

The female body in question: a study of Monique Wittig's writings with particular reference to L'Opoponax

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THE FEMALE BODY IN QUESTION: A STUDY OF MONIQUE WITTIG'S WRITING WITH
PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO *L'OPOPONAX*

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Abstract

This thesis is a comprehensive study of Monique Wittig's fiction, in which I explore the links between womanhood, sisterhood and writing. Particular attention is paid to *L'Opoponax* (1964), in which I argue that Wittig suggests a way out of the impasse of Freudian theories of femininity. This is achieved at all levels: stylistic, formal and thematic. I begin by defining my psychoanalytic and literary contexts (Freud, Klein and Irigaray for the former, contemporary French, English and American women's writing for the latter), in order to introduce the major debates connected with the concept of the female body and its representation in Western culture. I then show how the Freudian drama of sexual difference - namely, castration anxiety as it affects the little girl - is both powerfully evoked and systematically sidestepped in *L'Opoponax*, with its focus on relationships between women. Using Klein and Irigaray, I describe the problems arising within the mother/daughter dyad. I suggest that *L'Opoponax* hints at a healed relationship but also leaves much unsorted; this is seen to pull against the radical innovations of later texts, particularly *Le Corps lesbien*, accounting for some of the violence to be found there. The question of the mother versus the woman is thus not fully closed, but creates a space within which the *amantes*, female lovers, can begin to live and move. I end by replacing this question within its wider context as it is a crucial one for the future development of feminist writing.

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List of Abbreviations

Works by Monique Wittig - Fiction and drama:

O : *L'Opoponax* (1964)

G : *Les Guérillères* (1969)

C : *Le Corps lesbien* (1973)

B : *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes** (1976)

V : *Virgile, non* (1985a)

Vs: *Le Voyage sans fin* (1985b)

P : 'Paris-La-Politique' (1985c)

TG: *The Guérillères* (1971)

*Co-authored with Sande Zeig

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Preface: Body, Woman, Nature

Qu'il n'y a pas d'«écriture féminine» doit être dit avant de commencer [...]. «La femme» ne peut pas être associée avec écriture parce que «la femme» est une formation imaginaire et pas une réalité concrète [...]. «Écriture féminine» est la métaphore naturalisante du fait politique brutal de la domination des femmes et comme telle grossit l'appareil sous lequel s'avance la «féminité»: Différence, Spécificité, Corps/femelle/Nature. (Wittig 1982: 7-8)

Wittig's creative writing can be seen, and indeed *has* been seen by many authors whose works will be discussed in this thesis, as a formidable challenge to all three of the following words: the female body. In its most obvious form, the individuality of *the* body is attacked and dismantled, enabling a new textual erotics/politics to be envisaged. Thus the *on* of *L'Opoponax*, which can be both singular and plural, and the *elles* of *Les Guérillères* speak of the power of the collective: *la génération*, to borrow Marcelle Marini's words (1991: 149), is the key group to be foundⁱⁿ Wittig's first novel, whilst warriors people the second. In *Le Corps lesbien*, as well as the community of island-dwellers, we find not so much an individual as a couple of lovers: *j/e* and *tu*, with the slashing of the first-person pronoun emphasising, at the simplest level, the intensity of desire and passion which literally splits the desiring body into (at least) two. *Brouillon pour un dictionnaire des amantes* (where the co-authorship of Wittig with Sande Zeig is in itself significant) is faithful to the plural of its title in bringing to life the world of the companion-lovers, whilst *Virgile, non* adopts yet another strategy by pairing 'Wittig' the narratrix with Manastabal, her conscience and guide, without whom the journey through the Inferno and towards a lesbian Paradise would be unpracticable and even unthinkable. Despite areas of dissonance which will be explored later - in particular, the play *Le Voyage sans fin* and the short story

'Paris-la-Politique' do feature individual narratrices - it is possible to argue that in Wittig's texts there is not just one body, but several.

On the subject of the word *female*, Wittig makes her position quite clear. There is no such thing as 'woman in nature', no such thing as a quintessential femininity or femaleness:

Nous avons été forcées dans notre corps et dans notre pensée de correspondre, trait pour trait, avec l'idée de nature qui a été établie pour nous. Contrefaites à un tel point que notre corps déformé est ce qu'ils appellent «naturel», est ce qui est supposé exister comme tel avant l'oppression. Contrefaites à un tel point qu'à la fin l'oppression semble être une conséquence de cette «nature» en nous, une nature qui n'est qu'une idée. (Wittig 1980b: 75-6)

Wittig plainly acknowledges her debt to Simone de Beauvoir, whose famous 'On ne naît pas femme, on le devient' provides the title and the inspiration for the article from which I have just quoted. Like her, she stresses the role of society in shaping 'ce produit intermédiaire entre le mâle et le castrat qu'on qualifie de féminin' (Beauvoir 1949, Vol. 1: 285); like her, she denounces both the patriarchal thought which has made such a product possible *and* the collusion with this unjust power to which most women are drawn, a collusion described as the inevitable consequence of the creation of femininity within patriarchy. Thus Beauvoir's 'Elle se cantonne obstinément dans le seul domaine qui lui soit familier [...]. Qu'on lui propose un changement elle jette les bras au ciel: «Il ne manquerait plus que ça!»' (Vol. 2: 318-9) becomes Wittig's 'Et si ça me plaît, à *moi*, d'être en laisse!', uttered by one of the enslaved souls she describes in *Virgile, non* (28). Both writers argue passionately for change. Beyond that point however, one crucial difference between them is in Wittig's insistence that, for change to occur in their condition, women must break off the heterosexual contract; lesbianism is the *only* way forward:

Nous [les lesbiennes] sommes transfuges à notre classe de la même façon que les esclaves «marron» américains l'étaient en échappant à l'esclavage et en devenant des hommes et des femmes libres, c'est-à-dire que c'est pour nous une nécessité absolue et comme pour eux

et pour elles, notre survie exige de contribuer de toutes nos forces à la destruction de la classe - les femmes - dans laquelle les hommes s'approprient les femmes et cela ne peut s'accomplir que par la destruction de l'hétérosexualité comme système social basé sur l'oppression et l'appropriation des femmes par les hommes et qui produit le corps de doctrines sur la différence entre les sexes pour justifier cette oppression. (Wittig 1980b: 84)

Wittig insists that such a critique of sexual difference needs to be wide-ranging:

A ce point disons qu'une nouvelle définition de la personne et du sujet pour toute l'humanité ne peut être trouvée qu'au-delà des catégories de sexe (femme et homme) et que l'avènement de sujets individuels exige d'abord la destruction des catégories de sexe, la cessation de leur emploi et le rejet de toutes les sciences qui les utilisent comme leurs fondements (pratiquement toutes les sciences humaines). (1980b: 83)

Given this deeply oppositional stance, it would come as no surprise if Wittig's creative corpus were entirely given over to the expression of overthrow; indeed, Erika Ostrovsky's book *The Constant Journey* (1991), which is the first full-length published study of Wittig's fiction, rests upon an analysis of the representational implications of the term. 'Tout geste est renversement', the alpha and omega of *Les Guérillères* (7, 205), is given pride of place as her guiding principle (Ostrovsky 1991: 3). And, indeed, there is no doubt that rage and anger about the status and definition of women inhabit much of Wittig's writing, bringing *Les Guérillères* and *Virgile, non*, in particular, to fever-pitch. Here are just two thematic examples from the many we find; the first lists the freedom-fighters' desired attributes, whilst the second portrays some of the victims of patriarchal violence who dwell in the last circle of Hell:

Elles disent, que votre poitrine soit une fournaise, que votre sang se réchauffe comme un métal qui s'apprête à fondre. Elles disent, que votre œil soit ardent, votre haleine brûlante. Elles disent, votre force, vous la connaîtrez les armes à la main. Elles disent, éprouvez au combat votre résistance légendaire. Elles disent, vous qui êtes invincibles, soyez invincibles. Elles disent, allez, répandez-vous sur toute la surface de la terre. Elles disent, existe-t-il une arme qui peut prévaloir contre vous? (G: 197)

On a dû pour la parade vider tous les hôpitaux de la ville et si on avait pu faire marcher les mortes on aurait également vidé les morgues, car celles qui passent à présent ont à peine figure humaine. Certaines font montre de banales contusions, bleus, hématomes, yeux pochés. D'autres ont la mâchoire et le nez cassés. Certaines ont des membres dans le plâtre et marchent sur des béquilles. D'autres ont les organes éclatés, la carotide tranchée, des perforations par balles, des lacérations par couteau, des cages thoraciques enfoncées à coup de pied. (V: 96-7)

Wittig's fight against patriarchy and the political models on which it rests (the concept of slavery, in particular) will be discussed in my sixth chapter, in which I also note Wittig's assessment of the genesis of her second novel: it was born through the impetus of 'une si parfaite fureur' (1994: 118). But that is not *all* that happens in her writing (not even in *Les Guérillères*), since an enigmatic figure also features there: the lesbian, also referred to as *amante*, female companion-lover. This thesis is devoted to an attempt to define this figure, to find her body through the range of contexts created within Wittig's fiction, contexts which are themselves both bodies and anti-bodies, simultaneously put on the page and taken away: femininity, familial figures (especially the maternal), the collective, spirituality, eroticism, even lesbianism itself in its commonly understood forms. On the latter point for example Wittig writes: 'Dans l'écriture, j'expérimente l'amour lesbien comme pratique violente et sauvage. Il faut en finir avec ce mythe de l'homosexualité mièvre et décorative, sans danger pour l'hétérosexualité, voire récupérable par elle' (1973b). All these contexts are problematised by Wittig, but *not* erased, not even totally rejected. Rather, the equally problematic but nevertheless *posited* figure of the *amante* is also seen to be entering into creative dialogue with them.

This brings us to the third word of my title: the body. This of course has many meanings: the body of texts and the embodiment of theory, as well as the human body and its many representational levels. Wittig addresses all these aspects and is deeply provocative and

transformative; I shall now provide an introduction to the strategies she adopts in her texts.

In *L'Opoponax*, Catherine Legrand's body is given a *lived* quality (to borrow an expression from phenomenology), written as it were from within, despite or perhaps thanks to the fact that it is to a large extent hidden: we are never told what Catherine Legrand looks like, but in a very real sense we come to know or rather to experience her body through witnessing its observations, movements, fears, desires and phantasies. In order to gain that experience, however, we have to negotiate our path through a text that maintains a double tension: one, between the individual situation of this little girl and the collective body of which she is a part; two, and in often dramatic fashion, across the troubled area of gendering processes. The gender of Catherine Legrand's body, the links between her female body and her self, come across as unstable and anxiety-inducing. Early on in the novel, she wonders if she is 'la seule petite fille [...] à n'être pas exactement une petite fille' (19) because she is made to wear trousers, which she hates; it is suggested that she wishes to conform to the category 'girls' by wearing skirts and dresses instead, but we sense how shaky the reassurance provided by such garments is likely to be. My own observation of girls of Catherine Legrand's age (three or four) confirms that she is representative of a widespread phenomenon: wanting to 'belong' to the category of girls by adopting its clothing, whilst underneath, all is questioning, confusion, uncertainty. 'Girlhood' and 'boyhood' are myths, this book already suggests: gender is not a natural given but the result of a complex process of insertion and choice, part-desire, part-reaction.

Later, after she has committed a *faux pas* in the classroom by exhibiting her bare foot 'qui n'est peut-être pas propre', Catherine Legrand experiences the following crisis:

[Elle a fait ça pour faire rire Denise Baume Pascale Delaroché Reine Dieu et voilà que personne ne rit. Chaque petite fille reprend la position normale en face de son bureau comme pour se mettre à travailler. On ne parle pas. Personne ne regarde Catherine Legrand. [...] On peut dire que ça n'a pas plu que c'est pour ça qu'il y a quelque chose qui se met à tourner à toute vitesse dans cette espèce de chose qui a l'air d'être Catherine Legrand, et quand Catherine Legrand a fini de lacer sa chaussure, c'est tout lourd au-dedans d'elle, c'est immobile à la hauteur des yeux, ça regarde au-dehors à travers les orbites, c'est pris, ça ne pourra jamais être autre chose que Catherine Legrand. (95)

Within a psychoanalytic perspective, this has a definite sexual meaning: Freud describes how, to a foot-fetishist, the foot symbolises the *phallic* female sexual organs and reveals the fetishist's need to fend off castration anxiety. Effectively the fetishist keeps coming back to the point *just before* his first-ever sight of the female genitals, when he still *expected* to see a penis there (1905/1977: 68, fn.1 added 1915). Freud makes the additional point that there is 'a coprophilic pleasure in smelling which has disappeared owing to repression. [...] [Fleet [...]] are objects with a strong smell which have been exalted into fetishes after the olfactory sensation has become unpleasurable and been abandoned' (68, fn.1 added 1910). I shall return to a much fuller discussion both of castration anxiety and of penis envy in my first chapter, whilst the role of faeces in the phantasied relationship with the mother will be addressed in Chapter 2. The point I am making now is that Catherine Legrand's relationship to her body as portrayed in *L'Opoponax* dramatises the power of what Namascar Shaktini, in her study of Wittig's fiction (1982), calls phallic metaphors of the body, to which I would add the power of the maternal metaphors. In this instance, Catherine Legrand offers her foot to her friends as an object of laughter; she wants them to share in the sight of it, in a keen bid to establish her own kind of communication with them. She wishes them all to laugh together and thus to break down the phallic/maternal symbolism of the foot, indeed even to circumvent it, to act as if such power had never existed, as if the foot were 'neutral', ready to receive their own, new meanings. But it doesn't work; her friends are deeply shocked, and each - even the

disruptive Reine Dieu - shows her displeasure by returning to her 'normal' position: on her own, separated from Catherine Legrand and from each other, facing the teacher's desk. The disturbing symbolism is repressed by each of them, not dispelled; in effect, their superego is also phallic/maternal, qualities abundantly embodied by their teacher as will become particularly relevant in Chapter 4. Catherine Legrand is profoundly distressed at the failure of her creative endeavour. She will never be 'someone else', she fears; never free her heavy body from the shackles of a symbolism she perceives as foreign. Her isolation is palpable, and our familiarity with Wittig's later texts may make us wish for her to be spirited away to the *amantes'* worlds brought to life there, as part of a thoroughgoing effort to reshuffle the body by shaking out the phallic/maternal. In such a world, the 'elle a fait ça pour faire rire' would find a welcome context; laughter in Wittig's subsequent texts is deeply subversive and creative, as Ostrovsky points out (1991: 107). The following example shows what can happen:

Elles rient alors et tombent à la renverse à force de rire. Toutes sont gagnées. Il monte un bruit pareil au roulement du tambour sous une voûte. Les briques du plafond tombent une à une, découvrant par les ouvertures les lambris dorés des salles hautes. Les pierres des mosaïques sautent, les pâtes de verre dégringolent, il y a des éclats de bleu de rouge d'orange de mauve. Le rire ne décroît pas. Elles ramassent des briques et s'en servant comme de projectiles elles bombardent les statues restées debout au milieu du désordre. (G: 129)

Pending the advent of such companions, anxiety is a relevant feeling to convey in the representation of Catherine Legrand's relationship to her body and forms a remarkable contribution to the project of *L'Opoponax: dire l'enfance*, to use Claude Simon's words (1964). But of course, as this thesis will demonstrate, a range of strategies is skilfully adopted from the outset to free Catherine Legrand from her anatomically-bound prison and promote the point of view of the *amante*. The *opoponax* itself, the poltergeist-like figure she creates under the impetus of her love for Valerie Borge, is a vital part of that strategy, as Wittig herself explains: 'the *opoponax* appears as a talisman, a sesame to the

opening of the world, as a word that compels both words and world to make sense, as a metaphor for the lesbian subject' (1986: 72).

Turning now to *Les Guérillères*, we find that this book describes how its heroines, freed from the shackles of patriarchy, set themselves the task of examining their relationship to their bodies. They begin with a process of reclaim, of 'seeing for themselves', which includes listing the many metaphors attached to their bodies under patriarchy. They denounce the destructive reasonings underpinning these metaphors, and although the word is not actually uttered by them they offer us a critique of phallogocentrism - patriarchal discourse whereby meaning is organised around the primary signifier of difference, the phallus:

Ils ont fait de ce qui les différencie de toi le signe de la domination et de la possession. Elles disent, tu ne seras jamais trop nombreuse pour cracher sur le phallus, tu ne seras jamais trop déterminée pour cesser de parler leur langage, pour brûler leur monnaie d'échange leurs effigies leurs oeuvres d'art leurs symboles. [...] Elles disent, je refuse désormais de parler ce langage, je refuse de marmotter après eux les mots de manque manque de pénis manque d'argent manque de signe manque de nom. Je refuse de prononcer les mots de possession et de non-possession. (G: 153-4)

But patriarchy is equally suspect, and indeed Wittig writes elsewhere that 'le matriarcat n'est pas moins hétérosexuel que le patriarcat: seul le sexe de l'opresseur change' (1980b: 76); it replicates the same oppressive structures with the added characteristic that 'ce qui définit la femme c'est sa capacité de faire un enfant (biologie)' (ibid.). Thus the *guérillères'* policy is to abandon bodily symbols altogether (G: 102).

Like Beauvoir, Wittig seems at times to cultivate the image of a person whose body is - or rather, *should be* - her own, an instrument of creativity and action, the mainspring of a centrifugal movement: *towards* the outside world. I shall return later to the other part of her writing which *does* attempt to reveal aspects of the body obscured by patriarchy, particularly in *L'Opoponax* and *Le Corps lesbien*; for the moment, and

remaining within the Beauvoirean 'centrifugal' perspective, we can argue that often in Wittig - particularly within *Les Guérillères* and *Brouillon* - the body's own life and in particular its female rhythms are of far less importance than political action to bring about a better world. What women are allowed, indeed encouraged to do with their bodies is to develop muscular strength and endurance:

Tu t'en vas seule, pleine de rire, tu te baignes le ventre nu. [...] Les roses sauvages fleurissent dans les bois. Ta main se déchire aux buissons pour cueillir les mûres et les framboises dont tu te rafraîchis. Tu cours pour attraper les jeunes lièvres que tu écorches aux pierres des rochers pour les dépecer et les manger tout chauds et sanglants. Tu sais comment ne pas rencontrer un ours sur les pistes. 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. (G: 126-7)

They are also expected to become adept in the use of weapons:

Elles disent, que celles qui veulent transformer le monde s'emparent avant tout des fusils. (120-1)

Les armes qui les intéressent sont portatives. Il s'agit de lance-fusées qu'elles portent sur l'épaule. C'est l'épaule qui sert de point d'appui pour tirer. On peut courir et se déplacer extrêmement vite sans perdre sa puissance de feu. (135-6)

Leur violence est extrême. Elles se heurtent avec bravoure. Nulle ne peut leur imposer de frein. Chaque fois qu'on fait des exercices, il faut réunir plusieurs dizaines d'entre elles afin qu'elles jouent ainsi ensemble. (143)

As will be seen from these extracts, violence is a necessary part of the *guérillères'* project; its nature and problems will be more fully discussed in Chapter 6. In *Le Corps lesbien* and the *Brouillon*, too, we find an exaltation of physical exercise, active games and the ability to fight, through which the *amante's* body develops its characteristic toughness and resilience; the prototypical figure is the Amazon, and the *Brouillon* describes many tribes from a remembered / imagined past who inspire the *amantes* of the Age of Glory - present-day lesbians. The following extract describes the Bedjas:

Les Bedjas portaient des armures de cuir rouge, des bottes en peau de serpent, des boucliers en python. Elles portaient toujours à leur ceinture la hache à double tranchant qu'elles maniaient avec beaucoup de dextérité quand elles étaient obligées de descendre de jument et de se battre corps à corps. A gauche, elles avaient leur étui à flèches et à droite leur arc. (B: 40)

This emphasis on a past that may well be fictitious, impossible to confirm in reality, might indicate that Wittig's model of the female body - or rather a body in which the femaleness is crossed out in favour of its Amazonian identity, concretely shown in the ablation of one breast - is utopian in the passive sense, in that such a body cannot definitely be said to exist or to have existed. But Wittig would raise two objections to this. Firstly, she has made the feminist point that 'history' as a social science often excludes women, and particularly lesbians:

La parole de Sapho, comme celle de toutes les femmes, a été mutilée, morcelée. [...] Mais Sapho m'intéresse moins que les textes antiques qui évoquent les territoires des amazones; malgré les témoignages de nombreux auteurs grecs, dont Homère, puis d'historiens arabes, leur existence réelle a toujours été niée par la tradition patriarcale de l'histoire. (Wittig 1973b: 25)

Secondly, she insists that the Amazonian world is not a dead culture locked in the past: it endures today. The following interview extract mentions her third novel, but would also apply to the rest of her corpus:

Les îles des femmes du *Corps lesbien* ne sont pas les îles du passé antique: il s'agit de nos propres îles (ou plutôt îlots) de culture, de vie. Partout, se constituent des groupes de femmes vivant entre elles et pour elles. *Le Corps lesbien* est une manifestation de cette civilisation amazonienne, en rupture radicale avec la société établie. (Ibid.)

One small but significant example of the narrow links Wittig establishes between 'past' and 'present' can be found in the extract about the Bedjas: by 1976, when the *Brouillon* appeared, the double-headed axe had already been adopted among lesbians as one of their symbols. Similarly the colour purple, another contemporary lesbian symbol as in the phrase

'lavender menace', is used a great many times in Wittig's work. Thus her writing rests partly on reality; as for its clearly utopian aspects, these should not be read as passive or negative: the point is not whether the worlds portrayed in the fiction exist in reality or not, but whether they are *desirable*. Wittig's utopian vision of the body in all its aspects is her manifesto and resolutely points to the future which, she argues, must mean progress for women. All her novels from *Les Guérillères* onwards describe in great detail how *amantes* live, and the implication is that theirs is the best of all possible worlds. Everything points to an egalitarian society where movement and communication are exalted. We have already seen the importance of physical exercise and of learning to handle weapons; here are a few notes, taken from the *Brouillon*, to illustrate other aspects of this desired lifestyle:

- Accommodation:
HABITATION

A l'âge de gloire, les besoins individuels ont changé du tout au tout. La notion d'habitation a été remplacée plus ou moins par celle d'abri. [...] On n'est pas obligée [...] de vivre toute sa vie dans la même habitation. La notion d'abri permet une vie fluctuante, flottante, sans attache. (117)

MAISON

L'endroit ou l'espace où une amante se sent bien. On dit, à l'âge de gloire, «j'ai des ailes à ma maison» pour dire que l'on n'aime pas se fixer. (166-7)

- Food:

Each Amazonian tribe's eating habits are described as follows:

Lait, sang, miel, viande crue, moelle des roseaux, fruits, tel a été le régime alimentaire des anciennes amazones. Elles se sont toujours refusées à faire de l'agriculture et à manger du pain, qu'il soit d'orge, de blé, d'avoine ou de seigle. (40-41, 49-50, 73, 102, 105-6, 110, etc)

The modern-day *amante* has slightly more choice:

ALIMENTATION

Sujet de bien des discordes. [...] Actuellement les partisans de la chair crue s'opposent aux végétariennes qui préfèrent manger les plantes. [...] Les carnivores [...] disent que les plantes vivent et que cependant les végétariennes les cuisent. [...] Les cadavres exquis sont dans le domaine de l'alimentation une tentative nouvelle puisqu'on attend la mort naturelle des bêtes et des amantes. (12-13)

- Child-rearing:

This applies to all the past tribes of Amazons described:

Leurs enfants ne étaient jamais le sein unique de leur mère. Elles buvaient du lait des juments que les amazones ont toujours considérées comme leurs soeurs, leurs animales totèmes. (40, etc)

I have deliberately chosen three areas - home, cooking, children - which are the stereotypical 'places' of and for women under patriarchy, in order to show how radically Wittig alters them to match a completely undomesticated *amante's* body. It is as if the latter must be free to move on at any time. We do not find in the description of her lifestyle any reference to the power of what Beauvoir calls 'l'inessentiel': things and processes over which the woman pretends to have control, but over which she actually has little or none. Cooking, homebuilding and child rearing are *not*, according to Beauvoir and Wittig, creative activities which the woman can claim as hers alone, and which can contribute to her autonomy, independence and freedom; Wittig is quite clear (1980b) that they are, instead, the marks of her slavery. This explains why for example the *amantes* of the *Brouillon* eat as they do: they feed directly from the animal or the plant, with cooking processes non-existent in the Amazons' case, minimal in the modern-day lesbians'. The women no longer find meaning or sustenance in elaborate food preparations because these would ground them, tie them to the hearth; moreover, such preparations carry the risk of being viewed as magical, alchemical processes: rituals valued for themselves, whilst covering up but actually acquiescing to the oppression of one group by another. Bread is particularly suspect because it is loaded with bodily metaphor: the rituals of the Judaeo-

Christian tradition are an obvious example; besides, it takes too long to make. Similarly, all references to dwellings and homes in the *Brouillon* and some in *Les Guérillères* emphasise a nomadic lifestyle, with shelter *subordinate* to a woman's convenience and pleasure. The latter aspect sheds its own light on the *Brouillon*: a home is, in effect, a lovers' relationship, a shelter emanating from the lesbians themselves. As for breastfeeding, we see that it is not part of the bond between the Amazons and their children, the implication being that it is a static activity for women; countless representations of the Madonna and Child locked together, immobile, in the master-viewer's gaze, are rejected in one stroke of the pen. The *Brouillon* presents a compelling account of mobility, adventure, dances and games of all kinds, besides which the 'joys of breastfeeding' fade. Very cleverly, Wittig and Zeig suggest that the children are not likely to suffer in the least from what may seem a gross dereliction of maternal duty; mares are viewed as the Amazons' equals, highly prized for their speed, courage and strength; babies drinking their milk will inherit their qualities. I shall return to the place of trans-species 'passages', metamorphoses and exchanges which occur in Wittig's writing; but before I do, I want to examine in more detail the premises upon which she bases her rejection of the domesticated body. It is useful once more to return to Beauvoir, whose depressing picture of the housewife seems indeed to beg for change:

