale per una mobilitazione in difesa della “donna”. Ma questo è un problema che non riguarda più le lesbiche, grazie al loro cambio di prospettiva. Ecco perché sarebbe scorretto dire che le lesbiche sono donne che si associano, fanno l’amore, vivono con altre donne. “Donna” è una parola che ha senso solo nei sistemi di pensiero ed economici eterosessuali. E le lesbiche non sono donne.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Wittig, 2019a, p. 53)</p>	<p>Italian version – <i>collettivo della lacuna</i></p> <p>Ebbene, questo è ciò che affermano le lesbiche un po’ ovunque in questo paese e in alcuni altri, se non attraverso le teorie, almeno con la loro pratica sociale, le cui ripercussioni sulla cultura straight e sulla società sono ancora imprevedibili. Un antropologo direbbe che dobbiamo aspettare cinquant’anni. È vero, se si vuole universalizzare il funzionamento di una data società e far emergere le sue caratteristiche invarianti. Intanto i concetti straight sono progressivamente intaccati. Che cos’è “la-donna”? Panico, allarme generale, ci si attiva a destra e a manca per una difesa attiva. Francamente, è un problema che le lesbiche non si pongono, e non se lo pongono in ragione di un semplice cambiamento di prospettiva che adottano, e sarebbe improprio dire che le lesbiche si associano, fanno l’amore, vivono con le donne, perché “la-donna” ha senso solo nei sistemi di pensiero e nei sistemi economici eterosessuali. Le lesbiche non sono donne.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Wittig, 2019b, p. 34)</p>
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One of the three aforementioned techniques of feminist translation practice will be considered to analyse the translation choices around the rendering of the term “straight”. The technique of “hijacking” indicates a volitional cooperation and reciprocal influence between author and translator wherein the feminist translator has the same authority as the feminist writer that results in translation being invested with the position of mastery and the duty to carry her political valence. Feminist translators do not merely aim to please their audience or blend in invisible and objective theories of translation; they want recognition and are willingly working in the “light of accountability and responsibility” (Kolas in Flotow, 1997, p.

38). They declare in all honesty their positionality toward the source text, its author and the community it is intended for. It is imperative for a translator to “foreground the positionality of enunciation” (Simon, 1996, p. 79) in relation to language, institutions or cultures, and it is inevitable that the translator’s social and political background will affect their reading and writing. Politics of identity in translations and translation criticism enables the translator’s personal opinions and interests to be recognised, and their work will consequently be marked by them. These aspects might influence the choice of the text to translate, the response to its content and the translator’s communicative function (Flotow, 1997, p. 97) in conveying the meaning. The disclosure and recognition of “*the gendered construction of meaning*” (Flotow, 1997, p. 95) and language through the practice of translation, however, has exposed the cultural differences “that lie between supposedly related Western societies” (Flotow, 1997, p. 86) as “the factor of gender, the effect of ‘learning to be a woman’ [...] will mean something different in every society” (Flotow, 1997, p. 86). Thus, feminists and women cannot bond and be united only on the ground of gender, but it “remains fertile ground for research in the human sciences” (Flotow, 1997, p. 89) as evidenced by the progresses of lesbian studies that challenges the very “natural” nature of gender and its duality.

That being said, the term “straight” by Wittig herself in the French version has been rendered as “hétérosexuelle” and “hétéros”. Wittig herself translated the essay “The Straight Mind” from English into French, so one wonders why she did not also leave the English term in French. Now, given that straight referred specifically to “straight culture” and “straight concepts”, and not to the “mind” *per se* in its generality as a political regime of oppression, Wittig may have decided not to use the English adjective because she was referring specifically to the sphere of heterosexual (sexual) orientation and its culture and concepts. As for Bourcier’s translation and the *collettivo*’s one, I would like to point out the usage of italics for *straight* in both French and Italian. Italics has a communicative function in English (Saldanha, 2011, p. 424) signalling “information focus” (Saldanha, 2011, p. 428). French and Italian are two Romance languages, and according to Saldanha the use of italics in this sense is not common in this type of languages, whereas it is very specific to English (Saldanha, 2011, p. 431). Nonetheless, the feminist collective translation and Bourcier’s translation do present the usage of italics to emphasise the term *straight*. If in the English version of *The Straight Mind* italics is used to mark information focus, its usage in the French and Italian translations is to highlight the fact that the term *straight* has been borrowed from English. By keeping the foreign word, the translators point out that they are not going to translate it into

