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Virgil, No

Monique Wittig

Monique Wittig is a writer whose name is among those fundamental three or four most frequently invoked in any discussion of l'écriture Feminine, a late 20th century feminist theory which, to perhaps define reductively, rebels against the patrimonial heritage of language by "writing out the body feminine." Wittig's works go beyond theoretical high jinks to imagine the world of woman-identified women, rewriting traditional culture and the meanings it imputes to the word woman. In her latest novel, title Across the Acheron, Wittig remaps the journey made by Dante in The Divine Comedy, turning it on end to bring it into line with a woman's vision of the territories of the spirit. Heaven, hell, and the limbo of purgatory cycle wildly through each other and contain lost souls whose natures are predicated on a redefinition of sin. Wittig, who one might liken to an avenging Michael, is lead beyond angry outrage by her very unVirgilian guide to greater understanding and compassion as she winds her way through a virtual compendium of both victims and victimizers as well as whole and strong, woman-defined "angels." The following selections appear as edited and revised by Monique Wittig and have been excerpted from Across the Acheron (translated by David Le Vay), published in English by Peter Owen Ltd., London: 1987. (Distributed in the U.S. by Dufour Editions: Chester Springs, PA.)

--editors

I Overture

The grounds are devoid of ornamentation. The sand passes in fine, hard blades over the beaten surfaces. Manastabal, the one who calls herself my guide, walks ahead of me. Fortunately one doesn't have to wear tunics for this journey, which is both sacred and profane, for they would be instantly torn off by the wind. Instead, the dress and gait of

Manastabal, my guide, are somehow familiar. Her billowing shirt flaps round her chest and arms. The wind flattens her hair against her skull, revealing its shape. She has her hands in the pockets of her jeans and walks as in a silent film. When she turns towards me I can see from her lips that she is making a whistling sound, but I can't hear it. The sling of my rifle presses on the base of my neck and in the hollow of my shoulder-blades. The course we are following does not allow me to determine whether we are taking a definite direction. The space is flat, flat enough to reveal the circularity of the planet on the horizon. So one seems to be walking at the exact middle of the earth. In fact one follows the route which must be taken to arrive in Hell, since it is there that Manastabal, my guide, says she is taking me. As the wind persists and quickens one walks more slowly, leaning with every muscle against the expanse of air, only too glad not to have our limbs torn off. I open my mouth to ask if one still has a long way to go; the blast rushes into it, preventing any sound. At last, forcing the pace, I manage to catch up with Manastabal, my guide, and place an arm round her shoulders. Then one stops and looks at the other, face to face. One's features are distorted by the pressure of the air, and as one's lips curl back over one's gums they form no smile. What is she waiting for? Is she going to take me on her shoulder to get me to make the crossing? But what crossing? There's no river here. There's no sea.

II Dialogue

(There's nothing where one is going, Wittig, at least nothing you don't know already. One is certainly entering another world, as you imagine, but the sun shines on it just as it shines on the world one is leaving. Sighs, cries of pain, anguish, terror and uncertainty are uttered there, and you'd need vast ingenuity to describe them as heroic. The lost souls you are about to meet are alive, despite their fervent wish to be dead. They are anonymous, and I challenge you to find any quality about them that clothes them in glory. In their case the horror and irremissibility of suffering are not

caused by the ignominy of their deeds. I'm taking you to see what can be seen anywhere in broad daylight.)

At these words all the conjoined circles of Hell open and from the abyss rise only a glaucous light and groans so horrible that I daren't think about their nature. My knees give way at once and I say:

(If it's like this, there's no point in going any farther.)

The desert sand flattens out into scythe-blades, forming and fading into continuous, regular waves. I struggle against the wind to keep my balance as Manastabal, my guide, utters these words:

(If I understand you correctly, Wittig, fear affects you like a blow on the head and fills you with cowardice. Do you think you can draw back from this vital journey? Understand that I am with you here at the command of her who awaits you in Paradise and grieves to see you so poorly prepared for Hell. Here is the object she gave me as a pledge.)

I recognize the flask of ether that the one who is my Providence gave me in the past as a remedy in certain extreme situations. She is sending me the same object now as she commits me to go forward and meet her at the end of the road. Her words, as Manastabal, my guide, transmits them to me, crack like rifle-shots against the expanse of air, humming round my ears, galvanizing my muscles. So if I have to, then, I shall go to the farthest end of Hell, and on the other side, among the angels, I shall meet again the one whose loving deeds have given me the taste of Paradise. So I say to Manastabal, my guide:

(Guide me, I'll do my best to follow you. Come rain or wind, snow or hail, thunder or stifling heat, I shall go. You won't have to carry me on your back, as is traditional with this type of crossing. On the contrary, I could even carry you a little if necessary.)

At these words Manastabal, my guide, utters a laugh that grates unpleasantly on my nerves. Could one be in Hell already? But no, I see only dust and whirling eddies of wind around me.