Enfin si elle est «terre à terre», «pot-au-feu», bassement utilitaire, c'est qu'on lui impose de consacrer son existence à préparer des aliments et nettoyer des déjections: ce n'est pas de là qu'elle peut tirer le sens de la grandeur. Elle doit assurer la monotone répétition de la vie dans sa contingence et sa facticité: il est naturel qu'elle-même répète, recommence sans jamais inventer, que le temps lui paraisse tourner en rond sans conduire nulle part; elle s'occupe sans jamais rien *faire*: elle s'aliène donc dans ce qu'elle a; cette dépendance à l'égard des choses, conséquence de celle où la tiennent les hommes, explique sa prudente économie, son avarice. Sa vie n'est pas dirigée vers des fins: elle s'absorbe à produire ou entretenir des choses qui ne sont jamais que des moyens: nourriture, vêtements, habitat; ce sont là des intermédiaires inessentiels entre la vie animale et la libre existence [...]. Comment trouverait-on en elle audace, ardeur, détachement, grandeur? Ces qualités n'apparaissent qu'au cas où une

liberté se jette à travers un avenir ouvert, émergeant par-delà tout donné. (Beauvoir 1949, Vol.2: 316-7)

Placed in its historical context, this portrayal is convincing indeed. At the time of *Le Deuxième sexe's* composition, women's inferior status showed itself in many key areas; for example, although they had (only just: 1944) gained the right to vote, they had no access to contraception, no right to equal pay at work, and marriage often meant living in a state of material and financial dependence. A fuller description of this background is provided by Maité Albistur and Daniel Armogathe's *Histoire du féminisme français* (1977, particularly 437-445), whilst Claire Duchon (1986: 4, 12-13) acknowledges Beauvoir's place in post-fifties feminism and her role in changing some of the problems identified in her book, by joining the campaign for the liberalisation of abortion in 1971, for example. However, one of the problematic aspects of Beauvoir's thinking, which Wittig inherits, concerns the nature and place of the body. Beauvoir views it as a means, a springboard for action, and does not locate subjecthood there. It is clearly something to be transcended and in a very real sense mastered, and although the passage quoted above does not specifically mention the body the vocabulary for its elision is apparent: 'intermédiaires inessentiels', 'détachement', 'une liberté se jette à travers', 'par-delà tout donné'... This leaves the problem of the female body, and particularly the reproductive body, largely unsolved. Whilst rejecting, rightly, the enormous burden of metaphor with which patriarchy endows the female body, challenging for example the many myths which surround it, Beauvoir seems also to suggest that women would fare much better as persons, subjects, beings, if they could somehow not only shed these myths, but also the reproductive body itself. The latter crops up in the writing as some kind of dangerous or at least awkward mantle: 'la femme, comme l'homme, est son corps: mais son corps est autre chose qu'elle' (Vol.1: 46); on the subject of menstruation, we read that 'C'est dans cette période qu'elle éprouve le plus péniblement son corps comme une chose opaque aliénée' (ibid.), whilst it seems that true unfettered selfhood is the reward brought by the menopause:

Alors la femme se trouve délivrée des servitudes de la femelle; elle n'est pas comparable à un eunuque car sa vitalité est intacte; cependant elle n'est plus la proie de puissances qui la débordent: elle coïncide avec elle-même. (Vol.1: 49)

Wittig responds to this view, which in my opinion is based upon fantasy, of the female/reproductive body as somehow detachable from the self, by refusing to grant it any special status except as something to be treated with the deepest suspicion. In my fifth chapter, which is devoted to the maternal body, I shall follow the paths taken by Wittig's rage against those whom Beauvoir would call 'couveuses': women who view their reproductive bodies favourably and are absorbed by their processes - the *Mères* of the *Brouillon*, denounced by Wittig as traitors, whilst mothers in *Virgile, non* form a wretched underclass. As a prelude to the later discussion, it is important to mention the enormous problem which the reproductive body and indeed motherhood itself represent within feminism. In a recent article, Maureen Freely (1995) deplores the way mothers have either been ignored or insulted in the key feminist texts, including Beauvoir's. The following extract would be grist to her mill:

Une des malédictions qui pèsent sur la femme [...] c'est que, dans son enfance, elle est abandonnée aux mains des femmes. [...] [Elle] impose à l'enfant sa propre destinée: c'est une manière de revendiquer orgueilleusement sa féminité, et une manière aussi de se venger. On trouve le même processus chez les pédérastes, les joueurs, les drogués, chez tous ceux qui à la fois se flattent d'appartenir à une certaine confrérie et en sont humiliés: ils essaient avec un ardent prosélytisme de gagner des adeptes. (Beauvoir 1949, Vol.1: 305)

This fits in very well with Wittig's theory that femininity is artificially acquired with the collusion and collaboration of the mothers. But in expressing such views, Wittig may also be subscribing to an established tradition within avant-garde writing. Anne-Marie Dardigna (1980) analyses the misogyny, resting in part upon an attack against the mother, of many twentieth-century experimental male writers, including Robbe-Grillet, whilst Susan Rubin Suleiman (1990) also explores the negative image of the mother in the works of female and feminist contemporary authors, including Winterson and Wittig. She gives the following explanation:

To the extent that she is perceived as a defender and an instrument of patriarchy, the mother takes on all of the father's negative attributes even while lacking his power: as such, she is the perfect target for both the son's and daughter's anger. (1990: 138)

Wittig herself acknowledges the influence of the *nouveaux romanciers* on her writing: 'ce sont ces écrivains qui m'ont appris mon métier' (1994: 117). But it is quite possible that she may have inherited forms that are hostile to the mother, or which at least push her away. I am not talking of themes here, nor even of the way Wittig plays with genres and defies tradition in a clear bid to keep challenging what came before; what I have in mind is, rather, the textual erotics of *Les Guérillères* and especially of *Le Corps lesbien*, in which the body is the warrior-lover's food, drink, laboratory, playing field, musical instrument. *J/e*, the narratrix of the latter text, may be seen as a daughter playing with her mother's body, to transpose Barthes; and although *j/e* may and probably does stand for a multitude of women who take turns and swap roles, the *mother's* voice is never heard. At the end of my fifth chapter I refer to a passage where the narratrix, in distress, calls upon her mother; she appears, but 'en silence se tient' (C: 138), a figure in league with death - not the laughing, playful mother whom Suleiman, at the end of her aforementioned article, argues would be a revolutionary figure to find in a modern text. Of course, in many ways Wittig's writing is already revolutionary: Donna Haraway would agree with that view, and writes elogiously that the author knows 'how to write the body, how to weave eroticism, cosmology, and politics from imagery of embodiment, and [...] from imagery of fragmentation and reconstitution of bodies' (Haraway 1985: 92). But there is a problem attached to *fragmentation*. It is possible to argue that, because the phantasies of the *j/e-tu* passages stem from the earliest relationship with the mother, when the infant cannot perceive itself nor its mother as a whole, 'reconstitution of bodies' can only be partial: the mother's body remains in pieces, and moreover voiceless; it is attached to the narratrix/daughter's emergence as an *amante*, but rather in the manner of

a ghost, bringing to mind the ending of another lesbian novel, Jo Jones' *Come Come*, in which the narratrix is paralysed with terror at the thought of her mother coming into her home, whilst also dreading her absence: 'She cannot come in. She must not go' (197). This problem finds a context in the writings of Luce Irigaray, who argues that the relationship between mother and daughter has never been properly articulated and cannot perhaps be adequately represented, in the present state of the Symbolic. For the moment, they are stuck in and with each other:

Et l'une ne bouge pas sans l'autre. Mais ce n'est ensemble que nous nous mouvons. Quand l'une vient au monde, l'autre retombe sous la terre. Quand l'une porte la vie, l'autre meurt. Et ce que j'attendais de toi, c'est que, me laissant naître, tu demeures aussi vivante. (Irigaray 1979: 22)

It is possible to argue that in Wittig the lesbian daughter's birth happens at the expense of the silenced mother who is thus 'pushed back into the earth'. This is reinforced by the themes: the lesbian body comes onto the page with its reproductive organs either stripped off or subverted, diverted from their usual function, as in the case of the ova which I discuss in chapter 5. But there is more; it is not only the boundaries of femaleness that Wittig stretches. Her lovers become animals, birds, fish, inanimate objects, sometimes machinelike; the mother, the reproductive body, recede further. The whole process is akin to Haraway's description of cyborgs:

[O]rganisms and organismic, holistic politics depend on metaphors of rebirth and invariably call on the resources of reproductive sex. I would suggest that cyborgs have more to do with regeneration and are suspicious of the reproductive matrix and of most birthing. For salamanders, regeneration after injury, such as the loss of a limb, involves regrowth of structure and restoration of function with the constant possibility of twinning or other odd topographical productions at the site of former injury. The regrown limb can be monstrous, duplicated, potent. We have all been injured, profoundly. We require regeneration, not rebirth, and the possibilities for our reconstitution include the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender.[...] Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we

have explained our bodies and our tools for ourselves. (Haraway 1985: 100-1)

Regeneration such as Haraway envisions applies to the following passages from *Le Corps lesbien*:

M/on dos s'ouvre entre les omoplates pour laisser ^{passer} les membranes en éventail comprimées par les côtes. Violettes et translucides tout aussitôt elles se déploient et se mettent à battre. [...] Les ailes naissent sans discontinuer avec une vitesse qui s'accélère. (77)

M/es doigts poussent à une vitesse folle chacun d'eux atteignant à des longueurs quinze fois plus grandes que sa longueur originelle. (98)

M/es cellules sous tes doigts [...] s'élargissent. M/a peau se couvre d'ocelles de plaques rouges marron clair, les globules des noyaux cellulaires grossis des milliers de fois provoquent des perturbations considérables[.] (173)

Indeed, reading *Le Corps lesbien* prompts Judith Butler to ask whether the lesbian body which Wittig posits is 'really a body at all' (1987: 136). It is certainly a very different perception of the body from that which greeted Wittig when she was doing background research for the novel:

Sur des planches d'anatomie, destinées aux étudiants en médecine, figurait un écorché féminin, avec le moindre détail des muscles et des veinules; mais la représentation du sexe relevait de la mythologie: la vulve et le vagin étaient entièrement ouverts, alors qu'en réalité les parois vaginales sont adhérentes, et qu'en période de repos, elles ne présentent aucune béance. L'ensemble vulvo-vaginal était largement recouvert par un hymen: ainsi la femme apparaissait-elle disponible, ouverte en permanence et en même temps, voilée, réservée à la possession unique. Il s'agit là d'une ignorance et surtout d'une occultation totale de la physiologie féminine. (Wittig 1973b)

Wittig has a double agenda: reclaiming the body from the weight of patriarchal meaning, and also avoiding representations which might feature a merged relationship with the mother. Hence her use of 'une vision radiographique du corps' (1973b) to break with patriarchal, surface representational traditions going back to those of courtly love, on the one hand, and her use of fragmentation, proliferation, multiplicity on the other. The problem is that the latter does not

necessarily get away from the effects of merging, since the writing of *Le Corps lesbien* can be situated in the pre-Oedipal mode, when 'oneness' and 'multiples' are fluid concepts. And anyway, Irigaray writes that multiplicity is a problem for women and a further symptom of their under-representation (Irigaray 1977: 138, discussed in Whitford 1991: 81-4). Unless sexual difference is adequately represented, she argues that women risk losing something of their specific pleasure in this '«économie» du multiple' in which, moreover, the mother-daughter relationship cannot be articulated. In Wittig, an exchange between them is posited (entry for 'Fille' in the *Brouillon*: 96-7) but the strictures of her representational system mean that we are given no information about such an interaction; the relationship and its possible pleasure risk withering on the branch as a result - though glimpses are possible, as I suggest in my eighth chapter. For the moment, however, we need to bear in mind that the challenge to the concept of the female body and the search for the *amante's* in Wittig's creative writing also raise the question of the representation of the mother-daughter relationship and include a symptomatology of the maternal body.

It may be apparent by now that I intend to draw upon psychoanalytic theory in this study, and I should clarify my position on this. First of all, I am aware that Wittig is hostile to psychoanalysis, since it is one of the social sciences she denounces as being gender-based. This informs her rejection of *écriture féminine*, which, under the patronage of *Psych et Po*, uses and extends psychoanalytic models in its desire to articulate the feminine. The conflict between the *Questions féministes* collective, of which Wittig was a member, and *Psych et Po* has been described in particular by Hélène Wenzel (1981), who focuses on the differences between Cixous and Wittig, by Linda Zerilli (1991: 4), and, more fully, by Claire Duchon (1986). For Wittig, psychoanalytic theory is also deeply suspect because it is built on the exploitation of analysands, on their coercion and oppression, by practitioners who with

great *mauvaise foi* find in the unconscious precisely what they have formulated and put there:

Celles (et ceux) qui ne sont pas tombées au pouvoir de l'institution psychanalytique peuvent éprouver un immense sentiment de tristesse devant le degré d'oppression (de manipulation) que les discours des psychanalysé(e)s manifestent. Car dans l'expérience analytique il y a un opprimé c'est le psychanalysé dont on exploite le besoin de communiquer et qui tout comme les sorcières jadis ne pouvaient sous la torture que répéter le langage que les inquisiteurs voulaient entendre n'a d'autre choix s'il ne veut pas rompre le contrat implicite qui lui permet de communiquer et dont il a besoin que d'essayer de dire ce qu'on veut qu'il dise. Il paraît que ça peut durer à vie. Cruel contrat qui contraint un être humain à faire étalage de sa misère à l'opresseur qui en est directement responsable qui l'exploite économiquement, politiquement, idéologiquement et dont l'interprétation la réduit à quelques figures de discours. (Wittig 1980a: 47)

It is to be wondered what Wittig makes of the specific contribution of lesbian psychotherapists. Leaving this aside, her blanket rejection of psychoanalysis presents a real problem, as Zerilli (1991: 4) notes. Psychoanalytic theorists are not always prescriptive and dogmatic in their treatment of the issues of gender and of the place of anatomy in the construction of sexuality; reading Freud, we find - alongside some misogynistic and dated statements - a very rich study of the instability of gender categories in the unconscious, and the complexity of our relationship with anatomical factors. Dana Breen writes that for Freud, 'there is no natural sexuality, it is always psychosexuality, always a construction relatively independent of biology' (1993: 3). Psychosexuality encompasses the anatomical, the social, the emotional and relational, and reveals their interplay in the human psyche; as such it is relevant to my perception of Wittigian textuality. Moreover I do not believe that psychoanalysis constitutes an inward, purely private field whilst politics, including feminist politics, is a rigorously separate outside; rather, I find myself in sympathy with the views expressed by Jacqueline Rose:

I will argue [...] that the present discarding of psychoanalysis in favour of forms of analysis felt as more material in their substance and immediately political in their effects is a return to

positions whose sensed inadequacy for feminism produced a gap in which psychoanalysis could - fleetingly - find a place. What psychoanalysis offered up in that moment was by no means wholly satisfactory and it left many problems unanswered or inadequately addressed, but the questions which it raised for feminism are crucial and cannot, I believe, be approached in the same way, or even posed, from anywhere else. To ask what are the political implications of psychoanalysis for feminism seems to me therefore, to pose the problem the wrong way round. Psychoanalysis is already political for feminism[.] (Rose 1986: 83-4)

Interestingly, Wittig's stance regarding psychoanalysis is more ambivalent in her creative writing; for example in the *Brouillon* she hints at the possibility of an unconscious, although the social implications of this are clearly troublesome to her:

INCONSCIENT

Avertissement aux amantes, si vous avez un inconscient, vous êtes au courant. Mais à plus forte raison si vous en avez un prenez garde aux trafiqueuses d'inconscient. (B: 132)

I read this statement as a denunciation of psychoanalytic practices which aim to explain away homosexuality and force the lesbian to fit into a mould defined by patriarchy: that of 'normal' woman, who doesn't exist anyway. However, there is clearly an awareness on Wittig's part of the existence and richness of the unconscious; there are many references in the *Brouillon* to dreams and the desirability of reaching a deeper awareness (see for example the entries entitled 'Rêve', 'Paresse', 'Filet').

Given Wittig's ambivalence, I wish to pick up her pro-unconscious strand and suggest a use of psychoanalytic theory which will not, I hope, turn me into a 'trafiqueuse d'inconscient'; a preferable model to adopt is that of the *amantes* described in the *Brouillon* who create, collectively, a special net to catch and thus reveal each other's dreams (97). Freud and Klein will inform my reading, particularly in the first two chapters, although the relevance of Klein's theories to an understanding of the violence of the Wittigian text means that they will form a strand

running through the whole thesis. Luce Irigaray's critique of Freud and her work on femaleness, on the urgent necessity of bringing women into being through appropriate representation and conceptualisation of sexual difference, together with her emphasis on the mother-daughter relationship, will also be useful, since although there are points of departure between Irigaray and Wittig which will be mentioned at relevant points of the thesis there is also much to be gained from placing the two writers alongside. Both attempt to build a symbolism of the female body which says something of its specific pleasure - although they would define specificity differently; for Wittig it is that of the *lesbian* body. But, as Jan Montefiore points out, there are similarities between Irigaray's 'female' and Wittig's 'lesbian' (1987: 153-8).

My use of psychoanalytic models partly explains why I have chosen to focus so particularly on *L'Opoponax*: the first four chapters are devoted to it, and the chapter order of the whole thesis follows that of its seven sections, even if the second half opens up to include the whole corpus. By adopting such a method I have found more than just a structure for my arguments. *L'Opoponax* provides invaluable insights into Wittig's representation of a girl's development at many levels - emotional, physical, intellectual, linguistic, social/familial, spiritual and erotic - as she grows into an *amante*. Remarkably, Wittig *incorporates* psychoanalytic accounts of origins and development (the Freudian drama of the discovery of anatomical differences between the sexes) in a conscious bid to challenge them not through a process of rejection but rather of slanting, of viewing them from a different perspective. She manages for example to preserve the sense of Robert Payen's anxiety about the possible loss of his penis, the drama of his illness and death; at the same time, as Marcelle Marini perceptively points out, the text also suggests 'qu'une quéquette n'a jamais protégé de la maladie et de la mort, et laisse donc perplexe sur ses pouvoirs souverains. Comment vouloir «être comme lui»?' (1991: 153). Equally, Wittig's expressed criticisms of mothers do not prevent her from

powerfully evoking Catherine Legrand's earliest anxieties connected with the maternal body and their legacy in her psyche, whilst constantly suggesting representational ways of lessening their impact by providing alternatives to Kleinian patterns of ambivalence: there are indications right from the beginning of the novel that the *amantes'* world is a desirable possibility.

Should we believe, then, that *L'Opoponax* is germinal to the entire Wittigian corpus? Certainly, Wittig's depiction of Catherine Legrand's childhood and adolescence can help us to grasp some of the textual, theoretical, and emotional complexities of the subsequent books, and it is an illuminating process to examine, as I do in my work, the undoubted concordance which occurs between *L'Opoponax* and its successors. Yet it is also important to avoid pouring all Wittig's novels into the one mould fashioned from her first, prizewinning book. For a start, in Wenzel's words, 'each of her works rewrites a major literary genre, redefines and reinvents it' (1981: 284), and any comparison between her texts must retain an awareness of this. So *L'Opoponax*, whilst sharing in Wittig's general aim of presenting the world from a lesbian viewpoint (her 'war machine'), uniquely focuses upon childhood to do so - and indeed, possibly upon Wittig's own childhood, as is suggested by Brée (1989: 277) and Marini (1991: 157). Perhaps that is why the vision which emerges from *L'Opoponax*, despite its inclusion of anxieties and disturbances, is ultimately restorative, ending as it does with the words 'tant je l'aimais qu'en elle encore je vis' (281). Is Wittig, even whilst challenging many aspects of the body, physical and social, also keeping memories safe, treasuring them in this book? Certainly my initial reasons for wanting *L'Opoponax* to structure this thesis had much to do with my sense of it underpinning the whole corpus, rather in the manner of counterpoint in music; even the contrasts between the first novel and its successors would ultimately, I felt, contribute to an overall harmony, holding all other pieces (bits of bodies, and all subsequent writings) together in a triumphant proclamation of the reconstructed

Wittigian female body. The experience of composing the thesis has led me to review this project somewhat. Yes, peace and safety mark many moments of *L'Opoponax*, and especially its ending. But from then on, the Wittigian body is seldom 'safe', and rests upon a profoundly risk-taking economy. This dimension, and the full force of each separate text, is examined from my fifth chapter onwards, whereas it can be said that the first four chapters look at the building-blocks of *L'Opoponax* and its positive legacies to subsequent works. In other words I start by remaining faithful to my original plan; I posit a largely harmonious, redemptive picture of Wittig's challenges and achievements in writing the body, showing how she incorporates and rewrites Freud, uses Klein, subverts Sadeian representation and offers alternatives to negative portrayals of sisterhood. Then I put this picture to the test, revealing how the power of Wittig's fury and destructiveness, unleashed in later texts, strains against the figure of the posited *amante*. Hence the trans-corpus contexts of the second half, with its four bodies: maternal, collective, spiritual, erotic. These are war-zones, as well as places of immense possibilities for the body.

I no longer look to *L'Opoponax* alone, then, to provide shelter for the entire corpus and thesis, and choose instead to find my own way through both bright and dark places with all their tensions and paradoxes. But there is a context which can act as my guide in this process, and that is feminism. Of course, the term is riven with dissensions, not least if we survey its many French definitions in the last thirty years or so: *Questions féministes* and *Psych et Po* are both feminist, but the story of their differences is a long one. For me, and for the purposes of this work, feminism means positive change for women, which must include representational change. I am in no hurry to attach the prefix *post* to the word, either, because I think such change is in the making, not in the past. Although Wittig superbly rejects 'feminism' because it contains the word 'femme', suggesting that as a lesbian she has somehow moved on from its needs and issues, the representational, sexual and

political challenges embodied in her creative writing are relevant to women who are seeking new ways to represent themselves and each other, *not* as the deluded narcissists Wittig believes we are, but as participants in a process that has deep connections. 'The personal is political' may seem a simplistic motto nowadays, but it rests upon a far-reaching philosophy, the implications of which still need to be thought through. For women seeking change, Wittig's work is at the very least thought-provoking, at best revolutionary.

Feminism implies change in reading, too. After spending time listening to the battle cries of 'not this, but that' that have dominated debate on women's writing (including Wittig's) on both sides of the Atlantic for years, opposing heterosexuals and lesbians, mothers and amazons, S/M and vanilla sex, women of colour and whites, different social classes, and different critical approaches such as psychoanalysis and materialist analysis, I am one of a number of feminist scholars who wish to put forward a *propositional* model, where differing viewpoints can be contemplated and discussed together without the need to reject in order to embrace. This does not mean that decisions cannot be reached about the way forward, either; indeed, I believe such a model actually *enables* debate to move forward. Judith Still admirably describes such a reading practice, which she calls 'maternal' - a manifesto in itself, and certainly a welcome rehabilitation of the mother:

I wish to argue against always reading in terms of measuring against a standard, and in favour of reading in a motherly, creative fashion. [...] As readers, and therefore in a position of would-be mastery, the feminine economy of generosity can influence our practice. A search for feminines in texts can be a celebration of what we find as well as an analysis of the interplay of all the various differences, but it need not involve a marking down of those works judged as insufficiently feminine (or insufficiently anything else - VHL), since that very act of judgement would run counter to the economy of generosity. Nor should it be a fetishisation of any one particular mode of discourse or practice [...] (1990: 80)

No marking down, then, and no reified discourse in this propositional model - which does not and indeed should not preclude energetic argument, the revelation of knots and discrepancies. Working alongside such a provocative author as Wittig, indeed, it would be wrong to adopt a rather patronising stance - *tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner* - as a defence against the disturbing elements of her creativity. Such an approach would be unfair to her as a writer, as it would defuse some of her creative power and take away from her feminist impact. Perhaps the reading I have in mind is a blend of Still's motherliness with Wittig's and Zeig's Amazonian qualities: both a holding, contemplative activity *and* a nomadic, furiously inventive one. Certainly I read Monique Wittig's creative texts as voyages of discovery, in the strong Gulliverian sense, peopled with *fortes géantes de l'âge de gloire*. What picture(s) of the body do they build up - or destroy?

1. Discoveries

Si la femme avait d'autres désirs que 'l'envie du pénis', le miroir qui doit renvoyer à l'homme son image - fût-elle inversée - serait mis en cause dans son unité, unicité, simplicité. (Irigaray 1974: 58)

Ils ont inventé toute la sexualité dans le silence de la nôtre. Si nous inventons la nôtre, c'est toute la leur qu'il leur faudra repenser. (Leclerc 1974:53)

As we open *L'Opoponax* the first person we meet is a little boy called Robert Payen, loudly and playfully inviting other children to share in the sight of his penis. This rather humorous opening, which plunges us straight into the rich world and language of small children, gives great movement and energy to Wittig's representation of an important event in their lives: the discovery of anatomical differences. It is this representation, with its implications for both sexes, which will form the subject of this opening chapter. By referring mostly but not exclusively to the first two pages of the novel, I shall look at the different ways in which Robert Payen and the little girl, Catherine Legrand, are introduced, and show how Wittig is both responding to Freud's account of sexual differentiation by incorporating it into her narrative, and at the same time attempting to dismantle it by operating a shift in perspective. I shall be drawing mostly from Freud's 1924 and 1925 papers, 'The dissolution of the Oedipus complex' and 'Some psychological consequences of the anatomical distinction between the sexes'.

We will follow the text's lead and look, first of all, at the little boy. Here are the first lines of *L'Opoponax*:

Le petit garçon qui s'appelle Robert Payen entre dans la classe le premier en criant qui c'est qui veut voir ma quéquette, qui c'est qui veut voir ma quéquette. Ma soeur lui dit de se taire, et pourquoi tu arrives toujours le dernier. Ce petit garçon qui n'a que la route à traverser et qui arrive toujours le dernier. On voit sa maison de la porte de l'école, il y a des arbres devant. Quelquefois pendant la récréation sa mère l'appelle. Elle est à la dernière fenêtre, on l'aperçoit par-dessus les arbres. Des draps pendent sur le mur. Robert, viens chercher ton cache-nez. Elle crie fort de façon à ce que tout le monde l'entende, mais Robert Payen ne répond pas, ce qui fait qu'on continue d'entendre la voix qui appelle Robert. (7)

Robert Payen's seemingly confident (because it is loud) first appearance betrays its exact opposite, insecurity. Deep in the castration anxiety that will dissolve his Oedipus complex, he needs to be reassured that his penis is still there. Freud describes how the little boy fears punishment through castration by his father or parents for his incestuous Oedipal desires, and how this causes him to abandon them:

If the satisfaction of love in the field of the Oedipus complex is to cost the child his penis, a conflict is bound to arise between his narcissistic interest in that part of his body and the libidinal cathexis of his parental objects. In this conflict the first of these forces normally triumphs: the child's ego turns away from the Oedipus complex. [...] The authority of the father or the parents is introjected into the ego, and there it forms the nucleus of the super-ego, which takes over the severity of the father and perpetuates his prohibition against incest, and so secures the ego from the return of the libidinal object-cathexis. (Freud 1924/1977: 318-9)

Wittig underlines how strongly Robert Payen has now turned away from his mother, so much so that he fails to hear or pretends not to hear her calling him. She is inviting him to come back and collect a 'cache-nez', which it is tempting to think of as a 'cache-sexe', a rather disturbing garment: both arousing and potentially castrating. There is drama here, and his mother appears both threatening and rather pathetic, a representation to which I shall return.