neither “homosexuel” nor “eterosessuale” because these terms do not correspond with the meaning Wittig gave to the English term. Thus, *straight* appears as a new concept in the two Romance languages. In the Italian translation by Federico Zappino, however, the term has been translated with “eterosessuale”, which in Italian is more frequent only in relation to the sexual orientation of a person, and therefore it does not convey the meaning intended by Wittig with her theory. The collective used the feminist hijacking technique, while the male translator merely gave a more literary and less alienating translation for the Italian audience. The term *straight*, left in English and even written in italics in Italian, has a clear power to “explode”, precisely the scope Wittig expected from her language and her works, to creep in seemingly harmlessly and modify the linguistic and social fabric.

Table 6: Second extract. “Homo sum” (American version)

American version – Beacon Press

Naivete, innocence, lack of doubt, certainty that everything is either black or white, certainty that when Reason is not sovereign then Unreason or Folly have the upper hand, that where there is Being there is also non-Being as a kind of refuse, and the most absurd of all things, the need and necessity in re- action to this evidence and these certainties to support and advocate, in contrast, a “right to Difference” (a right of difference) which by reversing everything corresponds to the Tweedledum and Tweedledee of Lewis Carroll- these are all the symptoms of what I have once called, out of exasperation, the **straight** mind.

(Wittig, 1992a, p. 57)

Table 7: Second extract. “Homo sum” (French versions)

French version – Éditions Balland	French version – Éditions Amsterdam
<p>Naïveté, innocence, absence de doute, la certitude que tout est noir ou blanc, la certitude que lorsque la Raison n’est pas souveraine, alors la Dérison ou la Folie ont le dessus, la croyance selon laquelle là où il y a de l’Être, il y a aussi du non-Être, une sorte de déchet de l’Être, et le plus absurde de tout, le besoin et la nécessité, en réaction à cette évidence et à ces certitudes, de soutenir et de défendre, par contraste un « droit à la Différence » qui, en inversant tout, équivaut aux Tweedledum et au Tweedledee de Lewis Carroll – autant de symptômes de ce que j’ai appelé ailleurs, par exaspération, la pensée straight.</p> <p>(Wittig, 2001, p. 98)</p>	<p>Naïveté, innocence, absence de doute, la certitude que tout est noir ou blanc, la certitude que lorsque la Raison n’est pas souveraine, alors la Dérison ou la Folie ont le dessus, la croyance selon laquelle là où il y a de l’Être, il y a aussi du non-Être, une sorte de déchet de l’Être, et le plus absurde de tout, le besoin et la nécessité, en réaction à cette évidence et à ces certitudes, de soutenir et de défendre, par contraste un « droit à la Différence » qui, en inversant tout, équivaut aux Tweedledum et au Tweedledee de Lewis Carroll – autant de symptômes de ce que j’ai appelé ailleurs, par exaspération, la pensée straight.</p> <p>(Wittig, 2018, p. 99)</p>

Table 8: Second extract. “Homo sum” (Italian versions)