III The Eagle

I raise my rifle for practice. I see no possible target, unless I take as such the enormous roll of sand approaching from the horizon, pushing in front of it piles of dry branches, which are also rolled into the shape of enormous balls of wool. Not only is the target too distant, it moves too quickly for me to plan any line of fire. That is why I practice the rapid handling of the weapon, grasping it with one hand, releasing the magazine with the other, reloading, aiming, pressing the trigger, firing at random in the direction of the ochre cloud, suddenly ceasing to fire lest the wind beats the bullet back into my face. A desert eagle descends, circling above my head. It does not seem to be prevented from flying by the whirling gusts of wind that blow from opposite directions and buffet each other. Its flight is even and powerful, as is proper for an eagle. The appearance of the eagle is all the more welcome, since I feel I have not seen a living creature for centuries. Manastabal, my guide, does not return. To look in the direction where she departed I glance away from the eagle, which seizes the opportunity to sweep down to the level of my face and prepare to attack me. As it is now so close to me, it is too late to level my rifle and take aim. So I content myself with firing into the air to scare the eagle away. Instead it becomes enraged and hurls itself at me, wings outspread, talons outstretched, beak open, saying: (Cut out this stupid nonsense with your gun and your bullets, or I'll claw your face so deeply that not one of your lovers will recognize you again.)

I should like to ask it some questions, but instead I strike it on the body with my rifle-butt as hard as I can. The blow renders a hollow, metallic sound. The eagle falls to the ground with a clanking noise, its wings agitated by mechanical jerks, while the jammed automaton voice slowly repeats the same phrases: (Whether you like it or not, Wittig, slavery has a hoarse voice. Here, you can laugh. Don't aim too bloody high, you wretched creature. Dust you were born and to dust you will return.)

The voice sticks in a screech as I kick the eagle over and

over again and cry:

(Shut up, you drivelling old mutterer. A rolling stone gathers no moss and silence is golden.)

The robot lies at my feet, broken up, buried in the ground by its fall and my kicks, and already half covered under the scythe-blades of the rising sands that constantly sweep over the flat surface of the desert.

XXVII. The Shooting-galleries

Instead of houses there are fairground booths, which are all shooting-galleries. The lost souls from each house are represented there and exposed as targets, naked to the waist. I see them from a distance as I make my way down the main avenue, with Manastabal, my guide. My vision, blurred by anger and pain, shows me at first only the fixed smiles and postures of mannequins. As I come a little closer, however, the goose-flesh, the moles, even the pimples exhibited there convince me that these are not mere images but people in the flesh. And when at last I see what my eyes, fixed until now at the level of their smiles, have refused to see, it would take little to make them start from their orbits. The lost souls have their thoracic cages opened, their sawn ribs exposing the heart, for it is at this beating organ itself that the patrons of the shooting-galleries fire. The women stand without flinching, supported on one leg with one knee bent, and they are hardly shaken when a bullet, an arrow or a knife perforates their thorax. On some of the faces the smile is in process of slowly giving way to a grimace, while the number of perforations gradually transforms them into madonnas of the seven dolours. Nevertheless they hardly bend their legs and retain their pose, while their arms and hands are not held in front to protect their torsoes but hang down by their sides. I wager they will even have the good grace to remain standing like this, overwhelmed but retaining a half-smile in their grimaces of suffering, even after they are dead. Before Manastabal, my guide, has time to restrain me, I rush towards the first booth within reach. I have only my rifle and can't fire into the crowd. So I strike out with the

butt right and left, ridding myself of all those obstructing free approach to the shooting-gallery. I leap over the counter without letting the appeals of Manastabal, my guide, stop me. But, once there, I no longer know what to do. It seems that the lost souls have been waiting for me to relax their fixed attitudes, for they all fall into my arms at once, most with the death-rattle in their throats. When Manastabal, my guide, at last rejoins me I attempt to free my right and left arms at the same time while pulling the lost souls to their feet.

Manastabal, my guide, cries:

(You can't do any more for them, you can see plainly that they're dead or dying. But you're going to get us killed, you're so impetuous.)

And indeed the patrons of the shooting-gallery, except for those who've had their skulls split open by my rifle-butt, furious at having been deprived of their targets, believing they are being robbed of them, prepare with the aid of the customers at the nearby stands to charge the counter.

We're standing behind it in the midst of the dead and dying. Never, since I've been coming and going in Hell with Manastabal, my guide, have we found ourselves in such a pass. I ask her to forgive me, and am preparing myself to face up to them when Manastabal, my guide, manages to make flight possible by bluffing the enemy. They believe, in fact, that we're entrenched behind the lost souls, some of whom have not fallen over and are still half upright, while others have collapsed into a heap. Then, concealed by the canvas at the back of the booth, we manage to get away through an interstice, with no one the wiser. Only later, when we have covered a good distance from the fairground, does Manastabal, my guide, say:

(My goodness, if it weren't for me, you'd have taken on a hundred of them single-handed. Don't you realize the value of flight on certain occasions?)