How does the little boy come to believe in the threat of castration? Initially, according to Freud, he dismisses it, but an event comes along which has a remarkable effect, and gives credence to all previous warnings:

The observation which finally breaks down his unbelief is the sight of the female genitals. Sooner or later the child, who is so proud of his possession of a penis, has a view of the genital region of a little girl, and cannot help being convinced of the absence of a penis in a creature who is so like himself. With this, the loss of his own penis becomes imaginable, and the threat of castration takes its deferred effect. (Ibid.: 317-8)

The intense anxiety which the sight of the female genitals engenders gives rise, then, to Robert Payen's desire for reassurance about the presence of his own penis and its potency. His entry into the text thus resembles the 'recherche dans l'impuissance et le tremblement' with which

Bataille argues humans approach relations between the sexes (1957: 24) - except that he is wrong to talk of 'humans' regardless of sex, since the representation of this 'recherche', of this anguished desire, is in fact gendered by being profoundly anchored in male castration anxieties. Moreover, having said so much about anxiety, it is important to stress what a privileged position male desire occupies in Freud, in Bataille, and indeed in many male-authored representations of sexuality. This position is interestingly mimicked by Wittig's text, since an anxious little boy is also given prominence by being the first speaker, moving assertively and shouting an invitation to his schoolfellows. He is in a paradoxical position, both vulnerable and powerful; since he can ask for reassurance and presumably obtain it, as possessor of the penis around which whole representational systems are constructed, the power aspect comes across rather more strongly. He is certainly not paralysed by his anxiety, but can do many things with it because he can give it a clear shape. First and foremost, he can touch his penis, play with it, name it. I agree with Annie Leclerc, who in *Parole de femme* discusses the significance of such 'repérage' for the construction of a confident bodily identity: 'Le sexe du petit garçon, quelle que soit la répression qui très vite l'accable, a été vu, touché, manipulé, saisi isolément, nommé surtout, peu importe comment, pipi, zizi, quéquette, petit robinet, mais nommé' (1974: 63). I differ, however, from Leclerc's view that this naming always gives boys confidence, reassurance and strength; such a simplification of male sexuality to some extent echoes Freud's view that little boys follow definite, 'natural' steps in the resolution of their Oedipus complex and that the whole process of their gendering occurs relatively smoothly. Interestingly, Freud's 1924 paper says little about the possibly traumatic and long-lasting effects of the little boy's castration anxiety, although in 'Some psychical consequences' (1925) a few important lines do hint at the future. As far as Wittig's representation of Robert Payen is concerned, then, I believe it is important to retain a double focus: he is at the same time suffering from castration anxiety *and* enjoying a privileged relationship to his male body, which he can visualise and with which he can play.

The text provides clear instances of such playfulness: for example, Robert Payen has given his penis a nickname, 'quéquette' - a rather affectionate term which also arouses a *frisson* of naughtiness, by displaying the syllable-duplication characteristic both of pet-names (maman, papa, coco, tata, etc) and of many derogatory terms (cucul, chouchou, caca, zinzin) in childish vocabulary. This duplication is part of the great interest in sound-play revealed by Robert Payen's words, with the double [k] of 'quéquette' echoed in 'qui c'est qui' and the whole question repeated twice, leading to a strong alliterative effect. Such work with the signifier is seen to become an important weapon in the fight against anxiety, since Robert Payen seems as absorbed in the way he is voicing his question as in its content; we can go as far as to say that he is forcing his body into the signifier, as if it were a genie to be pushed into a bottle for containment. He isn't the only male to do this: 'Mais qu'est-ce que l'érotisme?' writes Barthes for instance, dismissing the possibility of an independent role for the body: 'ce n'est jamais qu'une parole, puisque les pratiques ne peuvent en être codées que si elles sont connues, c'est-à-dire parlées' (1971: 31-2). This touches on the debate concerning the place of prediscursive phenomena in the construction of gender and sexuality. Barthes, Lacan and Freud's 1924 and 1925 texts dismiss their relevance, and hence the possibility of a knowledge, or awareness, of the gendered and genitally erotic body prior to language acquisition. There are other views, however: indeed, Freud's himself, expressed in his later paper 'Female Sexuality' (1931), concerning the crucial importance of the girl's earliest relationship with her mother, and the need to make a similar study of boys (1931/1977, 383); and Melanie Klein's, whose theory will inform my next chapter, in which I re-examine both boys' and girls' anxieties in the light of this earlier, and very enduring, awareness of the prediscursive body. Whichever type of bottle we choose for the genie's prison, the body is not easily spirited away into floating signifiers and discursive configurations; Robert Payen's anxiety remains.

Another strategy open to the anxious male is that of transgression. It is tempting to view Robert Payen's invitation as a desire to shock the nun, to threaten the sexual purity she represents. Such fascination with

religious life and morals, and the desire either to attack them or to show them as profoundly corrupt, form a strong leit-motiv in much Sade-authored or inspired erotic work (the priests in Sade are depraved, the Spanish priest in Bataille's *Histoire de l'Oeil* is tortured, the nun in Pauline Réage's *Contes pervers* is a sex-starved sadist, etc). Using classic Freudian terminology, we can say that these texts play at the doors of the unconscious, where id and superego meet or rather overlap: but instead of meekly turning away from Oedipal desires in deference to parental authority, the male, penis-bearing text desperately needs to undermine such authority; it cannot be shattered, however, hence the repetitive and monotonous quality of the transgressive actions to be found in these Sadeian authors' pages. But Wittig's writing is, as I will show in Chapter 4, a fundamental challenge to the Sadeian text, and accordingly Robert Payen's wish to 'choquer la religieuse' is handled with subtle mockery: 'Ma soeur lui dit de se taire, et pourquoi tu arrives toujours le dernier.' When we study the representation of nuns in *l'Opoponax*, we shall see that Wittig attempts to place them in a different world from the phallic, heterosexual one; if we provisionally agree that she succeeds, it is possible to argue that within such an economy, and as far as the representation of the nun's viewpoint is concerned, neither Robert Payen's boasts nor his anxieties have much relevance. Transgression may be an option in other settings, but not here: once more, Robert Payen remains unassured.

Having looked at various strategies open to Robert Payen to deal with his anxiety, we now need to discuss the crucial importance of sight in the representational systems built up to make sense of gender. This emphasis on the visual finds its expression in Robert Payen's need to be reassured by his eyes or his schoolfellows' of the presence of his penis: 'Qui c'est qui veut *voir* ma quéquette' (my italics).

In *Parole de femme*, Annie Leclerc offers a useful critique of such visual privilege and wishes that other senses could be brought into play. Discussing phenomenology, she welcomes its task which she defines as 'Revenir aux choses mêmes, partir du monde lui-même tel qu'il se donne à

la conscience' (165), but is amazed that phenomenology's concept of consciousness leaves so much aside:

Mais quoi la conscience? Des yeux bien sûr, mais aussi des oreilles, des doigts et toute la peau, des narines, une langue, non? Peut-être bien d'autres choses encore?

Alors, *pourquoi* la phénoménologie ne parvient-elle jamais à sortir d'une méditation sur le voir? Pourquoi ce privilège, mieux, cet intérêt exclusif accordé au regard? (Leclerc 1974: 165-6)

Leclerc locates this privilege - which also very much angers Wittig, as her vituperative speech in *Virgile, non* (114-5) shows - in the fact that sight is supremely able to inform us of our separateness from the world, from things, and from each other. This has implications on *jouissance*, which, as she perceives it, comes from 'la confusion intime des chairs' (166). We all become separated from this intimate pleasure:

Voir, c'est jouir de la non-jouissance du monde.

Alors, c'est plus qu'il faut dire: la vue n'est pas seulement pourvue de dignité philosophique, mais de mâle dignité. La vue est l'image visible du désir. (166)

For Leclerc, sight is a peculiarly male sense because its activity can be equated with the phallic: 'Le regard est tout entier effusion. Mon regard se projette sur ce lieu, cet objet où je ne suis pas' (166).

Moreover, it is the sense of mastery and dominance:

Entre le monde regardé et mon regard sur lui se noue un rapport de domination qui ne fait jamais problème; j'en suis le maître. Le monde surgit à mes yeux pour autant que je le vise. Le monde est ma visée, mon intention, mon projet, mon désir. [...] [L]es choses n'ont d'autre rôle que d'obéir à la quête, au projet de conquête du regard; bref, à se laisser voir. (167)

If we follow Leclerc's reasoning, Robert Payen is able to dominate his penis by seeing it, and to some extent to master his body. We note that such mastery is incomplete however, since he also needs others to see his penis in order to become reassured of its presence; nevertheless, he has clearly already elected sight as the superior sense. Although I am sceptical about the solutions Leclerc proposes for such a representational distortion (basically, that it is almost exclusively women's responsibility to instruct men to respect other senses too), I find her critique of the supremacy of sight convincing, and relevant to

the Wittigian task of re-representing the sexes. It is helpful to bear in mind the relevance of such links between sight, consciousness and power as we return to the event which, according to Freud, made Robert Payen fear the possibility of castration: the sight of the female genitals. This has enormous representational implications. 'Qu'on n'oublie pas, en effet, writes Irigaray in *Speculum*, ce que la "castration", le savoir de/sur la castration, pour Freud en tout cas, doit au regard. Regard, en jeu de toujours...' (53). Relying on the look, for Freud, means that the little girl will be perceived by the boy as lacking an organ and even as mutilated. This perception gives rise to 'a terrible storm of emotion in him' (Freud 1925/1977: 337), since as we have already seen he fears the same thing will happen to him. But this storm may permanently affect his view of women, too:

This combination of circumstances leads to two reactions, which may become fixed and will in that case, whether separately or together or in conjunction with other factors, permanently determine the boy's relations to women: horror of the mutilated creature or triumphant contempt for her. These developments, however, belong to the future, though not to a very remote one. (Freud 1925/1977: 337)

Robert Payen is, in my opinion, already in Freud's not very remote future when he turns away from the shouting (hysterical?) figure of his mother. As she cries after her son, larger than life ('par-dessus les arbres'), at a window from which sheets hang, symbolising bedrooms and sexual intimacy, she is the embodiment of dangerous Oedipal desires and also, I feel, the locus of her son's 'horror of the mutilated creature'. As for 'triumphant contempt', perhaps his stubborn silence is proof of that. A more definite example will occur later in the first section, when Robert Payen has the following conversation with a little girl:

Le petit garçon qui s'appelle Robert Payen dit, regarde ma quéquette. Pourquoi tu as ça toi? Parce je suis grand. Moi j'en aurai aussi? Oui quand tu seras comme moi. Mais quand? Je te dis quand tu seras comme moi. (19)

Robert Payen seems to have overcome feelings of horror by reassuring himself that the little girl is in fact a little boy who hasn't quite grown into one yet. She is thus inferior to him and his attitude therefore displays contempt of the female body, whose function is to ensure that he remains 'big'; but there is also a genuine desire to

reassure the little girl by telling her that, in essence, she is like him. This rather resembles some men's friendly efforts, as reported by Leclerc in *Parole de femme*, to convince women that they do in fact possess a mini-penis: the clitoris. Such men's attitudes may seem to be an improvement on 'triumphant contempt', but are still akin to it, since they rely on a visually-bound concept of sameness:

J'ai beau être touchée d'un tel parti-pris de gentillesse, force m'est de reconnaître qu'un pénis bandé a tout de même plus d'allure, de conviction, de grandeur somme toute, que la secrète et confuse érection de mon petit clitoris... Eh non, mon clitoris n'est pas un pénis miniature, eh non je ne bande pas; pas plus que je n'éjacule... Et comme c'est drôle cette bonne volonté de me donner en propre ce qui ne me plaît pourtant que dans la mesure où ça ne m'appartient pas. C'est si mal deviner ce que j'aime. (151)

Irigaray's *Speculum* radically challenges this economy of the same. Discussing Freud's theory of sexual difference, she underlines that it rests on a representational system that cannot in fact encompass otherness:

[L]e désir du même, de l'identique à soi, du soi (comme) même, et encore du semblable, de l'alter ego, et pour tout dire de l'auto... et de l'homo... de l'homme domine l'économie de la représentation [...]. La "différenciation" en deux sexes part de l'a priori du même: le petit homme qu'est la fillette ayant à devenir un homme moins certains attributs [...]. Un homme moins la possibilité de se (re)présenter comme homme = une femme normale. (Irigaray 1974: 26-27)

Therefore, Freud's system cannot accommodate those parts of the female body which have no male equivalent, but nevertheless play a vital part in the little girl's pleasure in and awareness of her body: her labia, in particular. We shall develop this when we discuss Catherine Legrand's representation. For the moment, and returning to Robert Payen's portrayal, Irigaray's convincing arguments lead me to say that his sight has already become highly selective, since he does not look beyond the little girl's absence of penis - and, indeed, he does not enquire about the narcissistic, pleasurable value of other parts of his own body, either. It is not only the little girl's body that risks becoming impoverished within the Freudian representational system. In Jane Gallop's words, '[m]ale genital anatomy does not determine phallic

logic, but rather phallic logic determines a certain unitary perception of male genitalia' (1983: 78).

Yet, beyond the male emphasis on sight and on sameness which Wittig dramatically places centre-stage as the little boy discovers his gendered body, these representations of Robert Payen and his relationships with his mother and with little girls do hint at other phenomena. The first paragraph of the novel reveals not just his castration anxiety but also his fear of being stifled by his mother. She comes across as loving in an oppressive way, invasive even, with her voice violating the child's privacy as it penetrates the recesses of the playground. Her obsessive need to wrap him up in a scarf heralds his illness and death later in the section: '*Le petit garçon à la quéquette qui s'appelle Robert Payen est malade. Il a de grandes écharpes*' (19, my italics). It seems the stifling, housebound mother, a pathetic figure openly despised by Wittig in her later work, has scored a victory over her small son's resistance. The portrayal of this mother-son relationship is particularly interesting in that it reflects new psychoanalytic perspectives on masculinity, which recognise the importance of the pre-Oedipal phase and, significantly, the implications of the boy's early involvement with his mother (see Breen 1993). For example, Greenson writes:

It is my contention that men are far more uncertain about their maleness than women are about their femaleness. I believe women's certainty about their gender identity and men's insecurity about theirs are rooted in early identification with the mother. I am using the term 'dis-identify' in order to sharpen my discussion about the complex and inter-related processes which occur in the child's struggle to free himself from the early symbiotic fusion with the mother. [...] The male child's ability to dis-identify will determine the success or failure of his later identification with his father. (Greenson 1968: 370, quoted in Breen 1993: 28-9)

It is possible to argue that Wittig portrays a little boy who has been unable to dis-identify from his mother and to free himself from the threat of engulfment. The absence of any representation of his father until after Robert Payen's death is also relevant:

How much of the boy's identification with the father is a counter-identification, actually a 'contra'-identification, a means of counteracting an earlier identification? Is it not in this area

where we can find an answer to why so many men are uncertain about their maleness? Perhaps it is the shaky basis of their identification with the father, their contra-identification, which makes them so reactively contemptuous of women and so envious, unconsciously. (Greenson 1968: 373, quoted in Breen 1993: 29-30)

Wittig does not carry her inquiry into masculinity very much further in her writing, the focus of which will mostly be the creation of a lesbian identity as distinct from the feminine. However, her depiction of Robert Payen's anxieties, however brief, is most relevant to a discussion of Wittig's perception and critique of sexual difference. Even though Freud's account remains extremely important in providing a framework for an understanding of psychosexuality, it is possible to see how it can also be construed as restrictive of the lived body's possibilities (both male and female), and possible therefore to understand Wittig's desire to operate a shift in perspective. In order to show how she does this, we now need to look at the way in which her representation of Catherine Legrand challenges Freud.

We are not immediately or directly told how Catherine Legrand responds to the sight of Robert Payen's 'quéquette', though many indirect reactions to this event will occur later in the opening section and will need to be discussed in my next chapter. For the moment, we need to remind ourselves of what Freud believes happens to the little girl. When she sees a little boy's penis and discovers she has none, '[s]he makes her judgement and her decision in a flash. She has seen it and knows that she is without it and wants to have it' (Freud 1925/1977: 336); this is the penis-envy which will play a central part in her gendering process. How does she account for the absence of her penis? Freud gives two answers: in his 1924 paper he writes that she believes she has lost it by castration (1977: 331), whilst in 1925 his view is that she will hold her mother responsible for sending her into the world 'so insufficiently equipped' (338). This opinion is reinforced in his 1931 paper, 'Female Sexuality' (381). Another important consequence is that she loses interest in clitoridal masturbation, which for Freud is a masculine activity. He provides the following explanation:

It cannot be anything else than her narcissistic sense of humiliation which is bound up with penis-envy, the reminder that after all this is a point on which she cannot compete with boys and that it would therefore be best for her to give up the idea of doing so. Thus the little girl's recognition of the anatomical distinction between the sexes forces her away from masculinity and masculine masturbation on to new lines which lead to the development of femininity. (340)

The little girl's Oedipus complex comes into force when she 'gives up her wish for a penis and puts in place of it a wish for a child: *and with that purpose in view* she takes her father as a love-object' (340). As a result of this, her mother becomes the object of her jealousy. This turning away from the mother is a strong instance of Freud's at times very negative description of relationships between women, as we shall now examine.

Freud believes that, at an earlier stage, when the little girl realises that her absence of penis is not in fact a personal punishment but is a characteristic common to all females, 'she begins to share the contempt felt by men for a sex which is the lesser in so important a respect' (337); no wonder, then, that Oedipal depreciation of the mother and preference for the father can occur. This view, whereby the possibility of a female collective body, including a positive relationship with the mother not dominated by the phallus, is thrown out of the representational arena, would to say the least seem unpalatable to Wittig, who stresses the value of such a collective and strives to bring it into being through her creative writing and her political action. She would equally reject Freud's view that the wound to female narcissism can be soothed when the little girl grows up, becomes a woman, and has a baby son. For Irigaray, this is an illustration of what she calls woman's 'déréliction', since she can do no more than live her life and her body by proxy:

Sa satisfaction plénière ne découlera, une fois de plus, que d'une procuration. Phallique. En (re)donnant la vie, elle-même, à qui a droit au pouvoir, en (re)mettant au jour l'emblème de la puissance, elle se doit d'être pleinement heureuse. Orgueilleuse de s'être, elle-même, prêtée à la manifestation de son infériorité anatomique. Complice, en quelque sorte, de ce "destin" que son "propre" ventre ré-édicte en perpétuant la prééminence et du pénis et du sperme.

Son plaisir ne peut avoir d'autre origine, ou fin, que de re-susciter, "relever", toujours l'organe mâle. (Irigaray 1974: 133)

In such a scheme of things, the birth of a baby daughter can only be a disappointment to her:

Humiliation redoublée. Re-marque peu glorieuse de son sexe. Inaptitude à re-produire une "bonne copie" du sexe: le pénis. Dès lors replacée contre son désir dans, devant, un problème resté irrésolu: la relation à la mère. (133)

All these points, then, unite to form the phallic scenario within which, for Freud, the little girl's gendering occurs. Let us now read Wittig's first representation of Catherine Legrand:

La première fois que Catherine Legrand est venue à l'école, elle a vu de la route la cour de récréation l'herbe et les lilas au bord du grillage, c'est du fil de fer lisse qui dessine des losanges, quand il pleut les gouttes d'eau glissent et s'accrochent dans les coins, c'est plus haut qu'elle. Elle tient la main de la mère qui pousse la porte. (7)

The narrative tense has switched from Robert Payen's present to the perfect, a past tense which washes round the little boy's castration anxiety and his conflict with his mother to suggest a new relation to origins. Catherine Legrand's first appearance is very different from Robert Payen's: no shouting, no vocal wish for reassurance, but a view of the world which comes across as contemplative and reflective. One remarkable feature of this view, or rather vision, is its focal variety, since Catherine Legrand can at the same time see the wire fence, the vegetation alongside it and the playground beyond. Her vision also seems to travel in time, or at least to speculate on what might happen at another moment, in different weather conditions: 'quand il pleut'. It is a rich, multi-layered perception, which heralds the possibility of representing the lived body in exciting new ways. Wittig's description of 'le grillage', for example, is remarkable and deserves attention. Let us first remind ourselves that in the Freudian scenario, the female genitals are only a castrated hole: even if they engender horror in the male, it is because he believes there is nothing else to see. This could be symbolised by holes in a wire fence, if these were flatly described and thus rendered at best insignificant, at worst sinister; but this is not the case here. 'Losange' or 'diamond' are positive words to describe

both the designs in the wire mesh and the shape of the vulva; they transform the zero-circle, sign of absence and lack, into a potent sign connecting Catherine Legrand with her own bodily self, and with other women. 'Losange' is particularly evocative in that it rhymes with the French word for angel, just like 'orange' which will play its part later in this section. An important word indeed: angels will, at the end of Wittig's corpus - the last lines of *Virgile, non* - celebrate the triumph of a lesbian paradise and the power of love between (transformed) women. It is significant that many 'losanges' are immediately put onto the page, and that they are formed precisely through such multiplicity; indeed 'le grillage', the transparent, airy fence made of smooth wire, could not exist any other way than through the weaving together of such light, half-open designs which let air through, and manage to touch each other without collapsing into fusion.

It may seem an obvious point, but important to repeat nevertheless, that Wittig is not only writing in an anatomically referential mode when she presents us with these diamond-shapes. There is a tension between wanting to represent the vulva per se, as a cherished part of the body, and attempting to surpass the need for such an image. Indeed, *Les Guérillères* will show us how representations of the female genitals must be unearthed only to be critically examined, which does include a moment of celebration; ultimately, however, they must be abandoned:

Elles disent qu'elles n'ont pas à puiser leur force dans des symboles. [...] Elles disent qu'il faut alors cesser d'exalter les vulves. [...] Elles disent que tout symbole qui exalte le corps fragmenté est temporaire, doit disparaître. Jadis il en a été ainsi. Elles, corps intègres premiers principaux, s'avancent en marchant ensemble dans un autre monde. (G: 102)

It may not however always be possible for the text to jettison a love of parts in the name of reunification. Yes, indeed, Wittig ardently proclaims that the body must cease to be reified, fetishised, broken into pieces, its organic life, connectedness and movement destroyed. But significant traces of fetishism and fragmentation do remain in the text, particularly in her erotic writing, a thorny subject which my eighth chapter will address, together with the tensions inherent in the collective body: on the one hand, we find in Wittig's texts that what

matters is not the isolated female body, but the relationships between many living, active, communicating bodies; on the other, we find that such relationships are not free from conflict. Tensions occur between two desires which Wittig expresses with equal passion: the wish for a lesbian collective order and the exclusive, one-to-one love felt by one woman for another. For the time being, however, in order to explore the possibilities of positive representational change offered to women by Wittig's writing, we need to posit that she is indeed creating an 'autre monde', in which the body has been reassembled and movement together, between and with women, is possible. The 'los/anges' (les anges) of the wire fence are the messengers from such a world, with its renewed sociality. They are neither flat, monotonous copies of vulvas seen as disconnected organs, such as are used or abused within phallographic culture; nor are they exalting Woman as might happen within the limited and equally body-fragmenting iconography of a reclaimed matriarchy. What are the characteristics of this new representational world, which Wittig's vulva-designs are heralding?

I have already stressed the importance of connectedness, which is a key element of this renewed representation. I have put this within the collective context, by saying that it is impossible to imagine separating the 'losanges' from each other, within the fabric of the wire fence. But there is another aspect to connectedness, which concerns the individual woman's relationship with her own body. In the quote from *Les Guérillères*, Wittig refers to 'corps intègres', whole, re-integrated bodies. One problem is knowing how women are to maintain such a strong, positive body-image, since many forces exist which may cause it to fragment again. But the few lines introducing Catherine Legrand hint at a substance which can work within the female imaginary just as it works within the female body: it is 'cyprine', a Wittigian neologism which means rather more than love-juice, and which I prefer to use untranslated. In *L'Opoponax*, it makes its first subtle appearance thus: 'c'est du fil de fer lisse qui dessine des losanges, quand il pleut les gouttes d'eau glissent et s'accrochent dans les coins' (7). The proliferation of [s], [z] and [l] sounds in itself creates a sense of flow, and the rain / cyprine is shown moistening the 'losanges' as it

moves over the very material which creates them, the wire. Cyprine is a powerful connector. It cannot be separated from the woman's body, from her skin, as is the case for a man's ejaculate, or a mother's amniotic fluid or milk; it is the expression of her pleasure in and with her own body, an erotic substance which connects her to others and which she also gets to keep. In some ways, it can be likened to the concept of 'le muqueux' as expressed by Irigaray (1984: 108, 1985: 270); her creative reference to the woman's two pairs of lips (1977: 212), and Wittig's image of her two mouths (B: 42), are closely linked. The woman's sexuality and her speech can now begin to develop in a non-phallic, not purely maternal representational world. Cyprine and 'le muqueux' are manifestations of this world and are partly located in a renewed female lived body and partly located in the female imaginary, joining the two in a creative dialogue. Moreover, both writers' concepts have the representational advantage of shifting perception away from the supremacy of the look by privileging touch. '[I]t is the *touch* which for the female sex seems to me primordial: these 'two lips' are always joined in an embrace', writes Irigaray in *Women's Exile* (1977b: 65). Wittig would add: thanks to cyprine.