Italian version – ombre corte	Italian version – <i>collettivo della lacuna</i>
<p>L'ingenuità, l'innocenza una scarsa capacità di porsi interrogativi critici, la certezza che tutto sia o bianco o nero, la certezza che se la ragione non è sovrana allora può esserlo l'Irragionevolezza, la credenza che là dove c'è l'Essere dimora anche il non-Essere come una sorta di scarto accidentale, e – la più assurda di tutte – il bisogno o la necessità di supportare e di avocare, per contro, un “diritto alla Differenza” (o un diritto di differenza), che, invertendo tutto, corrisponde nientemeno che ai personaggi Tweedledum e Tweedledee di Lewis Carroll: tutti questi non sono che i sintomi di ciò che un tempo, per esasperazione, ho definito pensiero eterosessuale.</p> <p>(Wittig, 2019a, p. 78)</p>	<p>Ingenuità, innocenza, mancanza di dubbio, certezza che tutto è o bianco o nero, certezza che quando la Ragione non è sovrana, allora ha la meglio la s-ragione, la <i>Déraison</i>, la Follia. Credere che dove c'è l'Essere, c'è anche il non-Essere, come una specie di scarto, e, cosa più assurda di tutte, il bisogno e la necessità, come reazione a questa sorta di evidenza, a queste certezze, di supportare e promuovere un “diritto alla Differenza” che, con suo totale rovesciamento, ricorda i personaggi di Pincopanco e Pancopinco della favola di Lewis Carroll: se non è zuppa è pan bagnato. Questi sono sintomi di ciò che io, per esasperazione, ho chiamato “il pensiero straight”.</p> <p>(Wittig, 2019b, p. 46)</p>

As we already know, Sam Bourcier decided to keep the term *straight* for the French translation at Wittig's behest. Sam Bourcier is a leading figure in queer theory, and a trans researcher and teacher at Lille-III University. Like Monique Wittig, Bourcier emphasises the importance of the stance of the particular over the universalism of the dominant (hetero) subject in the rhetoric of the *straight* regime. According to Bourcier and Davis, “universalism is sacred” (Bourcier & Davis, 2012, p. 234) in France. It has been demonstrated by Eloit (2018) that in the universalist Republic of France, lesbians were stigmatically and systematically accused of congregating into a “ghetto” separated from the dominant differentialist rhetoric of French feminism that believed in a feminist unity under the category of women. Thus, particular subjects, i.e. minority subjectivities such as lesbians or gay men, were accused of unifying into “ghettos” (Evans, 2020, p. 21). The feminism of sexual difference of Cixous and Irigaray did not consider the performativity and constructivist rhetoric of queer subjects (Haraway in Evans, 2020, p. 20). Queer theory is in fact based on the notion that identity is a performative act, “a pure effect of performance” (Harvey in Venuti, 2021, p. 361). Such theory found fertile ground in the Anglophone world, while its

translation into the French context has been difficult, and Bourcier referred to it as “pathétique” (Evans, 2020, p. 18). Queer theory emerged within the work of academics such as Teresa de Lauretis and Diana Fuss, that were in fact based in the United States. A queer identity was referred to as one that did not have an essence (Halperin, 1995, p. 62). William J. Spurlin’s essay “Queering Translation” states that “both ‘queer’ and ‘translation’ mediate between hegemonically defined spaces, and their critical conjunction offers the possibility of new sites of heterogeneity and difference” (Spurlin in Bermann & Porter, 2014, p. 307). As feminist translation theory has amply demonstrated, the activity of translation implies a work across languages which transforms the way concepts such as gender categories, sexual difference and sexual orientation are conceived and conveyed. The question of authority and fidelity around the translation process encouraged a model based on the reliability and equivalence of the transference of meaning from one language to another; however, translation has rejected such conceptions from an activist and political perspective and proposed a rewriting of its linguistic and cultural subordination. Translation is no longer conceived as a mere linguistic transfer of meaning, but as a performative activity that is stripped of the conception of a binary dialectic between original text and translated text, of faithful reproduction of the former and assumption of an inferior position of the latter. In this sense translation represents a form of social activism: a fundamental element in this type of translation, as we have seen, is that of affect, a performative queering force. It is precisely in this notion of performativity that translation and queer studies meet. If translation is conceived as a creative act that can lead to the creation of multiple meanings, of a continuous making and unmaking of forms, we are immediately connected to Judith Butler’s notion of gender of “a sociality that has no single author” (Butler in Baer & Kaindl, 2018, p. 335). A space “that challenges any normative idea of straightforward translatability” (Spurlin in Bermann & Porter, 2014, p. 303) is a queer space.