And when I ask her whether one shall often have to run away during an operation, she says:

(Yes, of course, every time one rushes into the wrong maneuver.)

XIII Limbo 2

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.)

I say, interrupting her:

(Manastabal, my guide, say no more about them. It's for me to sing their praises and to say that since they possess beauty of gesture and physique as well as strength, they lack nothing that can prevent them from becoming angels in Paradise, if such an opportunity comes about. Ah, Manastabal, my guide, as you know, there are all kinds of them, and some are most remarkable. There are some who go about with shaven heads and the threats they offer are engraved on their foreheads. There are some whose shoulders are girded in black leather, they go about with knives in their sleeves. There are some who wear garments studded with nails and have sharp blades in the toes of their boots. There are the mafiosi in their dark suits, with revolvers in their shoulder-belts.)

But that's not all, for Manastabal, my guide, does not share my enthusiasm and is even silent. At last she says:

(You talk of gestures, clothing, bearing. You celebrate the equivocal beauty of the bandits and pride yourself on being one of their company. All right. As long as you don't forget, in giving too great a price to forms and their deployment, what made them necessary: the cruelty of a world that compels crime. People arm themselves carefully, they arm their lovers, their friends. They hope to see the local tobacconist pass by alone at the edge of a wood after

sunset, with the day's takings, then they can rob him. Ah, Wittig, all this is guerilla warfare. What can we gain from it when it's the whole world we have to repossess?)

And I:

(Our daily bread of course, Manastabal, my guide.)

And I wonder if Manastabal, my guide, has some large-scale plan for the conquest of the world. But as she speaks to me of Hell and the conveyers who are stationed there to carry out rescues one by one, I can't help being impatient with the slowness of the proceedings and pointing out that at this rate we shall still be here in a hundred years.

VI Paradise I

My sovereign beauty, my sovereign good! You must take on human shape then, so that suddenly you won't seem so unreal. For me it's a mystery as unfathomable as the mystery of the incarnation in my native religion. And as Manastabal, my guide, approaches I can't refrain from calling out to her:

(Tell me, Manastabal, my guide, since when have the angels had sexes? I've always been told that they hadn't any. Even from here I can clearly make out their vulvas, though no one taught me to do so when I was young and later they tried to make me believe they were invisible.)

And as I began to shout (it's a miracle, Manastabal, my guide), a string of dykes appeared, naked on their motor cycles, their skin gleaming black or golden, and one after the other they rode over the hill, disappearing into a flowering bush. I felt impelled to say to them:

(Take care, there's no rose without a thorn!)

And for the first time during this journey I heard Manastabal, my guide, laugh. Then I knew that one is in Paradise. The air here is as rough as the skin of a peach and the sky is acid against the ridges of the hills. The mere deliverance from the incessant wind of Hell is a relief in itself. But then I must mention the texture of the air in this blessed place, where every kind of breeze blows in free succession, resting against the inside of the ears like warm cotton wool,

and also its smell, which renders one's limbs elastic, supple and relaxed.

Then I ask:

(Manastabal, my guide, do you think I should be able to fly?)

And she, my guide, with Paradise becoming her, says:

(Nobody becomes an angel at this point.)

But I myself feel so light that I close my eyes for fear of discovering that this is only dream, for even when I was a small, ignorant child I never knew such well-being. I hope it will last for ever, as it should in such a place. Then

Manastabal, my guide, says:

(Make no mistake, Wittig, this is only a respite. Don't forget one must soon return to Hell.)

If pain existed in this place I would willingly break myself into little pieces. I say:

(Since I've forgotten everything, Manastabal, my guide, tell me how one landed here?)

Manastabal, my guide, remains silent for a while. I look at her streaming hair. At last she says:

(Using your language one might say it was through compassion. But, as you know, that's a word which has lost all its meaning. You must see for yourself how it is.)

And I:

(Ah, Manastabal, my guide, I see I'm not mistaken. It's the mystery of the Incarnation. But I beg you, tell me more.)

Manastabal, my guide, normally static in appearance, has relaxed limbs and lively muscles. I have difficulty in attracting her attention. Quite suddenly she says:

(One will have to find words to describe this place, lest everything you see suddenly disappears.)

And I, amazed:

(Do you mean this is not real?)

She says:

(Look around you, weigh the air that touched you, breathe in the wind, fill your eyes with the shapes, masses and colours. What word comes into your mind?)

And I, pitifully enough:

(Beauty.)

Her laughter pounces like the casting of a bird to earth and she says:

(We won't have it for long. Furl the sails, Wittig. Hell is near.)

I throw myself against a young mimosa bush, which is one of the most tender plants in the world, and, clinging to its branches, burying my nose in its flowers, I say:

(Look, nothing loses its physical qualities. As the air softens, it only adds to our comfort. Even the words are made flesh.)

Manastabal, my guide, stops laughing and, if it were not inconceivable in such a place, I would swear I see tears in her eyes. She says:

(Spare us, Wittig. Especially as to the mystery of the Incarnation and the word made flesh, for there is still far to go.)