There is however a crucial difference between the two writers in that for Wittig, cyprine cannot be the bridge between the sexes Irigaray envisions. Whilst connecting a woman to her own erotic body in a way that is outside, and owes nothing to, the reign of the phallus and the child-producing function, the Wittigian revision of the 'muqueux' also uniquely manifests the power of love for another woman. 'On dit souvent de la vulve qu'elle est une bouche. Bouches et vulves sont les deux parties les plus sensibles dans l'état d'amour, l'une allant souvent avec l'autre accolées', writes Wittig in *Brouillon* (42) before going on to quote from writings by other *amantes*, celebrating the love that is expressed by the two mouths. Cyprine provides the tide upon which Wittig's *amantes* can sail away from Freudian representation:

[L]e flot montant débouche dans le ciel, adieu continent noir de misère et de peine adieu villes anciennes nous nous embarquons pour les îles brillantes et radieuses pour les vertes Cythères pour les Lesbos noires et dorées. (C: 20)

The drops of rain of *L'Opopanax* may seem modest in comparison with such confident lyricism, but they definitely bring a promise of a world to come, appropriate to the vision of one who doesn't yet quite know that she is a *petite amante*: a little girl of three or four, perhaps. Other signs of love between women are provided by the two kinds of vegetation mentioned, grass and lilacs. These form part of Wittig's lesbian intertextuality, to borrow Elaine Marks' useful expression (1979: 353). 'I am greener than grass' comes from one of Sappho's best-known fragments, in which she describes the physical manifestations of deep desire for a woman (Fragment 20 in the 1984 edition); and Sappho is at the heart of Wittig's creative writing. Grass is in itself an important enough feature of the Wittigian corpus to merit its own entry in the *Brouillon*:

HERBE

Parmi les différentes variétés d'herbe que nous connaissons, l'herbe à sommeil est très appréciée par les peuples d'amantes qui pratiquent une paresse intensive. "Elle donne une somnolence exquise, une béatitude, un état de bien-être. Les formes vues par les yeux se mélangent et apparaissent comme des brouillards de couleurs. Les sons s'atténuent et se prolongent avec délices. L'herbe à sommeil c'est la conscience sans conscience", (Sseu Tchouan, *le Livre de la paresse*, Chine, âge de gloire). (121)

We should not be fooled by the words 'sommeil' and 'paresse': they are active states in which everything is possible! The double meaning of grass, the stuff both of green lawns and interesting happenings, already brings its connotations to bear on the first 'herbe' we meet in *L'Opopanax* - a book that is very much about altered states of representation. It is also relevant to mention that the title of the book itself is a variation on the word opopanax, which refers to a medicinal, healing herb.

Lilac, the plant and the colour, features widely in Wittig's writing and especially in *Le Corps lesbien*: 'Tu es m/a gloire de cyprine m/a fauve m/on lilas m/a pourpre' (49), 'Sappho quand j/e l'en prie fait tomber sur l'île une pluie violette à odeur de lilas (130), 'J/e ne reconnais pas parmi les épaves ta barque noire marquée du signe violet que tu affectionnes' (107), to mention just a few examples. *Virgile, non*

actually refers to the 'péril mauve' of lesbianism (14): all the more reason to see the 'innocent' lilacs of *L'Opoponax* as lesbian signs.

What, now, of the abandonment of clitoridal masturbation which, Freud argues, accompanies the little girl's Oedipal phase? There is nothing in the first page of *L'Opoponax* to suggest the clitoris. I do not believe, however, that this means it is absent, or missing; it certainly does not mean that Catherine Legrand has given up touching herself because she is discouraged by her absence of penis. This is because it is cyprine, with all it represents, and not any disconnected part of herself, which enables such pleasurable contact with and within herself to exist. Here again, Irigaray's concept of the female sex is relevant:

When Freud maintains that the little girl discovers that compared with the little boy she has 'no sex', and that this "castration" will completely arrest her in her auto-eroticism, that statement makes no sense, other than culturally. Indeed, nothing can prevent the woman from being permanently in auto-eroticism since she is all the time embracing herself within herself - without even requiring hands, instrument, and without it being visible. This continuity of feminine auto-eroticism is interrupted, however, by a kind of process which could be described as rape: by maintaining to women that they "need" a penis, by instructing them that they are nothing by themselves, that they are not female without the penis. That is when they are exiled from their auto-eroticism [...]. (Irigaray 1977b: 65)

In an entry from the *Brouillon*, this is what Wittig says about the Freudian-inspired debate concerning vaginal vs. clitoridal orgasm, and the role of the clitoris:

Anciennement on opposait à l'orgasme produit par le clitoris, un autre orgasme dit vaginal [...]. Les amantes ont une grande prédilection pour le clitoris, ces organes de plaisir dont, quand ils sont à l'oeuvre, il a été dit, "là tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté / luxe, calme et volupté" [...]. (191)

Within Wittig's 'cyprinal' erotic world, with its emphasis on connectedness and movement, the clitoris can be reclaimed by and for the lovers, both as pleasure-organ and as sign: in the entry on the 'clitore' (61), the clitoris is celebrated and worn on a ring. It is thus possible to argue that since Wittig posits connectedness between female lovers as paramount, the clitoris and other organs can begin to be represented in a way that shifts away from the phallic and the maternal.

One key aspect of such a shift concerns the concept of 'having' or 'possessing'. Within Freud's account of gendering, having or rather, in the case of girls, not having, plays a key part: 'She has seen it [...] and wants to have it', 'The hope of some day obtaining a penis', '[she] may harden herself in the conviction that she *does* possess a penis' (1925/1977). Of course, it is largely thanks to Freud himself that we can begin to question the concept of having a bodily part or not, since he shows what a shaky image it can project within the human mind. This, however, enables a satisfactory explanation only of the little boy's castration anxiety; he is the one who has, and can therefore fear loss. Freud's arguments concerning the effects on the little girl of her lack of penis do not appear totally convincing, which he himself seems to acknowledge when he writes in his 1924 paper that his material concerning the little girl's gendering process becomes 'far more obscure and full of gaps' (320). Putting it in more schematic terms, the having/not having concept does not seem to sit comfortably with the feminine. And indeed, in his later paper on 'Female Sexuality' (1931), in which he responds to the work of women analysts (Lampl-de Groot and Deutsch), he stresses the crucial role of the little girl's early relationship with her mother, together with his surprise at the importance and durability of this pre-Oedipal phase. The focus begins to shift away from penis-envy.

Given the importance of the little girl's homosexual attachment to her mother, can we find a key concept which might displace that of having/not having, since we are talking of a relationship outside the phallic? In the *Brouillon*, the displacement is posited as achieved:

AVOIR

Ce verbe dans son sens de posséder est tombé en désuétude. Cela tient au fait que depuis l'âge de gloire plus personne n'"a" rien. Dès la fin de l'âge de l'acier rapide, s'est généralisé un rejet des avoirs, des biens, des possessions, des richesses. Toutes les personnes à qui on demandait si elles désiraient telle ou telle chose répondaient, "pour quoi faire"?, ou bien "on n'a pas envie". "Avoir" tend aujourd'hui à n'être plus employé comme auxiliaire. Et même il y a certaines amantes qui le remplacent par le verbe être, dans les expressions, "j'ai froid, j'ai faim, j'ai sommeil". (30-31)

It is possible to suggest that Wittig is attempting to create a world in which companionship best describes the nature of a woman's relationship with her own sex. This is akin to Irigaray's concept of contiguity (1984: 102) and in Wittig's creative writing takes many forms, all of which stress the relational. When we first meet Catherine Legrand, she is holding her mother's hand on the threshold of the new world of school; they are in touch with each other, connected through a part of the body they both share, yet they are also autonomous since, rather than facing each other, they are moving forward together. There is an attempt, I think, to show them as two women, as equals who can, given the context in which their contact occurs, represent their own sex to themselves and to each other. Hands do many things in *L'Opoponax*, which find their source in this prototypical touch between mother and daughter.

I have discussed in my preface the importance of adequately representing the mother-daughter relationship, and the difficulty this presents within Wittig's texts which set up an opposition between lesbians and mothers. We shall return to this question in my fifth chapter, but for the moment it is worth repeating the theoretical basis for Wittig's opposition to mothers: they become traitors to the Amazonian order if they immerse themselves in a cloistering world which domesticates women, such as is described in the *Brouillon's* entry for 'Mère' (170-172). As I have already pointed out, we are given no information in this book about the relationship between mothers and their children, other than that the babies are fed by mares. However, the Amazons clearly see an active, positive mother-daughter relationship as a desirable possibility:

FILLE

Désigne un lien génétique des amantes entre elles, d'où l'expression "telle mère, telle fille". Cette filiation fait des filles les amantes des mères et des mères les amantes des filles, comme il est écrit dans la genèse de Phyllis Chesler. Là, Déméter la mère amante fait retentir tout le jardin terrestre de sa passion et de son chagrin après la disparition brutale de sa fille Perséphone.
(B: 96-7)

It is possible to argue that Catherine Legrand's hand-contact with her mother is a subtle expression of this companionship which turns women

into lovers and equals. This representation seems to be reinforced when, a few lines after the passage we have been studying so closely, a mother-figure, the nun, becomes the small girl's companion (in the strong contiguous sense) by taking her by the hand, enabling the separation from her mother to occur without any apparent trauma:

La mère de Catherine Legrand dit, bonjour ma soeur alors elle descend, elle prend la petite fille par la main et elle dit à la mère de s'en aller pendant qu'on ne fait pas attention à elle, que tout va bien. (8)

Wittig thus seems to be suggesting a path for the little girl's development which owes nothing to the Freudian Oedipus complex, since it can be argued that Catherine Legrand moves from being a daughter to being the pupil or disciple of an ambiguous figure, woman and yet not: the nun lives outside the heterosexual contract. As she is also a member of a group, a community, rather than a nuclear family, the nun can be said to be a prototype of the Amazons who will people Wittig's later work; this will be more fully discussed in the seventh chapter, which shows the ways in which Catherine Legrand's contact with the nuns brings her many opportunities as she grows into an *amante*.

I hope to have begun to show how Catherine Legrand's representation is different from Robert Payen's portrayal. She is the one who sees, or who, rather, uses an inner vision, and at least one more vital sense: touch. Cyprine will moisten her body, shift her away from an economy of parts and holes and from the master's Look, whilst her hands already enable her to meet another woman as an equal. Her sexuality and her voice are developing among signs from a collective order of women who are neither merged nor kept apart from each other, but, like a wire fence, allow light and air to exist between them. Two short extracts from the *Brouillon* celebrate each element, and the movement made possible between women:

[L]e corps a sa lumière. [...] C'est ainsi que durant leurs moments les plus doux et les plus radieux, deux amantes se joignent à travers des éclairs, des rayons, des étincelles, des lueurs battantes, des brouillards de lumière plus ou moins intense. (158)

Prendre appui sur l'air et voler est un entraînement qu'on fait spontanément dans les premières années de sa vie. (245)

Given such a context, with all it heralds for the future, it is surprising to find in the rest of *L'Opoponax's* opening section many instances of Catherine Legrand's anxiety and even panic. It seems she does not after all smoothly leave her mother behind in order to join the 'autre monde'. There is in fact a long process to be negotiated before she can develop into an *amante*, before her girl's or daughter's body can become a lover's body, and the struggle of her early years is at times acute. In this chapter I have already argued that she is represented within a different economy from the Freudian emphasis on penis-envy. But how is the following anxious observation to be understood?

Il y a beaucoup d'enfants qui jouent dans la cour de l'école mais pas du tout de grandes personnes seulement la mère de Catherine Legrand et il vaudrait mieux qu'elle ne rentre pas dans l'école c'est seulement les enfants, il faut lui dire, est-ce qu'il faut lui dire.] (8)

It seems that she is expressing a fear of merging with her mother, an uncertainty about who her mother is as distinct from her, and vice-versa. She goes on to ask why she is not allowed to be with the other children yet, and wonders if the reason is 'qu'elle n'est pas encore vraiment à l'école, parce que si c'est l'école c'est tout à fait étonnant' (8). Her mother's place in her world, her own place amongst children, the reality of school, all seem to be in doubt, as if Catherine Legrand suddenly lacked a representational anchor, a holding presence.

The text's ambiguity is at its height here. On the one hand, there is a promise of a lesbian world which will provide strength. On the other, there is a little girl who, representationally speaking, is made to run before she can walk. The Freudian pathway to femininity is very much in question, but any satisfactory alternative is, at this stage of the novel and indeed of the Wittigian corpus, in its infancy. Catherine Legrand's mother holds her hand in a promise of contact and communication, then goes away at the nun's bidding, becoming an uncertain figure who seems almost interchangeable with this mother-substitute. It is this uncertainty, this under-representation of the mother, which is a problem here. Catherine Legrand is not visibly or audibly distressed by her mother's disappearance; why not? Is it because she is already within the lesbian economy, with its many

strengths, enabling her to deal successfully with any separation anxiety - or is she having difficulty in expressing her loss, since she cannot yet satisfactorily represent her mother? The answer is most probably 'at times' for the former and, initially at least, a much stronger 'yes' for the latter. Catherine Legrand seems unable to hold on to the image of the one who has suddenly left her; but that doesn't mean she doesn't feel anything about this disappearance. On the contrary, as I shall develop in my next chapter, her psychic life is in turmoil as a result of it, so much so that she repeatedly experiences her body as being under attack. The 'grillage à losanges' reappears on p.8, but this time it is wrapped around a maternal 'gros poêle rond' and a 'tuyau' which is concertinaed in places - a composite phallic-maternal image, part penis, part umbilical cord - as if to keep the children safe from their powerful symbolism. But the 'losanges', messengers from a lesbian world, will not always manage to protect Catherine Legrand from disturbing maternal and phallic fantasies.

We now need to examine these, in the context of Catherine Legrand's stifled, but all the more present, separation anxiety. We shall then look at the ways in which, despite the representational gap such anxiety reveals, the text continues to posit, and to build, a path a towards a renewed world.

2. Rewriting the Fall

'Elle tient la main de la mère qui pousse la porte' (8): I have already discussed how this sentence hints at the possibilities of representing relationships between mothers and daughters, and by extension all women, in a positive and active way, by stressing their communication through a part of the body they both share. Thus the focus shifts away from lack of an organ, and onto communication and movement between women. Representational problems are by no means solved by this positive image, and indeed, as we read the opening chapter of *L'Opoponax*, we realise that conflicts and struggles await Catherine Legrand; her emergence as an *amante* is beset with problems. However, the Wittigian context enables these problems to be contained within a new economy, whilst maintaining a sense of conflict and tension which pushes the narrative forward. I shall now attempt to explain the nature of Catherine Legrand's anxieties, and then show how Wittigian textuality offers a provisional resolution.

1. 'And darkness was upon the face of the deep': anxieties and symptoms

In my last chapter, I focussed on the question of penis-envy in the girl and castration anxiety in the little boy, as exemplified by Robert Payen. I examined the Freudian view that the discovery of anatomical differences between the sexes plays a crucially determining part in the emergence of a gendered self, and structured my own analysis of *L'Opoponax's* opening pages by looking through that particular lens. Here, I shall adopt another starting-point, connected with earlier experiences in the small child. The reason for this is that the discovery of the absence of her penis is not enough, in my view, to account for Catherine Legrand's persecutory anxieties which seem to come from a much earlier period. Accordingly, I shall be shifting my theoretical focus from Freud to Klein, with particular reference to her 1928 and 1929 papers, 'Early Stages of the Oedipus Conflict' and 'Infantile Anxiety Situations'. I am aware of the great theoretical differences between Freud and Klein, particularly as far as the

construction of femininity is concerned: Klein's belief in a very early, prediscursive awareness of a gendered body is at odds with classic Freudian theory. Nevertheless, I am setting these theoretical obstacles aside as my aim is not to make Wittig's writing fit into a single, orthodox framework, but to use a range of theoretical tools and lenses to reveal the complexities and many-sided aspects of her work. Klein's views concerning the child's earliest anxieties are particularly relevant to Wittig's representation of the young Catherine Legrand and of her psychic turmoil.

In the last chapter, I highlighted the importance of companionship, of touch and communication between women. I stressed the importance of Catherine Legrand's contact with her mother, then said that this mother is somewhat under-represented, so that she cannot be seen as an anchor to Catherine Legrand's sense of self, 'secured around an internalized developmental experience born out of a sense of containment' (Breen 1993: 21). So what happens when this already rather hazy figure disappears from the child's focus completely? Just as the sight of Robert Payen's 'quéquette' can and indeed should be construed as having significant structuring power in the opening pages of *L'Opoponax*, so should Catherine Legrand's separation from her mother when she first attends school. She is soon in very great danger, as the following extract shows:

La grosse petite fille qui s'appelle Brigitte parce qu'elle est grosse prend Catherine Legrand par le cou, on lui sourit, les joues de la petite fille s'écartent et se remettent près de la bouche à toute vitesse, elle tire à elle par le cou, elle devient toute rouge, puis elle appuie sur le cou et se penche jusqu'à terre en tirant toujours. Catherine Legrand tombe à plat ventre et se relève. La grosse petite fille qui s'appelle Brigitte s'approche de nouveau, on ne lui sourit pas, on s'y attend cette fois, de nouveau elle tire, ses joues s'écartent, se gonflent, la tête est tout près, elle a des cheveux gris, quand elle tire elle est forte, on est tout de suite à plat ventre et si on se met à pleurer ça coule dans la raie du plancher. Il ne faut pas se mettre debout sinon ça recommence.
(p.10)

This comes across as much more than aggression from a fellow-pupil. The scene has a nightmarish quality, with its unprovoked, recurrent and almost inescapable attacks. Smiling, which is one of the earliest forms

of communication between mother and baby, is seen here as being terribly dangerous since it brings violence and hatred in its wake, and such is the force of Brigitte's rage that Catherine Legrand becomes temporarily disabled, crying face down until her tears wet the floor. That the representation of this incident harks back to an earlier scenario is clear from Brigitte's portrayal: her strength and size, her grey hair, her puffing and blowing - as in a monstrous birth - belong to a much older being than a 'petite fille'. Kleinian theory provides an explanation here: Brigitte can be considered to be a descendant of an earlier Bad Mother, pursuing Catherine Legrand in order to destroy her, and the real mother's disappearance from the school leaves the child vulnerable once more to these attacks from her past, accounting for their fantastic quality. Klein incorporated Freud's argument, expressed in *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, that for girls 'the loss of the object is the danger situation which operates most powerfully' (Klein 1929/1986, 88), and this argument is already enough to show that Catherine Legrand is now exposed to danger. However, the scene described above is underpinned by more active psychic phenomena than the little girl's relatively simple and passive 'dread of being alone, of the loss of love and of the love object' (ibid., 92) described by Freud. For Klein, Freud's account of the basic infantile danger situation in girls is a modification of an earlier, indeed the earliest danger situation, which she describes as follows:

The little girl has a sadistic desire, originating in the early stages of the Oedipus conflict, to rob the mother's body of its contents, namely, the father's penis, faeces, children, and to destroy the mother herself. This desire gives rise to anxiety lest the mother should in her turn rob the little girl herself of the contents of her body (especially children) and lest her body should be destroyed or mutilated. [...] When the little girl who fears the mother's assault upon her body cannot see her mother, it intensifies the anxiety. The presence of the real, loving mother diminishes the dread of the terrifying mother, whose image is introjected into the child's mind. At a later stage of development the content of the dread changes from that of an attacking mother to the dread that the real, loving mother may be lost and that the girl may be left solitary and forsaken. (Klein 1929/1986: 92-3)

During Brigitte's attacks, the emphasis on pulling and on being flattened, with the reference to a flat belly provided by the French language ('quand elle tire [...] on est tout de suite à plat ventre'), does

point to a phantasised attempt on the Bad Mother's part to rob the child of her babies. The considerable anxiety liberated onto the page is seen to impair Catherine Legrand's creativity; symbolically, she has been rendered mute, since her smile (the use of her lips, with all that implies for women) has brought her under attack, and she is unable to move or even to get up: 'Il ne faut pas se mettre debout sinon ça recommence'.

Further instances of these powerful psychic phenomena are provided by the nun. She is represented in these early pages either as a good, nurturing and munificent mother (holding 'tous les paniers du goûter' (9), mending Catherine Legrand's knickers (10) or as a violent, volatile figure:

C'est comme ça qu'on ne voit pas déboucher ma soeur qui vient de donner le signal de la fin de la récréation et qu'on reçoit une gifle de chaque côté de la figure, ça résonne et la tête brimbale.
(11)

Ma soeur descend de l'estrade en sautant. Sa robe vole d'un seul coup derrière elle. Elle marche en deux pas dans toute la classe. Ma soeur tire Josiane Fourmont par l'oreille et la force à se mettre debout hors du banc, la main de ma soeur continue de secouer l'oreille. Quand elle a fini l'oreille est à côté de la tête toute froissée et violette. (23)

This last example can be seen as a particularly powerful warning to Catherine Legrand from the Bad Mother, since Josiane Fourmont has just informed her that she doesn't love her own mother much and is seen to suffer immediately as a result of this statement.

Subjected to all these dangers, and without the presence of a reassuring real mother, Catherine Legrand appears at times exiled from creativity and activity. For example, the song 'à ma main droite il y a un rosier qui fleurira au mois de mai' (8) leads her to the disappointing conclusion that her hand, one of the symbols of communication between mothers and daughters, has not produced flowers yet; even more poignantly, during one of the scenes where she is portrayed at home (usually inactive, bored, or ill), she does not see the bird her mother points out to her in the fork of a tree, only fallen blossom: her eye is drawn downwards to the earth, not upwards to the living, moving bird

(13). And indeed this emphasis on the earth, the ground, on muddy spaces where one can get stuck, seems to me a strong example of the way Catherine Legrand is in danger of becoming enmeshed in early Oedipal struggles, which for Klein concern first and foremost the relationship with the mother. If we agree that the earth is a maternal element, we can see that it is split; Mother Earth, the nurturer, is a Good Mother, whereas the sucking, luring ground is Mother Death, the Bad Mother, who stalks these early pages:

Catherine Legrand dit, et les enfants qui sont morts on les met aussi dans un trou? On ne sait pas. Tout le long de la route il faut se méfier des trous d'égout. [...] Ça s'ouvre au-dessous du trottoir on ne les voit pas de loin il faut faire très attention pour se rendre compte qu'ils sont là, ça s'ouvre sur la route si on glisse dedans on est mort. Des égouts c'est là pour sucer, ça fait mourir. [...] [Si on est attiré dedans par surprise on meurt aussi et même personne ne sait qu'on est mort. (20)

Rather than nourishment, holding and containment, the earth offers dangerous gaps and holes which want to eat up the child and destroy her.