Even though Zappino is himself a queer activist and translator – he even translated Judith Butler’s work *Undoing Gender* (2004) [*Fare e disfare il genere*, 2014] – he ended up translating the English term “straight” into Italian as “eterosessuale”. In doing so, the meaning that Wittig embedded in the term and the explosive power that she gave it are lost in translation. According to Zappino, the dominant ideology is permeated by heterosexuality as the matrix of social oppression: the possibility of giving a name to this system that naturalises and justifies the oppression of minority subjects is precisely what prompted Zappino to translate Wittig’s work, as stated in his afterword to *Il pensiero eterosessuale*. In the same

year as his translation of *The Straight Mind*, Zappino also published *Comunismo queer. Note per una sovversione dell'eterosessualità* (2019). In this book, Zappino draws on Wittig's lesbomaterialist theory of gender categories, Judith Butler's performative gender theory, and Mario Mieli's theory on transsexuality. According to Zappino, heterosexuality is a way of producing people, transforming neutral anatomical differences into hierarchical social classifications (Zappino, 2019, p. 18). For Zappino, therefore, heterosexuality cannot be reduced to a mere sexual orientation; it is a mode of social production. Women and men are its product and as such are forced to reproduce heterosexuality if they aspire to achieve some form of recognition (Zappino, 2019, p. 26). According to Zappino, this is also the foundation of capitalism. That being said, Zappino admits that he gets a lot of criticism for his usage of the word "eterosessualità" and he gives the following response:

[...] quando la uso lo faccio per riferirmi a tre cose: 1) *al modo di produzione delle persone*, ossia alla razionalità che presiede alla produzione degli uomini e delle donne, da cui chiaramente discende che gli uomini e le donne non esistono 'naturalmente' ma sono a loro volta il prodotto di un costante e performativo 2) *rapporto sociale*, fondato sulla trasfigurazione di questa produzione diseguale e gerarchica dei generi nella 'differenza sessuale', la quale assurge a sua volta a 3) *metro di giudizio* da cui dipende implicitamente o esplicitamente la valutazione, non meno che la possibilità, la conformità, l'inclusione condizionale, o l'esclusione radicale, di ogni forma di soggettivazione e di relazione, cisgenere o trans* che sia. Poi, certo, l'eterosessualità è anche un orientamento sessuale [...].

(Zappino, 2019, pp. 29-30)

Zappino makes it clear that in these terms, his use of the word "eterosessuale" is the same as Wittig's and reminds us that queer arose from feminism and lesbianism, so there is no opposition between feminism and queer, even though the latter has been declined in multiple meanings (Zappino, 2019, p. 30). Zappino writes from the point of view of a minority subject: in fact he himself uses queer as a word that sums up and describes his subjectivity and activism. For him, it represents a way of approaching the overpowering of heterosexuality. Radical lesbians, on the other hand, are the women who have translated *Il pensiero straight* e altri saggi, therefore they also wrote from a point of view of minority subjects. Once again, the use of italics for *straight* in the Italian translation of *collettivo della lacuna* is present to mark the focal importance of the term and thus shift the reader's attention to it, also highlighting that it is a foreign word. On a micro-textual level, therefore, this expedient is a clear Trojan Horse used in the collective feminist translation, a deliberate stance on how to render and convey the Wittigian message in the Italian target culture. After all, the feminist

technique of “hijacking” and Monique Wittig’s Trojan Horse work in the same way: language is presented as “raw material” (Wittig, 1992, XVI) and words are ready to be moulded by the writer or translator to violently alter the context in which they are produced, a perfect war machine. Words convey the writer’s own point of view and individuality. For Wittig, words could render the universalisation of the lesbian point of view and break the chains imposed by the *straight* mind.

Year 2024: five years have passed since the two Italian translations of Monique Wittig’s *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* came out, and twenty-one years since the death of the lesbian author who shook the very foundations of traditional Western thought and how it shapes society and us as social subjects. We are in the third, or some say fourth, feminist wave, and what is certain is that gender studies and translation studies do not stop progressing, and I hope, one day, to be able to find a re-translation or a re-edition of the feminist collective’s text as the online publication of the work, although ultimately an act of rebellion, a true Trojan Horse, may not have reached the number of readers it deserved. The circulation of a book online, made available to anyone for free, certainly has its advantages and promotes access and distribution. However, if one is not aware of the publication, it might be difficult to read the work, and that is why I believe that a more “traditional” publication with distribution through bookstores would facilitate the reading of the book. I would like Monique Wittig’s masterpiece to find its place in an Italian bookstore so that her work of shaping bodies and minds, does not end.