Prediscursive phenomena can thus be seen to be at work in these summonings of a prototypical Bad Mother, leading Catherine Legrand to experience feelings of extreme danger, loss and exile. But what of the phallic economy, within which Catherine Legrand discovers that Robert Payen has a part of the body which she herself lacks? Despite the hopeful signs provided in the first representation of Catherine Legrand and her mother together (hands, lilacs, cyprine and *losanges* in all their Wittigian richness), Catherine Legrand is once more left unprotected and subject to anxiety. She is ashamed of her genital area, as the following extract shows:

Catherine Legrand se perche sur la barrière. Sa culotte se déchire d'un coup sec sur un clou. Crac. Catherine Legrand redescend et court avec précaution en criant pouce. Ce n'est pas tenable. Personne n'a rien vu. C'est impossible de continuer à jouer sans culotte même si les autres ne le savent pas. (10)

The fence is dangerous since it hides a sharp, castrating object. It does not provide a safe haven for the girl; it is an enclosure, not a doorway through which she might circulate freely. The representation of such doorways is very important within the Wittigian text: the

guérillères have their first gathering in a 'kiosque', an open-air structure which provides both shelter and free passage in and out; it is a starting-point for the construction of an undomesticated, strong female identity, grounded in a renewed awareness of the body's possibilities (G: 9). In *Le Corps lesbien*, caves, boats, islands all provide similarly airy shelter, whilst 'maison', as we saw in the preface, is described in the *Brouillon* as a pleasurable, mobile space (166-7). As she sits on her fence, however, Catherine Legrand is within the phallic world, with its rigid boundaries; she cannot be strong nor free at this stage since even if 'les autres ne le savent pas', she knows the state of her genital area, at least as it is constructed within the phallic economy. This state is characterised by absence, by lack; since Catherine Legrand does not experience her knickers as simply torn, but absent ('sans culotte'), we see that in the little girl's fantasy world, damaged goods have no value at all - they do not exist. Thus her sex may not be experienced as merely wounded, but as absent. This realisation leads Catherine Legrand to such degrees of shame and anxiety that, once more, we see her losing both her powers of speech and of movement:

Catherine Legrand tourne autour de ma soeur sans rien dire. C'est comme quand elle rêve qu'elle est en chemise de nuit dans la rue ou même toute nue parce qu'elle a oublié de s'habiller. Elle dit pouce quand quelqu'un s'approche d'elle. Ma soeur lui enlève sa culotte et la raccommode. Catherine Legrand est à côté d'elle sans mouvement. Là-bas les enfants continuent de courir. (10-11)

Catherine Legrand becomes segregated from the collective body of children, isolated and cut off from the world. Once more, Klein provides an insight into the reasons for such intense symptoms: '[S]he feels this lack [of a penis] to be a fresh cause of hatred of the mother, but at the same time her sense of guilt makes her regard it as a punishment' (1928/1976: 77). Klein's view is that early, prediscursive phenomena are at work within the Oedipus complex, which reactivates earlier psychic struggles with a primitive maternal super-ego; indeed, she asserts that 'the deprivation of the breast [is] the most fundamental cause of the turning to the father' (78). This helps us to see how Catherine Legrand's anxieties, even within the phallic economy, are maternal in

origin. But to what extent does the text describe her as 'turning to the father'? In a way, of course, it doesn't at all, since her father is never represented as a love-object; he appears only once in these early pages, at her mother's side, whilst Catherine Legrand struggles in the 'attaque' I shall describe later. It is possible to argue, however, that the text explores this process, by highlighting the little girl's relationship with Robert Payen. This is represented in the very first words of *L'Opoponax*, which later form the *leit-motiv* for the following extract:

Dans la cour de récréation on fait pipi à plusieurs accroupi. Le petit garçon qui s'appelle Robert Payen dit, regarde ma quéquette. Pourquoi tu as ça toi? Parce que je suis grand. Moi j'en aurai aussi? Oui quand tu seras comme moi. Mais quand? Je te dis quand tu seras comme moi. (19)

For Klein, such practices as urinating in common form part of the repertoire of young children's sexual relations with one another, in which the playmate is taken by the child to be a love-object and 'a substitute for the father or mother or both' (1928/1986: 82). If we follow her argument, we can say that Robert Payen becomes a substitute for the little girl's father, and the scene above becomes intensified for the following reasons:

[T]hese relations, which seem so insignificant and which apparently no child under the stimulus of the Oedipus development escapes, take on the character of an Oedipus relation actually realized [...]. In consequence of the need for punishment [...] these experiences often cause the child to subject himself to sexual traumata. (82)

Thus the text has opened up a fresh source of guilt, and the need for punishment is somatised in the many instances of ill-health and disability to be found in these early pages. One of the most dramatic, of course, is Robert Payen's own illness and death, which follow immediately after the scene in the playground. The children go to his house to pick up clues:

On n'entend rien. On fait le tour de la maison sur la route. Dans le jardin un camion sans roues est enfoncé dans la terre. Derrière la maison les volets sont fermés sauf au rez-de-chaussée où la fenêtre est ouverte. On voit une famille à table. Devant chaque personne il y a l'assiette. Les enfants assis ont l'air d'être de grands enfants. On n'entend pas parler. Le père se lève pour fermer la fenêtre. Il pousse sa chaise et dit des mots très fort. On ne comprend pas quoi. Les vitres tremblent quand il ferme la

fenêtre en la claquant. On dirait qu'il est fâché. On s'en va en courant. (20)

The sentences themselves have a lifeless, dull and repetitive rhythm, as if all active emotion were deeply buried - corresponding to the intense repression which, for Klein, accompanies the sexual relationships of the very young. Anxiety of the freezing, numbing sort pervades the description of the silent house with its mute occupants, together with the children's guilt and fear as the father's sudden, angry outburst causes them to scatter. Significantly, Catherine Legrand then immediately expresses the fear of 'les trous d'égout' which I have already attributed to her struggles with a maternal imago; it seems she fears retaliation from both parents, and not just her father as represented by Robert Payen's, and the Kleinian explanation for this double fear is that it relates mainly, though not exclusively (I shall return to this proviso later), to an earlier stage of psychic development where, at the height of the sadistic phase with its phantasised attacks against the maternal body, the child struggles with the father's penis inside the mother. Because a union of both parents is in question, '[a] special intensity is imparted in this danger situation [...]. According to the early sadistic super-ego, which has already been set up, these united parents are extremely cruel and much dreaded assailants' (Klein 1929/1986: 88). This accounts for the instances where Catherine Legrand feels herself to be pulled between two forces, causing her body to move mechanically to and fro, in a state that seems just as bad as immobility. This occurs first of all when she overhears her parents' discussion of her grandfather's stroke, which has paralysed his right side:

Le père et la mère regardent Catherine Legrand. On ne peut pas parler. Le côté droit glisse sur la chaise, l'entraîne, Catherine Legrand se penche pour le suivre, on la voit entre la chaise et le plancher, elle a un mouvement d'oscillation saccadé comme un jouet mécanique. Catherine Legrand est attaquée. La chose a monté le long de la chaise pendant qu'on a mangé sans qu'on la voie ce qui fait que ça combat maintenant sous les yeux du père et de la mère. On la regarde sans bouger. On ne peut pas l'aider. C'est elle toute seule. Catherine Legrand essaie de hisser au moins des mots dans la bouche, les efforts sont terribles, et ça y est voilà que ça sort en hurlements. (13)

Within this scopic régime, where the parents neither hold nor talk reassuringly to the child but stare at her as if in revenge, Catherine Legrand is cast out, struggling alone against and between them; the only form of communication possible for the little girl and her parents, and particularly her mother since so much concerns the maternal body, is the child's symptomatic screaming. The text shows her to be bearing the full force of her parents' own repressed anxieties, too, since by hiding all emotion behind a judgmental stare and by refusing to move to help their child, they can remain in control of their own childhood guilt, now re-activated by the grandfather's damaged body. Catherine Legrand is effectively abandoned by the good, nurturing mother, or maternal element in both parents; stranded between them and in great danger, she can only make jerky, repetitive movements, not move forward.

The same feeling of abandonment comes across when Inès takes Catherine Legrand and Alain Trévisé to play in the hay. Inès, 'la grande petite fille', has already twice appeared in a caring, maternal role. She is first seen escorting Catherine Legrand to school and protecting her, as well as other young children. This initial presentation is positive, in Wittigian terms, not only because of Inès' protective qualities but because she provides safe movement for the children; moreover, this description immediately follows her first appearance:

Contre les hauts grillages losangés, il y a des feuilles de lilas et des dahlias rouges. Dans le pré du hangar la jument de monsieur Magnier est debout la tête baissée. Elle se met à courir à toute vitesse contre la barrière. (13)

Diamond-shapes and lilacs already form part of Wittig's lesbian textuality, as we have seen in the first representation of Catherine Legrand and her mother together - a representation outside patriarchy and the reign of the phallic. Moreover, the way in which the static, downcast mare ('la tête baissée') comes to life and runs up to the fence (to trample it down or jump over it, maybe), also seems to herald the coming of an Amazonian age. Inès further grows in Catherine Legrand's estimation in her second appearance, when she offers protection from the totem-poles illustrated in Alain Trévisé's picture-book. These phallic objects of worship, made of several beasts one above the other, are

experienced by Catherine Legrand as extremely threatening; however, despite failing to reassure her verbally in the course of a delightful exchange of childish logic, to which I shall return, Inès stands by Catherine Legrand to protect her and thus gains her trust:

Catherine Legrand ne lâche pas la main de la grande petite fille qui s'appelle Inès parce qu'on ne sait pas ce qui peut arriver et s'il faut courir Catherine Legrand ne peut pas bien, on est toujours en arrière. (15)

It is worth noting how anxious and nervous Catherine still seems, despite Inès' protection. This could be because Inès relies on a maternal role which is still rather narrow, since the two girls, in their mother/daughterish game, do not relate as equals and indeed cannot: theirs is a symbiosis, an ultimately static bond where Inès needs Catherine Legrand to be weak just as much as the latter needs Inès to be strong. This relationship, already tested by Alain Trévisé's totem-poles, will be seen to reveal its flaws under the strain of 'la bête du diable', during a game in a hayfield:

Pour ne pas être vu on va se cacher dans le foin qui est ramassé en tas au milieu du champ. [...] On joue à qui touchera la main de quelqu'un à l'intérieur du foin. Le petit garçon qui s'appelle Alain Trévisé se tortille. On lui a touché quelque chose. On n'a pas encore fini de jouer quand Inès s'en va du foin en courant. On entend crier, la bête du diable, la bête du diable. On se met à courir de tous les côtés. Catherine Legrand est derrière et pleure en courant tombant et se relevant, n'arrivant pas à rejoindre les autres. [...] y a toute la longueur du champ entre Catherine Legrand et les autres. Catherine Legrand tombe au niveau de l'herbe qui est coupée à ras. Ça pique. [...] faut se remettre à courir, peut-être que la bête est déjà là tout autour puisqu'on ne la voit pas, peut-être qu'on ne pourra jamais plus courir en tous cas c'est grave si une grande petite fille comme Inès a peur. (15-16)

The game shifts from a female one, with hands predominant, to a heterosexual activity just as suffused with guilt as the children's session in the playground described above. The verb 'se tortiller', which indicates Alain Trévisé's embarrassment as his coyly-named 'quelque chose' is touched, and Inès and Alain's sudden, violent fear of 'la bête du diable', underline the power and intense guilt of their phallic game. Indeed, so strong are its characteristics that Inès forgets all about Catherine Legrand and abandons her to even greater fears than before, including, as a now almost predictable symptom, a

feeling of disability: 'peut-être qu'on ne pourra jamais plus courir'. Catherine Legrand is trapped between a punishing mother-nature, symbolised by a huge field and stinging grass, and an equally angry devil-father intent on pursuing her.

Likewise, on the next page, the nun fails in her capacity as a good mother when she forgets to fasten Catherine Legrand's snow-boots (17). As a result, the little girl falls prey to dangerous combined assailants: the evil side of Nature, or of Mother Earth, fills her boots with heaviness ('du lourd'), and restricts her movements; this means she cannot escape from the 'petit vieux' whom she sees in a descending cloud, intent on pursuing her. This supernatural figure is in radical opposition to the gentle, domesticated husband conjured up by the children when the nun hints that she is married to God: 'Il est assis [...] sur un fauteuil. Peut-être qu'il rentre quand même à midi avec le journal' (14). This God, or Devil, wants revenge; as in previous scenes, Catherine Legrand's struggle to escape both him and the weighty Bad Mother results in a simulacrum of movement ('elle n'avance pas, elle fait juste un, deux, de droite à gauche comme un métronome') and, finally, wrenches from her the same symptomatic cry, which is Catherine Legrand's only means of expression for the moment.

All these anxieties, then, are seen to have a powerful effect on Catherine Legrand. They stem first and foremost from struggles with a maternal imago, which also incorporates the father, since in fantasy his penis is inside the mother; both parents thus form a terrifying union. What, now, of the gendering process which is so closely linked to these psychic phenomena? Despite the oft-repeated labels attached to the children's names - 'le petit garçon / la petite fille qui s'appelle ...' - Catherine Legrand remains unsure of her own gender:

Catherine Legrand porte un pantalon qui lui colle aux jambes quand il fait froid. Ça la gêne quand elle marche elle le sent partout, elle a deux jambes, oui, et entre les jambes la couture ça l'empêche de marcher. On ne met pas de pantalon quand on est une petite fille. On n'aime pas ça parce qu'on devient deux. Catherine Legrand mais aussi ce qui est dans le pantalon et qui n'est pas exactement Catherine Legrand. Peut-être que Catherine Legrand est

la seule petite fille à porter un pantalon et à n'être pas exactement une petite fille. (18-19)

This extract reveals that Catherine Legrand does not wish to be reminded of the state of her genital area. 'La couture' on her trousers mirrors the seam left behind by castration; it belongs to the phallic economy, which demands that the seam be hidden or forgotten about: the damaged female sex must be reduced to zero. Wearing a skirt would help Catherine Legrand 'forget' her wound, and so it seems that a true 'petite fille' must accomplish the feat of being sexless. But wearing trousers reactivates her awareness of damage and loss to a part of her body and identity, just as her torn knickers did during the game of 'chat perché'; she is seen in the extract above to ponder whether or not she is a little girl, which means a failed boy. Moreover, it is possible that the emphasis on the seam also reactivates the part of her that identifies in fantasy with Robert Payen's fears of castration. This point needs clarifying. Although I have said that Catherine Legrand's anxieties are first and foremost maternal in origin, there is also, in the extract about the 'petit vieux' quoted above, a sense of an independent struggle with the father. As well as feelings of loss and mourning at the absence of an organ - a loss which is difficult to represent, since she never had a penis and thus doesn't quite know what she has lost - and the Kleinian sense of having been punished through castration for earlier psychic misdemeanours, Catherine Legrand seems at times to experience a dread of *being castrated in the future*. This may well also contribute to her fear of Robert Payen's father, of the totem-poles and of 'la chose' that attacks her when her parents discuss the grandfather's stroke. If we agree that this is so, then we can see that her sense of not quite being a little girl stems from two positions: first, an energised (if very raw) awareness of the wound inflicted to the female sex, which means she cannot process nor sublimate it and cannot melt into a rather anonymous, 'safe' category of silent *petites filles*; secondly, her identification with the masculine body. This corroborates Wittig's view that gender is not biologically given; it is interesting that on this point her theory agrees with psychoanalysis. Her justification of Beauvoir's phrase 'One is not born a woman', resting

on class analysis and materialist principles, is a far cry from Freud's claim that a subject can, in his/her unconscious, take up a gender position which is different from the anatomical label; but both perspectives help us to see the complexity of the process of gendering, together with its arbitrariness.

Catherine Legrand, then, appears in these opening pages to be full of anxieties and unsure about her gender identity. A sense of brokenness abounds: a spider - is it a symbol of femininity? - is dismembered (22); during a game where 'on joue à être malade', the body is approached in fragments (22); the children are taught to read, rather violently, with the words themselves broken into syllables by the nun's 'règle de bois' (16).

2. Wittigian transformation

But in fact we were always like this,
rootless, dismembered: knowing it makes the difference.

Adrienne Rich, 'Transcendental Etude' (1978: 75)

Dwelling exclusively on Catherine Legrand's fears and anxieties would present an unbalanced picture of *L'Opoponax*. Its texture, and this is apparent from the very first lines, makes it a very different reading experience from the symptomatic and at times suffocating writing of Chawaf or the bleak moments of Leduc's novels. What we find in *L'Opoponax* is also a witty playfulness that offers a way forward for the young heroine out of the morass of questions and difficulties she experiences. It is important to note, first of all, that the instances of anxiety are not listed in one continuous flow, but interspersed with descriptions of other areas of the child's early experiences which not only have a leavening effect, but independent creative power. It is as if two narratives were unfolding which were intimately connected, parallel and at times touching or entwined, with the bright strand offering hope of progress for Catherine Legrand and the children, particularly girls. For example, the episode with Brigitte is immediately followed by the following extract:

On répète après ma soeur, soixante-huit, soixante-neuf. On compte. Septante et un, septante-deux. Ma soeur est belge. On recommence à un. Un, deux, trois. (10)

In French and English, counting has a dual meaning connected both with numbers and with personal importance; to count is to matter. Wittig manages to show Catherine Legrand progressing in this area, since despite the very early, preverbal feel of her traumatic encounter with Brigitte, she has moved on to 'difficult' high numbers which she seems to be grasping. Interestingly, the nun's own origins are seen as relevant - 'Ma soeur est belge' - with her nationality and its linguistic characteristics offering an alternative to the complexities of French numbers from 70 to 99. This is a typically Wittigian strategy, whereby a solution to a problem is given by a complete shift in perspective, from a position perceived as dominant to one that is neither weaker nor stronger, but alternative, belonging to a different economy. This is all, of course, still very tentative at this stage in comparison with the radical reworkings of *Les Guérillères* and *Le Corps lesbien*, but a transformation is definitely at work. By the time the numbers one, two and three return, recreating the Oedipal triangle from which psychoanalytic accounts of the self take their source, we have been offered a choice of terms by a nun who, by her vocation and her nationality, is outside the heterosexual, French mainstream; this will be in our minds as the traumatic 'chat perché' episode, in which Catherine Legrand tears her knickers, begins, already altering though not softening its impact.

Secondly, there is Catherine Legrand's growing awareness of her situation. In the lines from Adrienne Rich quoted at the beginning of this section, knowledge, in the sense of awareness or consciousness-raising, to borrow a term from the feminist movement of the late sixties and seventies, has great healing power when addressing the 'déréliction' of the female sense of self. At best, such awareness will in *L'Opoponax* help Catherine Legrand to try out a range of solutions to her problems; but at the very least, her increasing ability to question, to discuss and to challenge, even if she still seems just as confused by the answers she receives, can already 'make the difference'. Asking questions and

making statements are deeply creative activities which move the narrative along, and provide us with a 'forward arrow' to Wittig's subsequent books. For example, in the passage about 'les trous d'égout', Catherine Legrand is expressing her anxiety about the female/maternal body, with its dangerous holes, in a language appropriate to her age; we are aware that when we read 'Catherine Legrand dit' or 'On réfléchit', and despite the authority that such expressions can convey, this female/maternal body is being perceived by a child: she is describing it through and with her fantasy, or in other words within a certain representational system; this is already an enormous improvement on the inchoate feelings of terror which suppress movement and communication of any kind. Such a female body is not a pre-existing, immutable given, prescribed by an absolute 'on dit'; but neither is it devalued, and we could go further by saying that describing this body and our relationship to it in our own words is an essential first stage in feminist representation, as women seek to reclaim and reshape meanings. Within Wittig's corpus, Catherine Legrand's thoughts, sayings and questions about the female/maternal body, where the vulva is nothing but a hole and yet can also be the locus of intense hatred and fear, already herald the explorations of *Les Guérillères*, where the use of 'elles disent' is equally speculative, marking stages in a process of change.

Catherine Legrand's deep desire to formulate questions and thus raise her awareness of the world, even if the answers fail to explain or reassure, is nowhere expressed with greater virtuosity than in the following extract:

Quand Catherine Legrand rentre de l'école le soir elle a peur d'être attaquée par des totems. La grande petite fille qui s'appelle Inès dit, tu es bête ça ne vole pas à cette heure-ci, mais ça vole quand, j'en ai jamais vu et c'est peut-être pas dans un pays comme ici, qu'est-ce que c'est un pays, c'est où on est, et où on n'est pas c'est pas un pays dis, non, alors il n'y a pas de totems où on n'est pas si c'est pas un pays dis, je ne sais pas, alors où on est c'est un pays et il y a des totems, oui mais ils ne te font rien si je suis avec toi. (15)

Jean Duffy (1983a: 292) has shown how this passage reflects a stage of linguistic development where children are beginning to be able to make distinctions, but cannot yet conceptualise fully and, even more

significantly, cannot go beyond a simple positive / negative binary system; we can see, then, how Catherine Legrand is at the very least proving the limitations of such a simple differential rule. But the first thing that should be said about this passage is that it is extremely funny and rather touching. Two little girls are learning to speak together, and their verbal prowess, as they attempt to make sense of the world around them, serves only to defeat its object - logic is well and truly turned on its head as the syllogisms form unlikely configurations. Again, for these children, it is fantasy that shapes the 'real' world; Catherine Legrand, as I have shown, is already persecuted in fantasy by a castrating father, and needs to lend a shape to this fear: hence her determination to believe that totem-poles can fly and attack her. She also needs to believe that she can find protection from such fears. Meanwhile Inès, at a slightly different stage of development, needs to have someone to protect. It is the girls' determination to hold on to these positions that are so important to them, and particularly to Catherine Legrand as she simultaneously seeks and resists protection from the loving parent Inès represents, that gives the passage much of its underlying power, whilst the rapid volleying of nuggets of childish logic provides its playfulness. We are close, here, to the world of Edward Lear, the nineteenth-century author of the *Book of Nonsense*, who said that his aim in writing for children was 'to keep what they read perfectly clear and bright and incapable of any meaning but one of sheer nonsense' (quoted on the back cover of Lear's *The Jumblies*, 1992, London : Orchard Books). Lewis Carroll springs to mind too.

Catherine Legrand's awareness of her situation, then, is already growing in these early pages, and looking for words and reasonings both to shape and express it. But the text goes even further, since it also shows us how, in the absence of satisfactory answers from the grown-ups, Catherine Legrand manufactures her own solutions to some of her problems. In the following example she is in her garden, alone and bored, trying to make the sun come out:

Peut-être que le soleil va se montrer derrière des nuages plus clairs. Catherine Legrand marche en fermant les yeux elle appuie

les mains sur les paupières pour ne pas être tentée de regarder. Elle se donne le temps de remonter l'allée en marchant très lentement, pour faire ça elle a des pas qui ne sont pas plus longs que sa chaussure il s'agit d'ajuster de très près le pied gauche devant le pied droit [...]. Quand elle sera au bout de l'allée elle recommencera à marcher en sens inverse, toujours les yeux fermés puis encore une fois l'allée, elle fait ça en disant soleil soleil chaque fois qu'elle avance l'un ou l'autre pied. Quand elle aura fini elle se donnera la permission d'enlever les mains de la figure, peut-être qu'on verra le soleil derrière les nuages. (12)

A particularly childish version of omnipotence is apparent here. As we have seen, Catherine Legrand often feels overwhelmed by the conflicts and struggles of her inner life, which seem so frequently to spill out onto the outside world and menacingly transform people, things and natural phenomena. Yet from this very vulnerability comes her creative use of charms and incantations - her own magic - to set the world to rights. This creativity is powerful and life-enhancing; we are not told whether her weather-spell succeeds, but Catherine Legrand's words and movement already alter the world for her, shape it and give it her own meaning and sense of time: 'elle se donne le temps'. Our observation of very young children can help us to see how vital such games and rituals are to their sense of well-being and healthy development. They need both to believe in supernatural phenomena - monsters, fairies or, as in this case, a living, personified sun - so that their fears and desires can be given shape, and to believe that their superstitious actions can make a difference to this sometimes threatening world. Of course, such solutions survive childhood and are the mainstay of many actions and creative endeavours; for example, the *opoponax* of the title is a poltergeist-like figure conjured up, later on in the book, by the adolescent Catherine Legrand as she tries to make sense of, and to express, her strong desire for Valerie Borge. In her childhood sun-ritual, it is already significant, given this lesbian context, that Catherine Legrand uses her hands to control and alter her vision; we know what an important part of the body hands are to her, since they symbolise contact and communication with an equal mother/lover, heralding the lesbian relationships of *Le Corps lesbien*, *Brouillon* and *Virgile, non*.

Another rich, transformative seam is tapped in the episode where Catherine Legrand is portrayed biting into forbidden fruit on the way to school:

Catherine Legrand mange toujours [sa pomme ou son orange] sur le chemin de l'école quoiqu'on lui a défendu de le faire mais c'est plus fort qu'elle. Quelquefois elle se contente de mordre dedans, alors ma soeur dit, à qui est le panier avec la pomme à demi rongée. Elle fait souvent exprès de ne pas se rappeler si elle a oui ou non mangé la pomme ou l'orange avant l'heure du goûter pour avoir la surprise ou pour si par hasard elle se remettait entière pendant que justement on l'oublie. (8)

Once more, playfulness is the keynote of this lively passage, which seems to defeat any sense of wrongdoing or transgression. Catherine Legrand may not be allowed to eat her fruit on the way to school, but she does so anyway, her independent desire overcoming parental authority. As in the previous passage about the sun, she plays with the supernatural by wishing to mend the damaged fruit, closing down her conscious memory in the hope that her fantasy can get to work, magically putting the apple together again. A Kleinian reading suggests that the little girl craves reparation and restoration of the parent-figures and particularly of her mother's body, whose 'fruit' (babies) have been symbolically damaged by her and must now be healed; indeed, we could say that such a creative resolution of severe psychic turmoil is enough to account for the light, airy and even joyful feel of this extract. But there is much more to be said about it. This passage doesn't just aim to resolve anxieties and difficulties present in other parts of these opening pages, or other aspects of Catherine Legrand's inner life; it also provides us with a vision of a completely different starting-point to the phenomena which shape our origins. There is no guilt here, and no retribution follows the autonomous expression of Catherine Legrand's wishes and desires; far from being an avenging angel, the nun will next be portrayed as absorbed in her own creative, magical world, peeling oranges and hanging spirals of orange-peel on doorways as decorations, which have an intriguing circular movement and are carefully guarded (9). It seems to me that the nun hints at a world where it doesn't matter whether fruit is whole or not, providing it can be allowed to create new figures, generate new symbols; the nun's

activity could thus be said to be a *mise en abyme* of Wittig's entire representational project concerning the body.

Coming back to the passage where Catherine Legrand bites into the fruit and wishes it to be whole again, we can discern another important aspect: it is attempting to tell a well-known story, and its moral, differently. Wittig is fascinated by myths and stories of all kinds, which she revises and transforms at will; we have a strong example of this here, since she is offering us a rewriting of the Fall. In the Book of Genesis, this is how Eve's desires and actions are portrayed:

But the serpent said to the woman, 'You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked: and they sewed fig-leaves together and made themselves aprons. (Gen. 4, v.6-7)

Eve is portrayed as deeply transgressive, since she disobeys God, and as a result of her temptation by the serpent she attracts God's wrath and is condemned to painful childbirth and to a restriction of her desire, which will now be solely directed to her husband who will rule over her. In biting into the forbidden fruit, she has gained knowledge not just of good and evil but also, significantly, of sexual difference, and of sexual shame; the peace with God, which seemingly precluded human knowledge, is now broken. It is relevant to place this story alongside the Freudian account of the discovery of the anatomical difference between the sexes and its impact upon the development of the little boy. As in the Adam and Eve story, it is the female who seems to precipitate the crisis, since it is the sight of her genital area and the belief that she has lost her penis which convinces him of the risk of castration, and makes him dread his father. The misogyny of the biblical tale gives way to a potentially much more passive representation of female sexuality, and although Freud himself warned against the risks of associating femininity and passivity, it is not surprising that Wittig should show such an interest in challenging both stories as part of her feminist revisionary writing. In the *Brouillon*, Eve is far removed from any slur

on her name, any association with sin of any kind or indeed with Adam, since she is Lilith's lover. 'Leur amour était si fort, dit-on, qu'il a survécu à un long séjour forcé que toutes deux ont dû faire dans le désert. C'est là qu'elles ont développé leur endurance légendaire' (88). In the same book, all references to Genesis leave out God the Father completely since any post-Golden Age conflict is described as being between Amazons and Mothers, an issue that will be discussed in greater detail in my fifth chapter; but it is relevant at this stage to quote from Patricia Duncker's appraisal of the *Brouillon's* project, in her article entitled 'Reading Genesis':

Wittig and Zeig, like myself, are the inheritors of Genesis. For us this myth recounts the beginning of the spiritual history of patriarchy, which is the beginning of division. It is of no use in the enterprise we have undertaken, the imagining and the creation of a world where we are free. (Duncker 1991: 222)

In order to begin to develop such strength, *L'Opoponax* needs to tackle the original Genesis story; working alongside it is very important as a first stage of awareness, which will enable the biblical Eve's qualities to be revealed and transferred to the young protagonist of *L'Opoponax*. First of all, and crucially, what Wittig does in the apple-scene is to free Catherine Legrand from any contract with a restrictive Father-God. True, the little girl is aware of parental rule, and she knows she shouldn't eat the apple. However, it is her desire which is given prominence, and there is a freshness and a joy in the phrase 'c'est plus fort qu'elle' which matches the delight Eve feels as she contemplates the tree in the garden of Eden. In an illuminating chapter from her book on French Sadeian erotic writing, *Les Châteaux d'Eros*, which sets out to challenge patriarchal representational practices, Anne-Marie Dardigna analyses the myth of Eve and highlights the importance and specific nature of her desire, referring to its multiplicity and wealth:

Et c'est là que, brusquement, Eve fait une chose extraordinaire: imaginons-la, au milieu du jardin, qui regarde avec attention cet Arbre interdit. Et de tout son corps et de toute sa sensibilité elle sent la présence de l'Arbre d'une manière que n'avait pas prévue l'omniscience divine, d'une manière qui s'exerce au-delà de l'interdit [...]. Mais plus encore - et c'est là la pire menace que fait peser Eve sur l'ordre patriarcal: elle prétend détourner l'oeuvre créatrice à son profit. En effet, Eve est initiatrice des valeurs dans le jardin d'Eden [...]. Elle formule, de son propre chef pourrait-on dire, des propos inouïs dans ce lieu où pourtant

le Verbe est tout-puissant. Et ces paroles proférées ne se rapportent ni à la justice, ni à la loi, ni à la nécessité mais au plaisir... L'Arbre est "bon", "agréable", "plaisant". Au-delà de la Loi et malgré la Loi, elle découvre un autre sens du monde, elle donne au monde un sens qui lui plaît, et surtout elle *voit* le monde et elle permet à Adam de le *voir*. (Dardigna 1980: 175-6)

Catherine Legrand, like Eve, gives herself permission to respond to her own pleasure and in so doing she is able to bypass authority, since just as Genesis represents God's word as a lie (Adam and Eve do not die as a result of Eve's action, as He had predicted), so Catherine Legrand is portrayed as safe from retribution. The vital importance of play is being stressed here: the game Catherine Legrand plays with reality - eating her apple and wishing that it were still whole - is seen in some way to succeed, to shape the world. It is possible to suggest that the apple symbolises her body: although the sight of Robert Payen's 'quéquette' has led Catherine Legrand to believe that she lacks an organ because she has been punished by castration, and despite all the psychic turmoil this entails in these early pages, which is in my opinion usefully explained by psychoanalytic theory, Catherine Legrand is also portrayed at times within a different representational system where psychoanalytic drama becomes a distant echo, there and yet not. As Catherine Legrand plays with the apple and as the nun is represented as picking up the same magical strand, weaving new symbols from a bright fruit whose name in French rhymes with the word for 'angel', we are given a glimpse of a very Wittigian paradise, where anatomical difference simply ceases to be relevant. Healing is indeed beginning to occur in this passage, which heralds the triumphant ending of *Virgile, non*:

Des anges passent à présent portant sur leurs épaules des paniers et des caisses de fruits. Elles les disposent ensuite au centre de la cour dans des entassements géométriques. Il y a des cerises, des fraises, des framboises, des abricots, des pêches, des prunes, des tomates, des avocats, des melons verts, des cantaloups, des pastèques, des citrons, des oranges, des papayes, des ananas et des noix de coco. A un moment donné, un chérubin seins nus, sonne la trompette pour annoncer que tout est prêt pour la cuisine des anges. (VN: 138)

In such a paradise, the biblical Fall from grace and the concept of original sin as described in Genesis no longer exist. Here is the *Brouillon's* humorous entry for 'Tomber':

S'il s'agit de tomber, mieux vaut le faire dans les bras de son amante, les yeux ouverts ou fermés, en avant ou en arrière. Si ce n'est pas possible, on peut tomber sur des tas de feuilles, de sable, de foin, de neige. (232)

However, *Virgile, non* itself pays testimony to the fact that paradise is hard-won; not everybody will enter, for there are many struggles on the way. If we take that as a metaphor for Wittig's representational project, we can see how struggle and failure are just as much part of her corpus as the triumphant assertion of a joyful lesbian identity. The many glimpses in *L'Opoponax* of such a new, glorious world are to be found alongside and within a particularly strong awareness of the difficulties facing Catherine Legrand, a *petite fille* who is also an *amante* in the making. When she smiles at Brigitte, immediately after the scene where the nun peels the oranges, she is viciously attacked; and even the nun will turn on her, one rainy playtime, after this game with a little boy:

On joue dans la classe. On tient les mains du petit garçon qui s'appelle Guy Romain et qui est assis à côté. On se met à cheval sur le banc et on chante, maman les petits bateaux qui vont sur l'eau, en se penchant l'un vers l'autre pour faire le bateau. C'est comme ça qu'on ne voit pas déboucher ma soeur qui vient de donner le signal de la fin de la récréation et qu'on reçoit une gifle de chaque côté de la figure, ça résonne et la tête brimbale. (11)

Once more, the potential of this game is immense, and it is very sad to see it so brutally disrupted by the nun, who has taken on the guise of Bad Mother. Two children make a boat, or pretend to be boats (the French expression has both meanings), through the activity of holding hands, which relates to the positive aspects of Catherine Legrand's experience; they are singing and moving in a game which has a creative and exciting result, and a promise of travel and exploration about it. The children are in a different world from that of Catherine Legrand's 'attaques', where her clockwork movements get her nowhere and she cannot speak, let alone sing. The game can also be seen as a reworking of sexual difference, since the children are equals, holding hands and

moving in a balanced way first towards the one, then the other, asking the same question of their mother through the nursery rhyme 'Maman les petits bateaux qui vont sur l'eau ont-ils des jambes', their epistemophilic and creative urges undamaged. Alas, the nun / Bad Mother has literally put a ban on re-creation - '[elle] vient de donner le signal de la fin de la récréation'; thus boy and girl become separated once more. Immediately afterwards, Catherine Legrand is portrayed alone, in exile in her garden, and at the end of the first section Guy Romain will reappear, but lost in a world of his own as he pretends to be a car, 'l'automobile', propelled by himself alone - in the 'wrong' direction, moreover - despite Pascale Delaroche's entreaties, with the song he shared with Catherine Legrand replaced by 'un bruit monocorde' (24): his creativity now expresses itself in autistic tendencies. As in the case of Robert Payen, the little boy seems to come off worse, his isolation greater and more final than Catherine Legrand's; but, for Wittig, both sexes suffer within a crippling economy.

So there is no denying the Fall into sexual difference, which banishes us from Eden and shatters our blissful, merged and unaware union with a parental figure - God the Father in Genesis, the Mother within psychoanalytic theory. The consequences of this fall from grace continue to echo through *L'Opoponax*, providing one of the contexts for the emergence of a new body, a new identity. Such struggles are, however, offset by a range of Wittigian strategies, which positively aim to provide a different focus for such an emergence, as I hope to have begun to show in the second part of this chapter. We shall now see what fresh trials and joys await Catherine Legrand, and the Wittigian textual project, as a new person is introduced: her younger sister Véronique Legrand.

3. Out of the prison (1): Véronique Legrand

In this chapter, the first of two drawing mostly from the second section of *L'Opoponax* (25-62), I intend to explore the relationship between Catherine Legrand and her younger sister Véronique, contrasting its qualities with the negative connotations which characterise stereotypical ideas about bonds between sisters. I shall highlight the elements of female sociality, spirituality and emotional life which Wittig weaves through her text to create this redemptive representation of the possibilities of sisterhood and to free both protagonists from the narrow confines of an anatomically-defined prison. This has important implications for an understanding of the links between the female body and a desired female sociality within Wittig's corpus as a whole, and thus serves as vital introductory material for discussion of the collective and erotic bodies (chapters 6 and 8 particularly), just as the first section of this chapter heralds corpus-wide discussion of the maternal body (Chapter 5).

1. A new birth

No mention is made of the girls' mother in the first part of this section, and nothing obviously prepares us for Véronique Legrand's arrival in the text. We need to note this elision of the mother's body and of her birth-story, an elision which is highly relevant and to which we shall return in the next chapter. However, the scene on p.32 in which Denise Joubert is rescued from the water by her friends can certainly be interpreted as a Wittigian revisionist birth-scene, whereby the child is born by and to the community rather than through a woman's body, just as the mermaids described in the *Brouillon* are reborn and help others to re-emerge as *amantes* (B: 217-9). The opening scene of the section also carries allusions to birth, as perceived or rather guessed at by a sister who is a *petite amante*, rather than 'just' a little girl:

On est caché derrière les lilas. On entend les voix crier quelque part, ça y est. Les feuilles sont mouillées par la pluie. Elles sont disposées de façon très régulière sur les branches. Sur chacune, de part et d'autre, elles sont disposées symétriquement elles ont le même aspect, sauf au bout où une feuille plus grosse fait plier l'ensemble de la branche. Un oiseau se pose sur la grosse fourche du lilas. Il ne s'envolera pas si on reste sans bouger. La terre est marron luisant, complètement détrempée, très claire. On est accroupi. De temps en temps un pied glisse de travers il faut le ramener sous les fesses. On met la main par terre pour se tenir. L'oiseau se met à chanter. [...] On entend les voix qui se mélangent. (25)

At first sight, this is a typical, ordinary game of hide-and-seek. But the text immediately places before our eyes what we now know to be a lesbian sign: the lilac. We are also in a collective, egalitarian world, symbolised by the painstakingly-described leaves which are symmetrically placed and identical in appearance - an unlikely description, expressing more a wish for sameness than its actuality. And indeed, a bigger, fatter leaf weighs down the whole branch - an allusion to the problematic figure and place of the pregnant mother. The scene has strong elements of desire for birth in the sense of renewal, within a female / lesbian sociality. I have already associated the rain with cyprine, symbol of love between women. It now soaks the ground on which 'we' (the 'on' of the text seems to me to be plural in this instance) squat, waiting, aware of the strategic importance of the body's position as it listens in controlled stillness both to what is far, other voices, and to what is immediate: the bird's song. There is a sense of liberation in this scene as we witness a reclaim of bodily creativity and its symbolic implications. Children call each other, their voices blend, a bird sings: creation happens - which we are free to shape according to our desire. It is relevant to note the emphasis on sounds in this birth-process since in the *Brouillon*, we are informed with a wonderful mock-seriousness that the ear is the lesbian's reproductive organ:

C'est ainsi que les petites amantes naissent aujourd'hui d'oreille en oreille. La plupart des amantes admettent que ces nouvelles naissances ne sont pas pires que les anciennes. Cette méthode a l'avantage de dispenser plaisir et agrément immédiat à la fois aux

nouvelles-nées et à celles qui les font. En outre, on évite ainsi les mutilations atroces, que subissaient autrefois les nouvelles-nées quand leurs choux étaient coupés par accident. (191)

For Wittig, the brightest and best creation must be the arrival of a new 'amante', and Véronique Legrand will be one such. As the extract reveals, such changes in our understanding of creativity and of our fertility can only happen on a collective level, and the sense we have of participating in an ambush is a good preparation for the tactical manoeuvres of *Les Guérillères*, the book to which *L'Opoponax* will give birth.

2. Sisters together

Given this promising start, it is not surprising that the first portrayal of Catherine Legrand's relationship with her younger sister comes across as caring and creative:

Catherine Legrand va à l'école en tenant Véronique Legrand par la main. Elles marchent sur le trottoir le long de la route nationale. Elles traversent à la hauteur du Primistère en regardant à gauche et à droite si la route est vide. Quand elles sont dans le chemin Catherine Legrand lâche la main de Véronique Legrand. [...] [Véronique Legrand] court en avant dans le chemin, on voit ses genoux toucher le menton quand elle saute. Les cheveux sautent aussi par-dessus le front. On s'arrête pour faire pipi parce qu'il n'y a personne. On s'accroupit. On regarde l'urine faire des dessins dans la poussière, les petites rigoles dorées contournent les îles, s'enfilent sous les feuilles épaisses comme celles de la rhubarbe. (33-4)

There are great similarities in this extract between Catherine Legrand's behaviour and Inès', as described in the first section. Protected by Inès, Catherine Legrand can now protect Véronique, and this already shows us the beneficial effect of social relationships between girls which are allowed to flourish away from stifling domesticity: at the very least, their bodies can be kept safe thanks to an awareness and imitation of a strong female role-model. Moreover, this model allows for freedom, since Catherine Legrand does not cling to Véronique but

lets her run off down the path; her perception of her sister is also very inventive: it is actually impossible for a child's knees to 'toucher le menton quand elle saute', and this composite image, conveying as it does both considerable energy and the roundedness of the foetal position, hints at the impact of the baby's arrival in Catherine Legrand's world. The elder sister seems to retain an awareness of the prenatal / neonatal body, which does not paralyse or impede the younger child as she discovers the world through movement. Once more, we see how Catherine Legrand's contemplative vision is able to encompass many stages of being.

The most exciting feature of this passage, however, is the description of the sisters urinating together, because it is a female-identified representation of the female body and its impact on the world, in marked contrast to the scene from the first section (19). Gone are Robert Payen's castration anxiety, the little girls' penis envy and the Kleinian evaluation of urinating in common as 'an Oedipal relation actually realised' (1928/1986: 82) with its apparel of guilt, fear and shame. 'Il n'y a personne': no boys, no unsisterly girls, no out-of-touch parents - and no orthodox Freudian psychoanalysts, either. Far from being the shame-filled expression of girls' genital inferiority - literally a second-best position - the sisters' squatting becomes endowed with positive representational potential; it is as if, in writing this, Wittig had taken into account the following words from Simone de Beauvoir's discussion of Freudian psychoanalysis, in *Le Deuxième sexe*: 'on nous dit que la fillette a honte d'uriner accroupie, les fesses nues: mais qu'est-ce que la honte?' (1949/1981: 61). The girls' urine starts to draw unspecified designs which nevertheless carry joyful connotations: the 'dessins' become 'petites rigoles dorées' and bring a new world into being - that of the Amazons' islands, which prefigure the 'Lesbos noires et dorées' of later work. The image of such islands recurs throughout Wittig's corpus; she accounts for their place, both in her creative writing and in her political thought, in an entry in the *Brouillon* (131),

and in the following extract from an interview conducted by Evelyne Le Garrec:

Je rêve depuis longtemps des Amazones qui ont créé une culture féminine. [...] Je crois qu'il y a eu des amazones en Grèce, en Afrique du Nord, en Amérique du Sud et que, potentiellement dans toute société, existent des noyaux amazoniques qui peuvent renaître à tout instant, où les femmes se définissent par rapport à elles-mêmes et non plus par rapport aux hommes.

Le Mouvement est composé de noyaux de ce genre, que j'appellerai des "îles". Peut-être toutes les femmes ne rejoindront-elles pas ces "îles", mais il est important qu'elles existent, même si elles ne regroupent qu'une minorité, parce qu'elles peuvent servir de référence aux autres femmes dans leur propre lutte. Elles savent que, quelque part, existent des lieux où les femmes se suffisent à elles-mêmes... (Wittig 1973c: 29)

Véronique and Catherine Legrand's body-writing, which celebrates female identification, contrasts with the 'écriture du corps' envisioned by Annie Leclerc and to some extent practised by Chantal Chawaf; both these writers, whilst problematising the question of the female body, nevertheless believe that the *individual* woman can and must reclaim her own (largely reproductive) bodily rhythms and turn them into writing. Wittig is at odds with such a view, in that for her the writing of the body always presupposes a relation with another woman; hence the representation of two sisters together. I also believe the simplicity of their materials - urine and dust - is deliberate; the urine can be seen as cyprinal, belonging to the lesbian body rather than the mother's - the future rather than the past. Maybe the dust is made up of the body-images of Woman and Mother which Wittig considers inadequate; it is not the reproductive body she wants to recover, but the articulation of a language born of female lovers' bodies.

However, together with the promise of this first recorded contact between the sisters, the text plants the seeds of doubt and even of destruction which threaten the girls' island-creation. Immediately after

the extract we have been studying, large flies, probably bluebottles, appear and inspire an intriguing conversation:

Des grosses mouches passent en bourdonnant. Véronique Legrand dit, en quoi c'est fait la viande. C'est fait avec ce qu'il y a dans les nez, avec toutes les saletés qu'on trouve dans les nez. C'est pas vrai. Si c'est vrai. Je le demanderai à maman.

(34)

The flies remind us of decay, and it is not surprising that Véronique Legrand should mention meat, having probably seen flies attracted to it. Catherine Legrand's answer to her sister's question is all too easy to dismiss as quaint childishness, but in fact displays considerable anxiety about the physical body and its flesh, which is equated to 'dirt from the nose' and, by extension, to excrement. Three factors are at work here. Firstly, Catherine Legrand is formulating an answer to the mystery of procreation; the nose can be viewed as symbolising a composite male / female sexual organ, uniting a protuberant penis-substitute - the nose itself - with a vaginal and uterine part: the nostrils in which 'les saletés' develop. This phantasy shows the important place which the question 'Where do babies come from?' occupies in the small child's mind, and the lengths to which she goes to provide an answer. But, of course, it is not a satisfactory answer and another small child - her sister - rejects it outright, perceiving perhaps the extent to which it is linked to damage and destructiveness, an awareness which informs my perception of the second, Kleinian factor at work here. Catherine Legrand has, in phantasy, deeply damaged all 'meat', by her early attacks on the inside of her mother's body. It seems she is still struggling with a hostile maternal imago so that flesh is now tainted, perhaps even dead, fit only for bluebottles' consumption.

The third factor stems from the second, but deserves a place of its own: Catherine Legrand's envy of her sister. This emotion prompts her to break, for a brief moment, the companionship they share as they bring whole islands into being, in their capacity as 'petites amantes'. Suddenly, it seems, Catherine Legrand feels the need to shatter this

peace by presenting her cheerful, energetic little sister with her own internal damage, in order to pull her down into mistrusting the flesh. Véronique Legrand resists: 'Je le demanderai à maman'. She turns away from her sister, towards a mother whom, it seems, she is unafraid to consult on such matters. Not once in the book is Catherine Legrand described as asking her mother anything, which hints at the difficulties she experiences in relation to her, forming part of a wider malaise which will be more fully treated in the next chapter. For now, I wish to examine in more detail the nature of what one may call 'mother-envy', which is quite distinct from the penis-envy which we discussed in the first chapter, before moving on to a discussion of its possible effects on the sisters' relationship. I shall be drawing principally from Klein (1956): 'A study of envy and gratitude', and am also indebted to Marie Maguire (1987) for her most helpful paper about the effects of envy on women.

Klein views envy as an innate emotion, part of the angry, hate-filled feelings experienced by the child towards his/her mother as a result of oral frustrations, just as s/he also feels love for her - powerful contradictory feelings which lead to splitting her into good and bad:

[T]he infant's longing for an inexhaustible and always present breast - which would not only satisfy him but prevent destructive impulses and persecutory anxiety - cannot ever be fully satisfied. These unavoidable grievances, together with happy experiences, reinforce the innate conflict between love and hatred, at bottom between life and death instincts, and result in the feeling that a good and bad breast exists. [...Envy contributes to the infant's difficulties, in that he feels that the gratification he was deprived of has been kept for itself by the breast which frustrated him. (1956/1986, 212)

Envy is destructive in a projective way, as distinct from greed which is introjective:

At the unconscious level, greed aims primarily at completely scooping out, sucking dry and devouring the breast [...]; whereas envy not only aims at robbing it in this way, but also at putting badness, primarily bad excrements and bad parts of the self, into

the mother - first of all inside her breast - in order to spoil and destroy her; in the deepest sense this means destroying her creativeness. [...] If envy is excessive - which would indicate that paranoid and schizoid features are strong - the result is a disturbed relation to the mother. (213)

In *L'Opoponax*, we can see how Catherine Legrand has projected the bad parts of herself - symbolised in the extract from p.34 by 'les saletés qu'on trouve dans les nez' - into her mother's body. There are many instances in the book of her being disturbed by an unpleasant smell emanating from various mother-figures, which indicates her sense of guilt since the smells can be seen as the mothers' revenge for the dirt she herself has placed inside them: in the same section, the upstairs neighbour is described as having 'une drôle d'odeur. Comme quand les pommes pourrissent sous l'arbre' (28), hinting at a lost female Eden of blissful dyadic union with the mother; her teacher has 'l'odeur du noir et du rugueux' (34); later, she reacts to the smell from a nun's shawl:

Le châle sent une odeur qu'on connaît. Ça fait du coup comme une gêne sur la poitrine ou quelque part ailleurs sur le ventre ou sur le sexe. Catherine Legrand a du mal à supporter cette gêne-là. (158)

In the adult, traces remain of these intense conflicts and phantasies. In my eighth chapter, I shall discuss how they form the basis of many of the sadomasochistic phantasies of *Le Corps lesbien* which contribute to the book's potent, disturbing eroticism and connect with the thorny issue of lesbian S/M. Kleinian theory is particularly helpful when studying representations of relationships between women in both their loving and their aggressive aspects.

Marie Maguire takes up many of Klein's theoretical points, stressing how much envy is linked to feelings of helplessness, inadequacy and inferiority; if it is not adequately struggled with, it can have long-lasting, damaging effects on future relationships, particularly with women since envy is first experienced in relation to the mother. She stresses the importance of being helped to cope, as a child, with envy

and those emotions which derive from it, but involve the presence of a third party: jealousy and rivalry.

The first real inequality for all of us is the experience of being small, powerless and utterly dependent on the adults around us. Inevitably, there will be other demands on the mother's attention. These inequities and the painful necessity of sharing love give rise to feelings of inadequacy, frustration, humiliation, rage, jealousy and rivalry.

If she can be helped to struggle with difficulties rather than accommodate to them, the child's developing personality will be strengthened. Her parents' capacities to give her love and protection while, at the same time, helping her tolerate internal conflicts, will be influenced by their own childhood experiences. The child's way of negotiating these fundamental experiences of inequality with parents and siblings, and the help she is given, will lay the basis for her capacity to struggle with the whole range of material inequities she will encounter in later life.] (Maguire 1987: 120-121)

It is worth remembering at this stage that there is very little evidence of Catherine Legrand being offered love and protection from her parents, although in the first section there are a couple of conversations and contacts with her mother : 'Elle tient la main de la mère qui pousse la porte' (8) and 'La mère dit, regarde le bouvreuil, où maman, dis-moi où, vite là, sur la fourche, sur le cerisier' (13). These slim offerings make rather poignant reading in that they describe attempts at communication between mother and daughter, but in the first example a premature separation is imminent and in the second, we have the feeling that it is too late for the mother to try and communicate her vision of the bird (of freedom) to her daughter: the latter cannot see it at all. As we have already noted, Catherine Legrand only sees the broken flowers on the ground - further evidence of a lost female Eden. Certainly, not much help is given in the management of helplessness, and this is borne out by the extreme sense of isolation in which we experience Catherine Legrand to be during her anxiety and panic attacks. She finds protection, up to a point, in Inès and the good aspects of the nun, but by and large she is alone as she grapples with her envy and related feelings. Her gender plays a part in this process, as Maguire explains:

Girls, who tend to remain more in touch with internal processes, and who tend to be receptive, are likely to be more aware of feelings of lack, inadequacy and envy, while denying any associated aggression. Boys [...] will tend to cut off from feelings of vulnerability and inadequacy and use their aggression to compete. [...] Girls, on the other hand, have few opportunities to fight for what they want openly [...]. They are likely to develop an intense fear of competition, learning to limit their expectations and desires, to get what they want by indirect means, to experience pleasure and success vicariously [.] (121)

If women are not helped to struggle with their envy, the following consequences may arise:

Conscious or unconscious attempts to arouse envy in others, idealisation of the envied person and a preoccupation with the fear of being envied are all ways of denying or defending ourselves against our own envy and conflicts about competitiveness. Envy may be aroused in others in various ways. Some women hide their own envy while exaggerating their strengths. Other women enlist sympathy by appearing pathetic, making other people feel angry, envious and deceived when they unexpectedly reveal their hidden resources. While being envied may temporarily compensate for feelings of inadequacy, eventually the person who arouses envy will be attacked, or live in fear that she may be. Since idealisation is an attempt to defend the self against awareness of deprivation, rage, or envy, the idealised person may later be experienced as persecuting and hateful. (132)

These, then, are some of the characteristics of envy between women viewed within the Kleinian perspective. If we now focus more precisely on its effects on sisters, it is possible to see how the arrival of a new baby girl may stir up much of the elder daughter's original envy of the mother, together with feelings of inadequacy and helplessness. The Freudian point of view is also relevant: if the older sister has transferred her affection to her father, she is likely to experience her younger sister as a rival. Moreover, if she had begun to come to terms with her anatomical 'inferiority', the arrival of a baby sister may be particularly unwelcome in that it will plunge her back into an awareness of herself as lacking an organ, contributing to feelings of hatred of herself, her mother, and her sister. Whatever theoretical framework we

use for examining sisters' relationships, we can see that the elder is likely to become envious of the new girl's qualities, particularly those which attract her parents to her, and try more or less unconsciously to undermine, if not attack, her sister - or herself, as a defence against her envy. She will need help in struggling appropriately with these difficult feelings, in order to reach a stage where disruption becomes positive change and envy gives way to admiration, gratitude and love.

For sisters, then, sibling envy - rightly recognised as a crisis in development - has its own motives and characteristics. One very strong example of this is to be found in the fairy tale of Cinderella: the Ugly Sisters' persecution of their stepsister can be construed as fuelled by envy, the emotion which both now share. Whether they are twins, in which case they simultaneously experience envy towards beautiful, young Cinderella, or not, in which case no doubt the older one would in the past have bullied the younger, now able to vent her rage not against her initial oppressor but against the newcomer, the Ugly Sisters form a powerful, damaging and specifically female alliance. In the next chapter we shall look at such alliances as they form within the Legrand sisters' school, and I also deal with the issues of envy and jealousy provoked by the presence of sisters (in the wider sense) in my study of the erotic body; in *Le Corps lesbien*, the narratrix is frequently filled with intense jealousy when she senses that the collective of *amantes* is attempting to separate her from her lover, or even just vying for the latter's attention. *J/e*'s intense reactions and feelings of jealousy threaten to overwhelm her and often send her back to a crippling world of dyadic phantasies connected with the mother, based on greed and envy. For now, in the light of our discussion of envy between sisters, we need to ask ourselves how Catherine Legrand's feelings towards her sister are represented in the second section of *L'Opoponax* and what impact they have on Véronique Legrand. Are they fuelled by envy and rivalry, and if so, to what extent?