Bien que celle qui est ma providence s’approche de moi, aucun obstacle ne surgit, aucune chute ne s’ensuit. C’est donc le paradis palpable sensible souverain. J’y cours, j’y vole s’il est vrai que c’est ici et maintenant que prend fin ma longue pérégrination dans l’enfer.

(Wittig, 2014, p. 104)

Conclusion

This dissertation has proposed to take the reader inside the chapters of Monique Wittig's theoretical and literary journey into the universe of the *straight* mind. A painful journey, that of Wittig's through the *straight* ideological fabric, constructed and imposed like a kind of invisible spider web, not initially perceived and distinguished, but which is nonetheless there, entangling and suffocating. An "écrivain": this is the bare appellation engraved on the tombstone of Monique Wittig (1935-2003) at the Père-Lachaise cemetery in Paris, because this is what Wittig considered herself, a writer, before anything else, before being a feminist, a materialist, or a lesbian – and note the absence of the feminine version of the noun in French. Remember, lesbians are not women.

Wittig brought forward a personal deconstruction and subversion of the infernal circles of the *straight* mind. She operated a veritable epistemological revolution in 20th-century philosophical and literary thought. Wittig provided the key to unchain us from well-established perceptual and interpretative systems of the social fabric erected by the heterosexual regime. Understanding the workings of the latter, which operates on an ideological and political level, lets us deconstruct and overcome the binary and oppositional division of gender categories. French feminists of so-called sexual difference, led by Hélène Cixous, took their cue from the gender dichotomy to develop a theory that precisely on the basis of this binary opposition promoted an emancipation and liberation of women based on the recognition of an essence of womanhood. These feminists were grouped under the name of "French feminism" in the United States – a group that erroneously included Monique Wittig herself, since in stark contrast with their thinking she developed a materialist theory about the nature of the exploitation of women in Western society. Wittig's materialism broke with "French feminism": sexual difference was nothing more than a social construct to validate the oppression of the class of men over the class of women. The latter is a fundamental concept for Wittig, for whom women are conceived as a group of oppressed subjects in relation to the dominant phallographic discourse. The latter is the so-called *straight* mind, understood as a political regime of oppression which naturalises and regulates social interactions, which makes us believe that sex groups are natural groups, which structures reality and how we perceive it. It is therefore no coincidence that Wittig gave this name to her most famous work, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*.

Wittig wanted to liberate women from such system and she did so through language, by lesbianising it, i.e. using the universalisation of a lesbian subjectivity to re-appropriate the traditional forms of the literary canon, creating texts that would act as Trojan horses. The project of a recognition of a lesbian subjectivity has encountered not a few criticisms in French as well as in Anglophone and Italian circles. The critiques of the differentialist current of feminism has been joined by queer theory, and whether on the grounds of a “ghetto” or a “lacunae”, Wittig was excluded from dominant discourses. The hostility and misinterpretation of the Wittigian theoretical paradigm is the main reason for her systematic exclusion from the social and literary scenes, which were also the reason for her departure from France. However, this very condition shaped her work as a translingual writer in exile in the United States who wrote in English and translated herself. Indeed, the only way for lesbians to exist is to translate themselves. Words, texts, translations, contain a performative force of social activism and political change of the scaffolding constructed by the heterosexual regime.

Monique Wittig’s political and literary crusade to subvert the heteronormative present for the advent of a post-patriarchal future forces us to think ourselves and reality innovatively: she exhorts us to a rereading and reinvention of the world, and many are the forces that still strive to protect their privileged status as universal subjects by silencing Wittig’s word, which to their misfortune, continues to inspire us. Fortunately, what continues to be transformed, as Wittig herself intended, is the perception of the world for anyone who has the fortune to read *The Straight Mind*. As Manastabal suggested to Sam Bourcier in “Wittig La Politique”, we should not forget a copy of what has been a literary and philosophical milestone in the change of perspective in recent decades, that is, recognising that there is an ideological and cultural fabric in which we are trapped. Monique Wittig has given us the key to escape it.