It is important to remind ourselves that in Wittig's writing, the direct expression of many feelings is to some extent banned. In *Le Corps lesbien*, the most emotional of Wittig's books, we find joy, anxiety, fear, terror, despair, aggression, destructiveness, desire, pleasure, orgasmic delight - a passionate mix, to say the least. The first page, however, carries a clear warning: we will *not* find 'l'affection, la tendresse ou le gracieux abandon'. Of course, this is a comment about representation: women's writing has often been dismissed as being merely concerned about 'soft' emotions, and even some erotic lesbian writing can come across as rather mawkish (Renée Vivien, for instance); in her wish to steer clear of such stereotypes, Wittig expresses the passions and represses gentler emotions. It is important however to note that Wittig does not manage to - perhaps does not wish to - silence the subtler emotions completely. In *L'Opoponax*, which features a portrayal, in Wittig's own words, of 'l'enfance étouffée et silencieuse' (Wittig 1973b: 24-5), this very repression means that we can deduce some of Catherine Legrand's emotions, by looking at their effect on the world around her. The writing is often oblique but, by fashioning an appropriate mirror, we can gain a reflection of this prototypical *petite amante*. So, for example, by placing ourselves within the lesbian intertext, we can be helped to see that the relationship between the sisters is likely to be companionable and creative: lilacs and cyprine herald Véronique's arrival; Catherine Legrand protects her sister as Inès protects her, and then teaches that there is no shame in squatting but in fact considerable pride, since they can build with urine and dust the islands of *Le Corps lesbien*. These hopeful signs precede the troublesome conversation about the meat, so that the initial representation of the sisters together comes across as joyful, even if disturbing elements need to be taken into account.

Véronique Legrand's games and activities give us clear indications about the sisters' relationship. In the following example she is in bed, playing with her fingers; she has just given up a game involving her

index finger alone - herself alone? - because it cannot seem to function properly for her; now, she finds a more promising activity:

Véronique Legrand [...] s'intéresse à deux autres doigts dont l'un est nettement plus grand que l'autre. Il s'agit du médium et de l'auriculaire. Ils se déplacent ensemble et figurent Véronique Legrand et Catherine Legrand, l'un marche un peu en arrière de l'autre parce qu'il est plus petit. Ils vont à l'école et marchent sagement sur le trottoir. Ils se rejettent de côté quand une automobile passe. Le plus petit tape avec un pied dans une flaque, le plus grand lui fait des réprimandes. Le plus petit continue néanmoins à taper dans la flaque. L'autre le tire par la main. Mais voilà qu'il change d'avis et se met à taper lui aussi dans la flaque en repoussant le plus petit pour avoir toute la place. Le petit se défend bien. Ils sont maintenant tous les deux dans la même flaque dont ils font rejaillir l'eau. (57)

We see here, initially, an almost deferential attitude towards Catherine Legrand's larger size and authority: clearly the younger sister has internalised the sense of being protected by her, and of being united with her against danger. However, Catherine Legrand may at the same time have passed onto her some of her own anxiety: both girls respond strongly, perhaps excessively - 'se rejettent de côté' - to cars driving by, as if the drivers could not see them or, worse, planned deliberately to run them down. This fear is expressed independently by Véronique Legrand in the only passage where her vulnerability appears (46-47): there, we learn that, like all children, she has fears of her own, stemming from her own conscious and unconscious struggles. We can recall Catherine Legrand's persecutory anxieties from the first section, described in my second chapter; the fear of cars may be seen as one such anxiety, one aspect of the bond between the sisters.

But if part of this fear is passed on by Catherine to Véronique, is it because of the elder sister's destructive envy, expressing itself in an unconscious desire to hold the newcomer back? It is important to say that Catherine Legrand's strong reaction to the cars is based on a real, external danger: cars (drivers, strangers) can kill. Moreover, her reaction may reveal the stress she is under; she is having to adopt a

maternal role with her little sister, take on the considerable responsibility of keeping her safe. Kate Osborne writes about this relationship:

[T]he capacity of the oldest child, especially if she is a girl, to identify with the mother's role and even assume the care of younger siblings, whilst common in many cultures where family sizes are large, can lead to the child taking on parenting tasks prematurely. The 'big sister' syndrome, while crucial in times of crisis, is often unappreciated by siblings close in age, and is unhelpful for the emotional development of the eldest daughter. (Osborne 1995: 7)

However (perhaps, indeed, partly because of the stress of her big sister role), some of Catherine Legrand's responses are undoubtedly of envious origin. As she plays with her fingers, Véronique Legrand initially visualises her independence and delight in splashing in puddles as attracting her elder sister's strong disapproval: 'le plus grand lui fait des réprimandes'. *She* wants to have the pleasure to herself, does not want her little sister to have any of it, and tries to spoil it for her sister by making the activity blameworthy. However, the youngster's spirited response - 'le petit se défend bien' - leads to a negotiated settlement: both can share in the obviously munificent puddle, enjoying widening its confines to accommodate them both. This game is a 'récréation'; conflict has been openly faced, envy resolved, and a new, joyful activity brought into being. Of course, as the game is described by Véronique Legrand, it may represent a desire for resolution rather than its actuality, but there are many other examples in the text showing that such a resolution is indeed taking place and is having a very beneficial effect on the younger sister's development. When Véronique Legrand is portrayed, she is most of the time playing freely, discovering the world about her in a confident, serene way which simply could not occur if her sister constantly reprimanded her or jostled her out of the way. I shall now discuss Véronique Legrand's games in some detail, examining the way she is dealing with many conflicts connected

with the body and acknowledging how this is made possible precisely by her elder sister's constructive relationship with her.

Véronique Legrand est assise dans le jardin. Véronique Legrand est dans son fauteuil d'osier. Elle joue avec un petit bout de bois qui fait un coude à cause du noeud dans le bois. Elle se raconte des histoires, le petit bout de bois en suit les péripéties, en glissant dans sa main, en effectuant tous les mouvements qu'elle veut qu'il fasse. Il lui passe entre les doigts à toute vitesse. Maintenant il est immobile. Véronique Legrand s'arrête de parler et le regarde en tirant la langue. Elle le perd, elle le cherche à quatre pattes par terre, elle le retrouve sous le fauteuil. Aidé par elle il grimpe le long de l'osier et prend sa place sur le siège. Véronique Legrand est à genoux devant lui et se remet à lui parler. Elle le laisse sur le fauteuil. Elle se déplace dans la poussière sur les mains et les genoux. Elle s'arrête devant un autre bout de bois à peine plus grand que le premier mais dépourvu de noeud. Véronique Legrand s'assied à côté de lui, le prend entre les doigts, le considère en le tournant en le retournant, Véronique Legrand ne parle pas, Véronique Legrand va au fauteuil où elle pose le deuxième bout de bois à côté du premier. (37-38)

In this game, the first in which Véronique Legrand is portrayed playing by herself, the Freudian drama of sexual differentiation is enacted from her own point of view. The first twig has a knot, or penis, and initially Véronique Legrand feels in control of this body, to the extent that she can claim it as her own as they move and play together; at this stage, she has no real sense of the male body being different from hers. Then the realisation of this difference occurs, freezing both speech and movement for a while. 'Elle le perd': she becomes aware of having lost her penis, and looks for it everywhere in the dust. She then attempts to resolve the loss in ways Freud suggests in his 1924 and 1925 papers; she turns to her father, worshipping him, elevating the male body above the female, which is dramatised here by the way she enthrones the knobbly twig and kneels before it, talking to it; thus, incidentally, the male ego finds its mirror and can defend itself against castration anxiety. But at this stage, Véronique Legrand begins to write her own script. She searches with equal eagerness for the female body, finding it also in the dust: a smooth twig, lacking an organ - 'dépourvu de noeud'. She sits next to it, in a companionable

stance and in a deeply reflective silence as she tries to fathom out what to do next. Finally, she seems to reach a compromise by placing the female, mother's body next to her father's on the chair - an equality of sorts. Yet we feel that this is not entirely satisfactory for her: 'Véronique Legrand ne parle pas' - no dialogue occurs with the woman / mother in this place, nor with the parents together. She turns from them and, immediately it seems, a new scheme of things is brought into being in her next game:

Véronique Legrand joue aux bouts de bois. Elle les trouve tous dans le jardin et elle les dispose sur le fauteuil. Quand elle a ce qu'il lui faut elle les prend un à un et les plante dans la terre. Ils se déplacent suivant un ordre qu'elle établit au fur et à mesure, soit en ligne droite, soit deux par deux, soit en foule sans aucun ordre. Catherine Legrand tourne en rond dans le jardin. [...] Catherine Legrand va à la grille du jardin. Sur la route il n'y a personne. Catherine Legrand essaie de passer la tête entre les barreaux. [...] Les bâtons de Véronique Legrand sont maintenant en rond. Véronique Legrand suce des petits cailloux pour les rendre propres et après elle les entasse à l'intérieur du cercle qu'elle a formé avec les bouts de bois, où ils sont tout blancs les uns à côté ou au-dessus des autres.

(38-39)

Here, we have a powerful *mise en abyme* of one aspect of the Wittigian textual project: the re-creation of the collective body. The twigs (no longer described as having a 'noeud' or not) now symbolise the 'guérillères' who will do the early work of reclaiming the female body, challenging many mythical constructions of it, including the Freudian; they will at the same time fight for, and build, a world where women can safely dwell. Indeed, these early fighters' bodies to some extent form the new world itself. Véronique Legrand orchestrates the proceedings, working from the straight, phallic, teleological line initially formed by the bits of wood to the bright, chaotic-yet-orderly community of the cleansed stones; baptised into a new life, they have become island-women, protected, but not imprisoned, by an active, living circle.

Véronique Legrand, then, is free to imagine and improvise, and it is partly thanks to her sister. Even though, in the passage just quoted,

Catherine Legrand seems bored in the garden, there is a sense in which she, too, is planning an escape into a new world: '[elle] essaie de passer la tête entre les barreaux'. Whilst hoping that someone will come and rescue her, she is also keeping a look-out against enemies; she is thus helping to keep her sister safe. And her own circles - 'elle tourne en rond' - whilst expressing dissatisfaction and aimlessness, provide the design which Véronique will positively energise; in many ways, Catherine Legrand's circles are the 'bouts de bois' to Véronique's white stones - they protect the new 'petite amante' without stifling her.

Another game is described a few pages later, bringing in many of the same elements:

Dans le jardin Véronique Legrand écrase de la brique pour bâtir une maison. Catherine Legrand est à la grille la tête coincée par les barreaux. Elle voit passer sur la route un camion de déménagement non bâché. Les meubles sont entassés derrière la cabine les uns au-dessus des autres mais sans ordre. [...] Catherine Legrand voit qu'en bas tout l'édifice est soutenu par un petit garçon qui tient sur la tête en équilibre une grande armoire [...]. Il est tout nu, il a l'air très mal. En regardant avec plus d'attention Catherine Legrand voit qu'il y en a un autre mis de la même façon entre les meubles mais vers le milieu de l'échafaudage. [...] Les petits garçons sont tous deux immobiles comme des statues, le moindre mouvement compromettrait l'équilibre de l'ensemble. [...] Catherine Legrand remonte l'allée en courant. Véronique Legrand n'écoute pas ce que Catherine Legrand lui raconte. Elle a maintenant réduit deux briques en poudre. Véronique Legrand crache dessus, on voit que la salive lui permet de délayer la poudre. Ça fait un mortier rose et épais qu'elle remue avec la pierre qu'elle a dans la main. Au bout d'un moment elle n'a plus de salive et demande à Catherine Legrand de cracher à son tour. Véronique Legrand recouvre avec beaucoup de soin plusieurs pierres de pâte rose. (51-2)

I have quoted at some length in order to compare and contrast the two sisters' activities. Catherine Legrand's daydream brings forth a powerful vision of an enormous, complex structure precariously balanced on two male bodies, which are seen to suffer considerable discomfort in the process. The male body is necessary for such an architecture to be envisioned, but it, too, is trapped and cannot easily escape, just as Catherine Legrand feels caught at times between the narrow bars of the

anatomical prison. The boys she sees can neither move nor talk to each other; phallic structures have paralyzed them. It is up to us, the readers, to take up Catherine Legrand's vision and ask ourselves what would happen if the boys did somehow break free and start to move and talk together, forming a new kind of specifically male companionship outside phallicism. Brotherhood is, however, beyond the scope of this chapter and to a large extent of this thesis; what is relevant here is the way Catherine Legrand's broad vision, which enables her to empathise with the plight of male existence, in many ways protects Véronique Legrand, sparing her the need to take on such a plight and freeing her to do her own work: building dwellings for a new woman-identified world. Once more, dust is used, with the improbable description of crushing bricks conveying a sense of the girl's energetic imagination. Bricks are supposed to be indestructible; in the story of the Three Little Pigs, the brick house defeats the Big Bad Wolf's attempts to blow it down. And yet Véronique Legrand reduces bricks to dust through the work of her hands and of her remarkable concentration.

It is of course no accident that she uses her own and her sister's saliva to mix this dust into a paste. Once more, we have a *mise en abyme* of Wittig's representational project, whereby the two mouths - symbols of the creative, erotic possibilities of women together - use saliva / cyprine to renew the world by placing *amantes* at its centre; the same *muqueux* is used to re-create, re-member, their bodies as well. An illustration of this can be found in *Le Corps lesbien's* revision of the Isis / Osiris myth:

Elles m'attirent jusqu'à tes morceaux dispersés [...]. [J]e prononce que tu es là vivante quoique tronçonnée [...], j'e produis avec empressement des larmes de la cyprine de la salive en quantité voulue, j'e t'en enduis à toutes tes déchirures, [...] j'e dis que comme par le passé nous pourrons faire ensemble les petites filles qui viendront après nous, toi alors Osiris m'a très belle tu m'e souris défaite épuisée. (86-7)

In the extract from *L'Opoponax*, the pink colour of the mortar makes us think that it is also flesh, so that Véronique Legrand is at the same time creating both the dwelling and its inhabitants. This representational reclaim of the world and the body, created through two sisters' mouths - their speech, their 'oralité' - brings to mind the following lines from a poem by Emily Dickinson, quoted in Jan Montefiore's *Feminism and Poetry* (1987: 135):

The Solemn - Torrid - Symbol
The Lips that never lie -
Whose hissing Corals part - and shut -
And Cities - ooze away -

Old prisons and palaces have been turned to lava, and in Wittig's text this is used to create a different kind of shelter, relevant to women's needs. As for the flesh of its inhabitants, it is most definitely not made of 'ce qu'il y a dans les nez'.

Having come to terms with her sister's presence in her life, with its many advantages, Catherine Legrand can now witness her sister's activities without wishing to spoil them through a distorted vision. Instead, her gaze contains admiration and approval. In the following extract she is with her new schoolfriend Reine Dieu, watching Véronique Legrand grappling with one of early childhood's mysteries: the threading and tying of shoelaces.

Véronique Legrand est assise par terre. De ses deux chaussures elle a enlevé les lacets, elle a retiré aussi les chaussures, elle est en chaussettes dans la poussière. Véronique Legrand s'essaie à enfiler un lacet dans une des chaussures, elle s'applique ce qui fait qu'elle tire la langue. Véronique Legrand renonce à obtenir un résultat, elle pose à côté d'elle la chaussure, elle se met à faire des noeuds dans le lacet, la langue est étalée sur le menton. (45)

Again, an active picture is built up, stressing Véronique Legrand's achievements and her obvious dedication in concrete, physical terms. The pleasurable aspects of the child's efforts come across very strongly: the appropriateness of sitting down on the ground, the sensual

pleasure of being in direct contact with the dust, the freedom of being without shoes connect with our own sense of the very young body's potential for happiness. The emphasis on the tongue once more stresses her *oralité*, heralding the links which will connect work, play and erotic pleasure when the *petite amante* grows up and her body's achievements are celebrated in Wittig's mature work.

The two older girls watch their junior and allow her to develop her activity in her own time. This supportive mirroring by big sisters goes a long way towards explaining why Véronique Legrand can feel so safe and be so creative. The same companion-lover's gaze brings her to life in the following description of a family picnic:

On est assis dans un pré. Il y a une nappe sur l'herbe et des assiettes. Véronique Legrand a autour du cou une serviette à carreaux orange et bleus. Elle boit de l'eau dans un grand verre qu'elle tient à deux mains. On voit la langue à l'intérieur qu'elle appuie contre la paroi, à l'endroit où la langue se presse s'écrase sur le verre autour il y a une espèce de frange verte provoquée par la succion. La mère essuie la bouche de Véronique Legrand avec le bout de la serviette nouée autour du cou. (47)

There is, once more, a peaceful stillness in this scene, a sense of balance and purpose in Véronique Legrand's body. The colours of the napkin around her neck are particularly vibrant, and we have already studied the regenerative potential of the orange and its links with a new female-bodied spirituality. What is particularly striking in this description, however, is the emphasis on Véronique Legrand's mouth and tongue. There is companionship in the way our gaze is invited, like Catherine's, to be close to the little child's body without penetrating or invading it; far from being in any way damaged or even just objectified by our look, her body is experienced as lived. We are *with* Véronique Legrand as she drinks. In this refashioning of our way of seeing, the drinking-glass plays a crucial part. It becomes a two-way, cylindrical mirror, offering a multiple perspective; it joins the outside and the inside of the body, helping us to understand the importance in such a young child's life of licking and sucking: sensual oral pleasures, still

closely linked to the mother's breast. Soon after this extract, cows appear and, again, are studied with close attention; the girls offer grass to one of them, and once more the tongue provides a strong, tactile sensation which the narratrix shares with us: 'On fait manger la vache sur la main en faisant attention que les doigts soient tendus. La langue passe sur la paume, râpeuse, avec des grands filets de bave' (49). The maternal intertext is at work here: cows provide milk, the girls offer their hands to them - we have seen in my opening chapter how the hand is one of the symbols of mother - daughter communication.

I have already said that Catherine Legrand's vision often has a contemplative quality, allowing a spiritual dimension to develop. Images of parents and children, within the Judaeo-Christian tradition, privilege the father and son (Jahveh and Adam, Abraham and Isaac, God the Father and Jesus), and of course the mother and son of countless Nativity pictures. Mothers and daughters nowhere acquire such iconic status. In the picnic scene we are discussing, however, Catherine Legrand is able to grasp that there is something divine about her sister, who moves in the world with such serenity and confidence, reclaiming, building and repairing as she goes. Even though she is weaned, the emphasis on the pleasure of her tongue and mouth show her as remaining in symbolic touch with her mother's breast, neither devouring it nor being devoured by it, whilst her mother's hand supports and enables her daughter's independent efforts as she drinks water from the glass: 'La mère essuie la bouche de Véronique Legrand avec le bout de la serviette nouée en pointe autour du cou'. There is companionship between mother and daughter, which Catherine Legrand's contemplativeness enables us to savour; given the strictures affecting so many of our systems of thought and perception, the portrayal of such companionship is in itself akin to a divine miracle, of which Catherine Legrand is the witness, in the deeper sense of seer. It is also possible to argue that the miracle could not happen without her, that she is its representative channel or catalyst, just as later she brings the opoponax into being; so the

troublesome emotions which stir her, be they sibling envy or attraction towards another schoolgirl, also awaken the possibility of a representation of family and erotic relationships in which love and growth are possible, since the balance between the girl, her sister and both parents has been represented in new ways. For it is not just the maternal breast which is rewritten, shifting the representation of the mother-daughter dyad into an iconic relationship of equals; the father's penis is as well:

Le père coupe une branche de noisetier sur l'écorce de laquelle il fait avec le canif des dessins. Le bois dessous est tout blanc et humide quand on le touche. Pour finir le bâton est entièrement dégagé de l'écorce, le blanc jaunit au bout d'un moment, ce qui fait qu'on met des mouchoirs autour pour qu'il reste blanc. (47-48)

The new designs on the bark show the father refashioning our understanding of the male body. The stick is no longer a weapon or an instrument of penetration, blindly entering the opponent / woman's body to colonise their interiority. It is now described as having an inside and a depth of its own, as the bark is slipped off to reveal the wood's more vulnerable core. Significantly, it is damp - 'tout blanc et humide' - like the cyprinal body, and it is given a new sheath to protect it. An old skin has been sloughed off, and the wood's aliveness revealed. The girls are entrusted with this renewed body, which their presence has made possible, and it is relevant that the wood chosen for this re-creation should be hazel, from which divining-rods are made; the paternal penis is thus seen as participating in the task of providing water, life itself, to drink, and this returns us to the figure of Véronique Legrand drinking from her magical glass. Both sexes are thus seen to remain in, or rather reclaim, the realm of oral and tactile power, which allows individuals to live and support each other, removed from the threat of annihilation through maternal smothering or phallic penetration.

The key to this rewriting, then, is the figure of *amantes* together, in this case two sisters who have resolved their envy, jealousy and rivalry

and can unite in a companionable, creative relationship. This new sisterhood displaces the phallus as organising agent, just as Namascar Shaktini argues that Wittigan lesbianism does in *Le Corps lesbien*. What further possibilities are afforded in *L'Opoponax* by Véronique Legrand's role and her relationship with her sister?

3. Girl or goddess?

Throughout *L'Opoponax*, Catherine Legrand remains very protective of her sister. In secondary school one day, she leaves her own activities, connected with the first stirrings of her love for Valerie Borge, to rush to her sister's side, after hearing that Véronique Legrand has fallen and hurt her knee. This setting aside of her own needs to see to her sister's is a clear indication of the strength of her love for her (198-9). Likewise, when they are both boarders, Catherine Legrand looks out for her sister and keeps her company as she brushes her teeth, even though by then her feelings for Valerie Borge are at fever pitch and the full power of the opoponax has been unleashed (240).

At that time it is also noted that 'Véronique Legrand et Catherine Legrand auront des lits parallèles. Quand on est couché, on peut donner la main à la personne qui est dans l'autre lit' (238). This stresses one key aspect of their relationship: the two sisters are 'parallel', side by side, able to touch closely without merging. In another instance, staging an ambush against a group of boys who had previously attacked them with nettles, the sisters are represented as being united so tightly as to act as one:

[...]On peut arriver par derrière sans bruit et les attaquer à coups de couteau. Véronique Legrand et Catherine Legrand ont des couteaux ouverts dans les paumes des mains, Véronique Legrand le tient ouvert dans la main gauche parce qu'elle est gauchère. Catherine Legrand le tient ouvert dans la main droite parce qu'elle est droitrière. Elles peuvent ainsi avancer côte à côte étroitement serrées hanche contre hanche sans se gêner, les couteaux sont à l'extérieur d'elles. (114)

This description highlights their symmetry, enabling them to form a powerful, ambidextrous whole. Many ingredients of Wittigian female tactical success are there: the women can move, they can defend themselves and each other without getting in each other's way, because they share the same objectives and have made their bodies work efficiently. But the knives (mock penises) turn out, in fact, to be of limited use; in the future of the Wittigian corpus, as my study of *Les Guérillères* will show in Chapter 6, other weapons will be invented and strategies followed to guarantee a world fit for women. Catherine and Véronique Legrand already herald this process in many other activities they share throughout the book, and particularly in the following, when they are seen panning for gold:

Véronique Legrand et Catherine Legrand ont des tamis, qu'elles ont fabriqués elles-mêmes, en leur faisant des bords peu élevés, une surface de l'importance de deux mains réunies, comme ils sont ils suffisent pour ce qu'on veut faire. (224)

The representation of the sieve is inspiring, in that it shows an energised, powerful circle, with communication inscribed in its fabric, since *two* hands are joined together: this is not an isolated creation, but a collective one. Moreover, hands spread open and yet touching are a feminist representation of the vulva; the girls' bodies are thus at the heart of what they do, and help them to shape an appropriate technology.

Véronique Legrand will be invested with considerable power as the narrative unfolds and she grows up under her sister's protective, admiring eye. A first indication of this importance is given by her name. This is one of the meanings given for Veronica in the Oxford dictionary: 'Cloth with representation of Christ's face, especially one miraculously so impressed after being used by Saint Veronica to wipe sweat from Christ's face as he went to Calvary'. That Wittig is aware of this spiritual dimension of the name is made clear in *Le Corps lesbien*:

m/es doigts te trouent de part en part m/a surface seule m/a très plane m/a sans épaisseur m/on voile de Lesbos ton visage tout plat

peint sur le linge de Véronique tels les traits douloureux de Christa la très crucifiée.

(30)

There is something prophetic in the figure of Véronique Legrand in that she is growing up within a Christian, Catholic world and at the same time helping to produce a new kind of representational space, which will transform the narrowness of religious rule into something broad and subtle enough to accommodate female lovers. She is both 'linge de Véronique' within an already feminised world, organised around Christa rather than Christ, and 'voile de Lesbos'; her name, according to Chambers's Dictionary, has two possible origins, both relevant to the Wittigian project: Vera Eikon, true image, and Pherenike, victorious. She is already able to mirror a new world without rejecting the old, although she will transform it. This process is at work in the following passage:

Ma mère supérieure entre dans la salle en marchant vite [...] en tâchant que ses pas n'aient pas l'air scandés par les mesures de la marche parce que [...] l'air qu'on entend est celui d'une marche nuptiale. Véronique Legrand raidie au centre de la scène présente un corps étroit, tout d'un bloc. [...] On voit que les cheveux qui tiennent bien à la tête ont des lueurs d'acier dans leur blond, que ma mère supérieure est en train de sourire dans le fauteuil rouge qu'on a mis au premier rang en laissant un espace entre son siège et les premiers bancs. Les élèves courent autour de Véronique Legrand, reviennent à elle, tendent leurs jambes dans la course, vont de plus en plus vite et c'est un galop sur la scène maintenant, on voit comme des crinières soulevées, on attend des cris auxquels se joindraient ceux de Véronique Legrand parce qu'elle s'est jointe à elles maintenant, elle a sauté d'un bout à l'autre de la scène dans une seule enjambée et on voit [...] que Véronique Legrand est soulevée plus encore que les filles qui sont avec elles par le mouvement de la danse, on voit sa tête et ses épaules au-dessus des autres ce qui fait que c'est la dernière figure qu'on regarde au milieu des arbres, Véronique Legrand comme portée par les suivantes d'Artémis. (212-3)

The wedding march celebrates the union of two seemingly irreconcilable worlds, the pagan and the Christian, headed by two women who are able to coexist with obvious freedom and pleasure: Véronique Legrand / Artemis dances whilst the Mother Superior smiles, enthroned in a red

chair. For the day, in fact, they are more than women or even *amantes*; they are goddesses, in the Wittigian definition of the word:

DÉESSE

Celle-qui-est-fêtée, celle-qui-est-célébrée. Déesse était pour les amazones de l'âge d'or un terme d'affection, d'amour et de tendresse. Chaque amazone était un jour de l'année déesse, c'était son jour de fête. Ce n'est que beaucoup plus tard que déesse a changé de sens pour celle-qui-engendre, celle-qui-règne-la-mère. (B: 74)

Artemis has a special status, so it is not really surprising to find the much-loved Véronique Legrand in her role:

Celle qui n'a pas été déesse, celle qui n'a pas régné, celle qui n'a pas été nommée, celle qui n'a pas été l'unique.