There are leaks comparable to water leaks in the consciousness of every person. [...] ‘When the memory leaks, it’s forever,’ says an old song from the Concrete Age. There are also leaks in interest, leaks in feelings, leaks in energy, leaks in imagination. There is still another kind of leak called a ‘galloping leak’ which helps one forget all of the others.

(Wittig, 1979, p. 96)

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Annexes

Figure 1: Folder Beacon Press

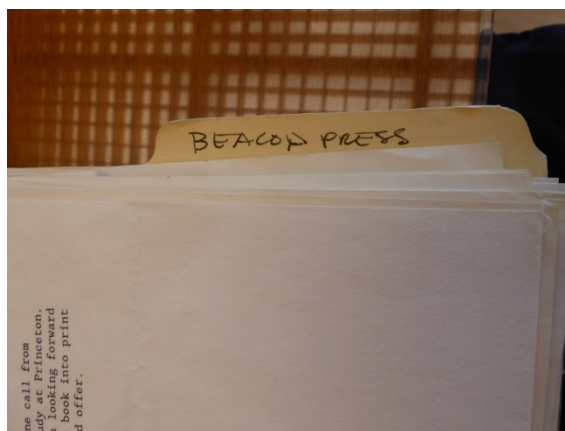


Figure 2: Letter dated January 13, 1986 from Susan Wolf

January 13, 1986
Susan Wolf
1215 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10029
(212) 369-0898

Joanne Wyckoff
SEnior Editor
Beacon Press
Boston, Massachusetts 02108

Dear Ms. Wyckoff,

I am writing to you as Monique Wittig's assistant and representative. She has informed me that she has a contract with you for the book entitled The Straight Mind. This manuscript remains unfinished and Monique would like to propose another book to you, perhaps in addition to The Straight Mind or as a replacement, since she expects it will still take some time to complete that work.

This book would be a collection of her theoretical articles, most of which have appeared in a scholarly journal called Feminist Issues. These articles are already translated and they are often mentioned in other works. However, they are generally unavailable because of the small circulation of that journal. They are very important contributions to feminist thought and Monique has given lectures based on these essays at universities and colleges all over the United States. They have all been received with great interest and enthusiasm. For this collection, Monique would write an introduction. If you are interested in this project please let me know.

We have also heard that Beacon is working on a translation of Virgile, Non. The British rights to that book have gone to Peter Owen and we assume that they are already working on the translation. If you know anything about Beacon's work on it I would also greatly appreciate hearing about it.

Sincerely,
Susan Wolf
Susan Wolf

Figure 3: Letter dated June 28, 1990 from Andrew Hrycyna

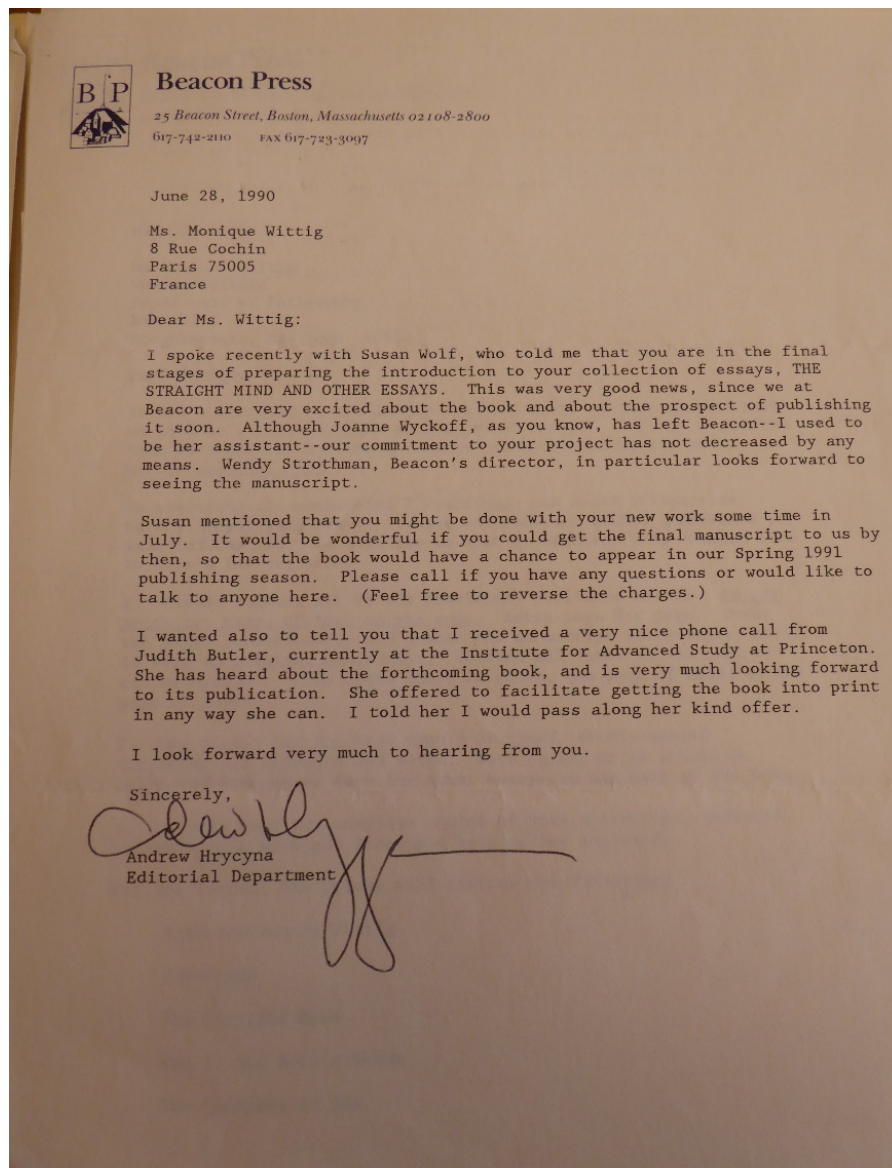


Figure 4: *The Straight Mind* review by Ryn Etter on Booklist

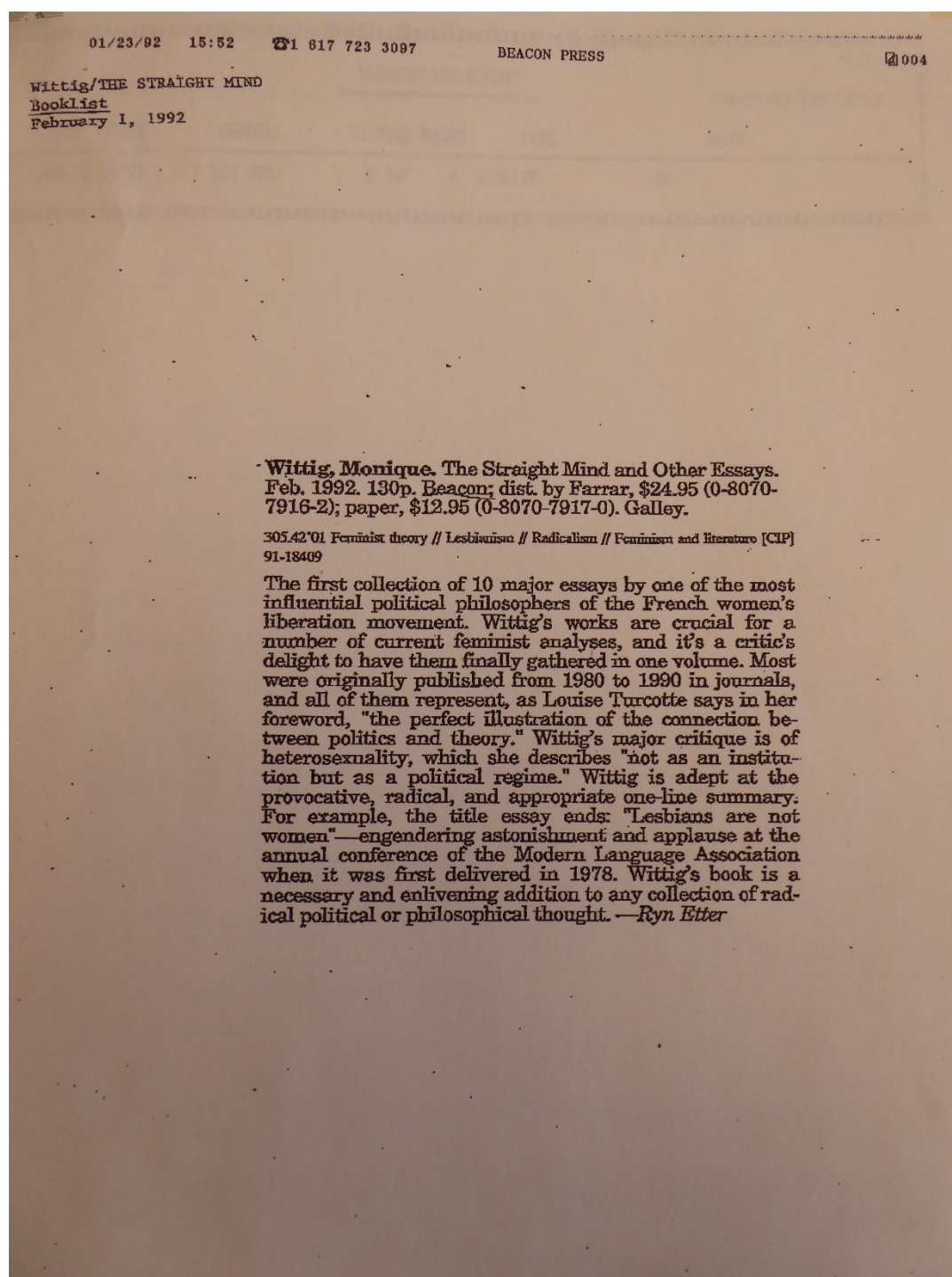


Figure 5: Judith Butler's comment on *The Straight Mind*

The Straight Mind and Other Essays
Monique Wittig

"10 major essays by one of the most influential political philosophers of the French women's liberation movement. Wittig's works are crucial for a number of current feminist analyses, and it's a critic's delight to have them finally gathered in one volume."
-Booklist

"Among the most provocative and compelling feminist political visions since The Second Sex . . . the radical extension of de Beauvoir's theory, its unexpected lesbian future. Wittig's theoretical insights are both precise and far-reaching, and her theoretical style is bold, incisive, even shattering."--Judith Butler, Johns Hopkins University

The Straight Mind and Other Essays is the long-awaited first collection of theoretical non-fiction from Monique Wittig, author of Les Guerilleres and one of the most important French feminist thinkers writing today.

These forceful and lucid essays, bearing the literary mark of Wittig the novelist, range over theory, politics, language and literature. In these interlocked critiques of the "straight mind," Wittig takes a distinctive and radical stand on the question of how much culture controls our understanding of sex and gender. She argues that the category of sex is itself a political one and heterosexuality "a trap, a forced political regime." Wittig argues that "there cannot any longer be women and men, and that as classes and as categories of thought or language they have to disappear, politically, economically, ideologically." The title essay ends with the explosive and resonant conclusion--one that caused an important stir at the 1978 MLA meeting, where it was first presented--that "lesbians are not women."

Political essays in the book include reflections on the idea of the social contract and on the methods of contemporary feminism. The essays on literature include thoughts about Wittig's own fiction and a piece on Djuna Barnes that illustrates Wittig's opposition to the popular French school of "écriture féminine."

A co-founder of the modern French women's movement, winner of the Prix Medicis, Monique Wittig is author of several books, including The Lesbian Body and Les Guerilleres. She is professor in the department of French and Italian at the University of Arizona.