En réalité la plus aimée des amazones, la plus souvent fêtée. Chaque jour de sa vie plutôt que chaque année, Artémis a été célébrée comme l'excellente chasserresse, l'experte en armes, la rapide cavalière, l'incomparable amante. [...] Par la suite, il y a eu de nombreuses Artémis puisque chaque fois qu'une amazone a été la plus aimée, elle a été appelée Artémis par ses amies. (B: 25-26)

These definitions of the goddess, then, play down the supernatural element in the divine; one of the keys to understanding lesbian divinity is to be found in the nature of the relationships between women who create a form of worship appropriate to a reclaimed world and its dwellers. A broader discussion of this topic will be found in my seventh chapter.

That Catherine Legrand worships Véronique as a goddess, as defined by Wittig, is clear throughout *L'Opoponax*; one of the last images we have of the sisters is of them standing in a river, staring at the snake Véronique Legrand has discovered and is studying intently, in the manner of a disciple (252-3). Snakes, like Véronique, are invested with special powers in *L'Opoponax*, preparing us for the place they will occupy in the lesbian imagination, as is borne out by the entry for 'serpente' in the *Brouillon* (216).

Véronique Legrand has thus found the right nourishment in her relationship with her sister to grow and develop into an *amante* and a goddess in the Wittigian sense. But what happens to girls when such sustenance is lacking? Catherine Legrand herself is not represented as having the same protective, creative mirroring from any female in the novel, even though she is able to gather little bits here and there (from Inès, Reine Dieu, some nuns). The consequences of this deprivation will echo throughout the text, allowing the necessary tension to emerge and keep shaping a desire for a renewed female body. Catherine Legrand is not the only character of the novel to suffer from inadequate mirroring, either. In the next chapter, we shall be revealing the darker side of relationships between girls which is the result of this poor perception of the female body and of its place in the world.

4. Out of the prison (2): Reine Dieu

In my last chapter, we followed Véronique Legrand's progress under the protective eye of her sister and saw how the games she played helped her make sense of the world and of the body; she could then envision change and renewal. These games were free in that they were undisturbed by other people, although through studying them we found that they were not chaotic, but on the contrary had a method and structure of their own. They emerged as the early stages of the radical revisionary tactics of the *guérillères* and *amantes*, energising and redefining the female body and its place in the world through the powerful agency of sisterhood, women together.

But what of Catherine Legrand? At the beginning of the second section of the novel, we see that she is in a new, single-sex school, where *mademoiselle* has replaced *ma soeur* as the girls' teacher. What effect will this new mother-figure have on Catherine Legrand and on her schoolfellows? We now need to focus on these older girls' learning processes, particularly in connection with writing and reading, looking at their links with the girls' emotional life and the representation of their bodies. We shall discover disturbing accounts of sadism and bullying, and shall describe the representational system that imprisons the pupils, bearing in mind that a small girl who is also a Wittigian goddess in the making, Véronique Legrand, has already shown us a world full of possibilities for girls and women. I shall then introduce the splendidly-named Reine Dieu, arguing that her representation offers further hope of freedom from misogynistic strictures and heralds the birth of a new kind of eroticism.

1. 'L'odeur du noir et du rugueux': Mademoiselle

Mademoiselle est en conversation avec une dame à la porte de la classe. On parle tout fort. On rit. On se secoue. On envoie des gommes. Hélène Corte traverse la classe en courant. Contre le mur

il y a un tableau noir qui est tout le long. Mademoiselle se retourne et dit, taisez-vous. Elle sourit à la dame. On entend qu'elles reprennent l'histoire qu'elles se racontent. On ne voit maintenant que le chapeau de la dame. Mademoiselle est devant elle. On a un cahier dans le bureau. On écrit dessus avec un crayon noir. Mademoiselle marque la date à l'encre chaque jour en haut de la page. On s'appuie sur le papier pour former des lettres. On fait même des trous. (25-6)

In this rather cheerful description of the classroom, the first image we have of Mademoiselle contrasts sharply with the role she will adopt later on: she is talking and smiling with another woman, facing away from the classroom and its world of duties and responsibilities. Significantly, the two women are telling a story, and this hints at the importance of women's speech or *oralité* in the Wittigian corpus - we are able to anticipate the 'elles disent' of the *Guérillères*. Meanwhile, the atmosphere within the classroom resembles a festival, full of laughter, chatter, physical prowess and movement, as if the girls had picked up some of the women's pleasure. We catch a glimpse of *Le Corps lesbien*:

Celles du groupe numéro sept font les bateleuses. Leurs cabrioles leurs gesticulations leurs jongleries leurs cris leurs chansons leurs vêtements faits de pièces de couleur vive provoquent un remous au milieu de l'assemblée. (187-8)

Indeed, the two women's growing proximity ('Mademoiselle est devant elle') hints at an erotic relationship. This seems a promising world in which to start to learn to write, and although the first description of this activity reveals the effort involved - 'On s'appuie sur le papier pour former des lettres' - we also detect the girls' pride in the material aspects of writing: having a book, using a pencil, discovering the indelibility of ink. Remarkably, making holes in the paper comes across as an achievement in its own right, rather than a failure: 'On fait même des trous'. This is important if we accept that holes are one of the ways of symbolising the female genitals, and also the mouth. Rather than the horror such gaps are said to evoke within a phallic scopic regime, we have a vision of writing which can tolerate holes and gaps without fear, and indeed with pleasure. The plural 'des trous' is significant, returning us to the image of the vulva-shapes in the wire

mesh fence (7) which we studied in my first chapter: we are in a world of collective endeavour of which the mother-daughter relationship is the prototype. It is tempting to see the union of the teacher's and girl pupil's handwritings on the page as another phase of the same process, as an immensely hopeful first draft.

But, alas, this promise will not be realised. We note how, in the passage above, the teacher wishes to silence the girls' own speech: 'Mademoiselle se retourne et dit, taisez-vous'. Moreover, she has no desire to share her story with her pupils and turns her back on them. She comes across as greedy and jealous, wanting to suck all the conversation with her friend into herself, unlike the nun in the first section who was occasionally prepared to share her inner world with the children and often told them stories. Mademoiselle is also envious of the girls' youthful energy and creativity, and will go to great lengths to suppress them by stressing the children's mistakes and never offering any praise or encouragement, except to Françoise Pommier (35-6) who is so impossibly perfect that she can be seen as the exception confirming the rule. The next time we see Catherine Legrand at her desk, it seems Mademoiselle has succeeded in her destructive endeavours:

Catherine Legrand ne sait pas écrire. Avec le crayon noir elle appuie sur le papier. Elle fait des lettres qui dépassent de chaque côté des deux lignes à l'intérieur de quoi on doit écrire, ça dépasse en haut et en bas, ça touche les autres lignes, ce n'est pas droit. Mademoiselle dit, recommencez. On fait des s et des a puis des r. Les s ont toujours des trop gros ventres, les r tombent en avant sur des cannes. (27)

She already views writing as a system of rules and obligations so numerous that it is almost impossible to remember them all; hence the sad statement that she cannot write. As sympathetic adults witnessing her efforts, we have, rather, a strong feeling that it is writing (as defined by a bad teacher) that is failing her, by making it impossible for the little girl to form symbols that could help her tell her own story and provide an adequate representation of her body, its life and relationships. Her writing hand takes the pencil in directions that

simply cannot fit into the lines imposed by her teacher; children, and particularly *petites amantes*, are not 'straight', and will find great difficulty in being creative and developing happily within such a rigid system. It is possible to argue that Catherine Legrand's letters echo the greatness of her name and indeed of the Wittigian project, and there is indeed a certain attractiveness in the way they overflow the confines of the lines that aim to contain them; but this subversion of the norm is problematic, since it obviously leaves an unprotected little girl exposed to her teacher's vindictiveness and to her own damaging fantasies. Significantly, when Catherine Legrand is told coldly and bluntly to start over again, we see that she perceives writing as being generated not by the rich possibilities of sisterhood, but by an internal struggle with parent figures: 'Les s ont toujours des trop gros ventres, les r tombent en avant sur des cannes' (27). It is impossible to say whether this describes how the copper-plate, lower-case characters should normally look, in which case Catherine Legrand is quoting Mademoiselle's neurosis-inspired instructions, or whether the bellies and crutches are terms used by the teacher to deride the child's efforts; either way, it hints at the problematic place in both the teacher's and pupil's minds of the mother, disabled by her child's unconscious attacks on the inside of her body, and of the father, attacked in fantasy inside the mother and now needing to support himself with crutches. Within Mademoiselle's empire, writing seems to have at its core the battlefield of the infant psyche; the teacher decides that the only way to survive in such a world is to stamp out the female body, since so much concerns the mother, by conducting a holy war against stains and holes - her 'messiness' - thus purifying the page into a so-called 'neutral', undefiled state. She sides with the Fathers: the page must remain virginal, marked only in accordance with accepted patriarchal custom by the straight lines of 'good' writing. Meanwhile, Catherine Legrand picks up the message that she is at fault; not only is she denied help in resolving her conflict with parental imagos, but she sees in the very

shape of written characters the evidence that she has hurt them. She accepts punishment as her lot:

Mademoiselle dit, Catherine Legrand, le cahier n'est pas à jour. Il faut rattraper les pages d'écriture du lundi du mardi du mercredi du vendredi du samedi, les autres sont à un autre lundi. Entre celui de Catherine Legrand et le leur il y a trois lundis. Des pages d'm, d'l, de b avec des voyelles. Des pages de maison, de caillou, d'image, de fontaine, des pages d'avenue, de lion mange l'agneau, de Léon apprend sa leçon, de Jeanne se lave les mains. Le crayon est trop pointu il troue le papier. Le crayon est trop épais il fait des grosses lettres. La gomme ne gomme pas. Elle étale ce qui est déjà là et qu'on est désireux d'enlever. Mademoiselle dit, les mauvais ouvriers ont toujours de mauvais outils. Mademoiselle marque la date à l'encre en haut des pages qu'il faudra remplir. Catherine Legrand est seule dans le banc, seule dans la rangée, seule contre le mur.

(28-29)

Catherine Legrand is punished both for her absence, which explains the gaps in her work, and for her messy writing. This is a very sad passage: the child comes across as totally isolated from her schoolfellows, exiled and imprisoned by her cruel teacher. We wonder about the reason for her absence: was it due to ill-health or to truancy? Perhaps she was not actually absent from class, just unable to apply herself to written work. Certainly there are clear hints of learning difficulties; the child's anxiety as she fails effectively to manipulate the tools of writing comes across very strongly. They have become malevolent objects intent on thwarting her endeavours, reminding us of Ravel and Colette's opera *L'Enfant et les sortilèges*, in which the things and animals making up a child's environment come to life and attack him, in punishment for one of his own tantrums and his general ill-treatment of everything he touches. Klein argues in her study of the opera that the plot hinges on the child's ambivalence towards his mother and his unconscious attacks on her body and on the father's penis inside it; her perspective is highly relevant to our study of *L'Opoponax*, since we can view the ink and messy, greasy pencil as the symbols of the earliest weapons 'which very little children have at their disposal: namely, the device of soiling with excrement' (Klein 1929/1986: 86),

whilst the sharp pencil which makes holes in the paper represents 'the other weapons of the child's primary sadism, which employs his teeth, nails, muscles, and so on' (87). The content of the reading exercises is also revealing: 'le lion mange l'agneau' is an improbably aggressive phrase to use in work with young children, and suggests fear of retribution from vengeful parent figures; 'Léon apprend sa leçon' shows that the child has taken this warning to heart, and that all future learning will now be motivated, to a lesser or greater extent, by early battle with the united parents. 'Jeanne', like Lady Macbeth, tries to wash out the stain, the evidence of her own aggression, and perhaps even her femininity. I would add to Klein's analysis that in *L'Enfant*, as in *L'Opoponax*, the child is extremely isolated and there is no indication of her/his having been helped in any way by a real, loving parent or parent figure to cope with these early struggles, with the result that the ability to learn has become impaired. It is plain that the messiness of the materials used in writing triggers considerable anxiety in both children, by re-activating this unresolved conflict; no wonder the libretto of *L'Enfant* opens with the words 'J'ai pas envie de faire ma page', which will attract his mother's disapproval and further reinforce his sense of guilt, just as Mademoiselle reinforces Catherine Legrand's.

However, unlike the child in Ravel and Colette's opera who turns his rage and fury outwards and thus eventually comes to resolve his conflict with a punishing maternal imago, Catherine Legrand increasingly turns inwards, becoming trapped within her difficulties. This, I think, is the heart of the 'enfance étouffée et silencieuse' with which Wittig herself has qualified the world of *L'Opoponax*: a world which paralyses the movement, freedom and creativity of writing itself, turning it into an evil genie hell-bent on persecuting children, and particularly an *amante* in the making. Desperation mounts in a long, climactic passage, from which I have selected the following extracts:

On écrit sur le cahier avec un porte-plume qu'on trempe dans l'encre violette. La plume racle le papier, les bouts pointus s'écartent on dirait qu'on écrit sur du buvard, après le bec est

plein de barbes. [...] On écarte les deux parties du bec de façon à pouvoir passer le doigt entre elles pour les nettoyer. Les bouts pointus ne se mettent pas ensemble ce qui fait qu'on écrit double. [...] L'index glisse tout le temps sur la plume pleine d'encre. Sur le cahier il y a des empreintes violettes, les lignes des doigts qui ont pris l'encre s'espacent régulièrement en formant des ronds. Il faut appuyer l'index de toutes ses forces [...]. Le pouce également se presse au bout pour maintenir le porte-plume bien serré dans les doigts dont on ne peut plus se servir après. On a même mal dans tout le bras. Il vaut mieux écrire au crayon [...]. En tout cas Catherine Legrand est un cochon, Mademoiselle le lui dit en secouant son cahier, un cahier ça, qu'est-ce que c'est que ça, c'est une véritable porcherie. Il y a sur le cahier des taches d'encre en plus des empreintes digitales. (34-35)

The enmity of ink is even greater than the pencil's in that holding the pen actually inflicts injuries: the little girl's fingers go numb, her arm aches. Defeated by the skill of writing, because its space was damaged inside her even before she formed her first letters, Catherine Legrand further attracts her teacher's insults. Mademoiselle's words are significant: 'cochon' and 'porcherie' reinforce the association between the child and the excrement present in our earliest sadistic phantasies (and, incidentally, betray Mademoiselle's ignorance and contempt of the animal world, in which the pig is a superb, highly intelligent animal). Her words are like spells with which she further tries to imprison the child within these early struggles, to protect herself against them. The height of her desire is to turn her pupils into passive, obedient pupils like Françoise Pommier, deprived of independent speech and movement, with any psychological struggle banished or, at least, deeply buried:

Françoise Pommier fait avec son porte-plume des lettres rondes et fines qui se tiennent juste entre les deux lignes sans dépasser. Françoise Pommier écrit lentement en s'appliquant. Elle fait avancer sur la surface du cahier le long de la ligne un buvard propre qu'elle maintient avec la main qui n'écrit pas. Elle relève la tête quand elle a fini la page. Elle ne dit pas, ça y est j'ai fini. Elle attend que Mademoiselle arrive à sa hauteur et regarde son cahier. Mademoiselle est contente de Françoise Pommier et lui fait des compliments. (35-36)

It is difficult to rejoice in Françoise Pommier's achievements because we know that they are obtained at a terrible price, and that the perfection of her handwriting is likely to rest on considerable emotional strain;

at all costs, she must try to distinguish herself from the 'cancers', the bad pupils, to split off and project onto them the bad parts of her self, in order to deny her own early struggles and protect herself from her introjected mother's revenge. In all probability, she has become terrified of messiness and its effects, not least on Mademoiselle; she clings instead to the myth of perfection: her faultless writing may thus be seen as the picture of an idealised mother, quite untouched by sadistic struggles. Klein writes:

The idea of perfection is [...] so compelling because it disproves the idea of disintegration. In some patients who had turned away from their mother in dislike or hate, or used other mechanisms to get away from her, I have found that there existed in their minds nevertheless a beautiful picture of the mother, but one which was felt to be a *picture* of her only, not her real self. (Klein 1935/1986: 125)

So, under Mademoiselle's rule, the only mother a girl may find through her writing is an inauthentic reflection of her, an idealisation. This paper-mother lacks the organs which were the target of the child's early attacks: the womb, her breasts; in fact she is altogether bodyless. By extension, in this desperate desire to control the purity of the written mother by negating her reproductive body, the writing daughter also negates this body's creativity and its rich symbolism. Thus, she closes one of the pathways towards a new relationship which, through tolerating the reintegration of the whole of her mother's body (both its risky messiness and its creativity), could involve a companionship of equals. This pathway is often criticised by Wittig, both in her non-fiction and in the *Brouillon*; in *L'Opoponax*, it is of less interest to her than the lesbian path taken by Catherine Legrand, but it is nevertheless present in her work, and we will return in my next chapter to the tensions it creates.

But, before I indicate how Wittig suggests a way out of Mademoiselle's sinister empire, we need to ask ourselves what exactly is the representational system which she is trying to pass on to her pupils -

her daughters. What are its characteristics and dynamics, and what purposes does it serve? To answer these questions, it is useful to compare Mademoiselle's world and the Sadeian representational field, as described and problematised by various writers, including Barthes and Dardigna. The latter's *Les Châteaux d'Eros* is particularly relevant in pointing out Sade's influence on French contemporary writing; this explains why I draw from her work rather than, say, that of Angela Carter (1979) and Susanne Kappeler (1986), whilst acknowledging the importance of their studies of Sade.

Going back to the first, festival-like scene in the classroom (7-8), which held such promise for the girls' writing, we are struck by its colour, mobility and noise; this is what one might call a pre-Sadeian representation, an evocation of a lost age. Women and girls together are telling stories, competing and 'creating' - in both senses of the word, since to create also has the familiar meaning of stirring trouble. Beyond doubt, all aspects of women's speech are present, at least potentially, and we sense that a collective creation may be just round the corner, which could accommodate and process both female aggressiveness ('On se secoue. On envoie des gommes') and joy ('On parle tout fort. On rit'). We glimpse what a Golden Age of women's writing might have been, and can thus start to envision a new, glorious textuality woven by *amantes*. Crucially, one of its characteristics - the desire to reclaim speech, oralité - was present in women's medieval texts; this is most relevant to our study of Wittig, who displays great knowledge and awareness of these early writings, extracts of which become woven into the texture of *L'Opoponax* (in the fifth section (154-7), particularly). Dardigna describes the female, pre-Sade roots of the French novel in these terms:

[L]e roman a été, pour ce qui est du moins de la langue française, l'expression première des femmes. Dans l'Occident médiéval, une femme, Marie de France, cultivée et lettrée, fait entrer dans la durée, dans l'histoire, dans une écriture qui laissera ses traces jusqu'à nous, les récits en 'roman' d'alors. En rupture franche avec le discours dominant - organisateur et globalisant lorsqu'il est

savant (et latin), chantant la gloire des exploits virils des compagnons de Charlemagne lorsqu'il appartient à la geste populaire - , la parole qui se fait entendre reprend à son compte les narrations des jongleurs bretons qui traversaient la vie quotidienne du peuple. Marie les recueille et, s'appropriant le 'roman', c'est-à-dire la langue vulgaire que les gens cultivés dédaignaient au profit du latin, elle 'invente' ce qui, sans elle, aurait été perdu. Avec cette matière-des-mots-du-quotidien, elle crée un corps de textes qui ouvre la voie aux grands romans courtois. (Dardigna 1980: 33-34)

This passage also reveals the place of movement and nomadic artistic activity ('jongleurs bretons'), which are key aspects of Wittigian creativity.

In these early writings, as in Wittig's, women's pleasure is of paramount importance:

Ce qui nous intéresse à travers [ces femmes], c'est qu'elles ont su glisser dans les interstices de la geste mâle, un quotidien et un merveilleux *différents* où la vie et l'amour sont les ressorts fondamentaux du récit. Cela est important à signaler: chez Marie de France, les histoires finissent bien et la vie très subitement triomphe toujours de la mort, malgré le tragique des enjeux. La conteuse a pour but une certaine forme de jouissance qui pourrait se résumer par ces quelques mots dont elle termine *Le Lai de Milon*:

'Les anciens ont fait ce lai sur leur amour et leur bonheur. Et moi, qui l'ai mis par écrit, j'ai pris grand plaisir à vous le conter'. (Ibid.: 34)

This resembles the last words of *L'Opopanax*, which incorporate a quotation from Charles d'Orléans: 'On dit, tant je l'aimais qu'en elle encore je vis' (281). In Wittig's first novel, too, life and love are triumphant, overcoming many perils (including seven deaths) and bringing the *amantes*, and a new kind of writing, into being. One of the perils is undoubtedly Mademoiselle's cruelty, which hovers over the second and third sections like a dark shadow, just as Sade hovers over the history of the modern novel. Dardigna shows how he borrows both the novelistic form, which was seen up to the eighteenth century as largely the province of women writers and therefore classed as a minor genre, and

the concept of female pleasure; under the guise of his women narrators, he subverts and distorts their *jouissance*, robbing them of its specificity, its difference from the male:

Ce qui se machine à travers l'invention de l'héroïne sadienne c'est *l'assimilation de la sexualité féminine*. Certes, Juliette, Clairwill, la Dubois, la Durand, Charlotte et Olympe jouissent, mais c'est chaque fois à la manière des hommes: elles 'déchargent', elles 'éjaculent'! Les mots employés par Sade en sont même étonnants de monotonie. Les femmes n'obtiennent de liberté sexuelle qu'à renier leur différence, à simuler la jouissance masculine. Tout en étant narratrice, *la femme devient l'exclue du texte pour ce qui est de sa parole véritable*. C'est à ce prix désormais semble-t-il qu'elle pourra encore y figurer. (Dardigna 1980: 37)

It is possible to view *Mademoiselle* as the novelistic result of the Sadeian imagination; deprived of her own voice and pleasure (except for a fleeting moment, when she talks with a female companion), her task is to perpetuate the relationship Sade establishes with the female body, stamping out its specificity and yet allowing much disgust and hostility of it to come through. Writing about Sade, Marcel Hénaff describes this relationship as being akin to the Oedipal crisis:

[I]l se tisse un étrange rapport entre le scripteur et la figure honnie de la mère. Comme si, à être l'exclue-du-texte, la mère n'en tenait pas moins dans son orbe, sinon dans son sein, le fils révolté et fasciné, 'incestueux' et 'criminel', qui n'écrit qu'à la désirer dans la profanation, qu'à la séduire dans la soumission. (Hénaff 1978: 285)

Fear and hatred of the maternal body can be seen as the principal characteristic of Sadeian representation, informing its entire relationship with the female body. In *Sade, Fourier, Loyola*, Barthes demonstrates how important it is to 'cacher la femme' (1971: 127) - to hide anything that might be construed as her reality, such as her genitals - whilst offering up bodies for inspection and abuse, but only according to a strict system of discursive rules:

Tout est remis au pouvoir du discours. Ce pouvoir, on n'y pense guère, n'est pas seulement d'évocation, mais aussi de négation. Le langage a cette faculté de dénier, d'oublier, de dissocier le réel

[...]. Sade oppose foncièrement le langage au réel, ou plus exactement se place sous la seule instance du 'réel de langage'. (Barthes 1971: 140-141)

Dardigna points out how this fear of the female body is linked to a rejection of nature as a whole, seen as equally disgusting and potentially suspect: '[L]'érotisme c'est le refus de la nature, la méfiance pour le corps dans ses fonctions spontanées et naturelles qu'il faut domestiquer coûte que coûte en des rites complexes', and quotes Klossowski's definition of perversion as 'la première réaction contre l'animalité pure' (1974: 117). In *L'Opoponax*, the whole of nature is banned from Mademoiselle's classroom; through a high window, Catherine Legrand can see the sky and guesses that it is 'du côté du pré du hangar', but the outside world is filtered out by a wooden blind controlled by the teacher; all the children are left with are wide rectangles of light projected into the classroom (29) - pages from a Sadeian, body-hating book. We have already seen how Mademoiselle's war against messiness is connected with the memory, and fear, of our earliest struggles with the mother; she projects these negative connotations onto children's creativity, seeing in them an animality ('Catherine Legrand est un cochon') which must be stamped out at all costs and yet, paradoxically, is vital for her survival as a subject, since she splits off her own animality onto them and tries to become pure discourse, pure intellect. Words are divorced from the body, whilst grammatical rules and regulation handwriting reign supreme; the content of what is studied, of the phrases that are penned, is of no importance. Wittily, the sentence 'Le trésor qu'on trouva dans le puits fut pour la pauvre famille une ressource inattendue' is chosen to illustrate the way the girls stumble over difficult words; there is no sense of any curiosity concerning the treasure, any rejoicing at the family's good fortune, only disconnected, broken-up sounds that confuse the pupils, further infuriating their teacher:

[O]n s'est arrêté longtemps au mot re-ssou-rce. On a fait re- puis ssou- puis rce. Mademoiselle rentre toutes ses lèvres dans la

bouche, ça lui tire la peau des joues, elle est appuyée sur les avant-bras, sa tête est raide quand elle regarde dans la classe à gauche ou à droite, on lui voit le chignon au sommet tout rond, dessus les cheveux sont tendus tendus on dirait qu'ils vont craquer. (44-5)

The treasure and the opportunity it provides for refreshment and renewal can be interpreted as being female pleasure itself, freed from its well after a long period of imprisonment; it symbolises women's creativity, the resourcefulness of the body saved by a communal effort - that of 'la pauvre famille'. It offers hope of representational change for all bodies, men's, women's and children's. Alas, this is quite lost on Mademoiselle, clad in black - in mourning ? - , dissecting stories into syllables which mimic the fragmentation of her own body: 'Mademoiselle est assise [...] derrière le grand bureau ce qui fait qu'on ne voit pas ses jambes' (43). And indeed, despite her best efforts, she does not come across as achieving mastery of her self into a detached, pure intellect; in the example from pp.44-5, she seems on the verge of disintegration as she sucks her mouth into her body in a desperate attempt to deny her own oral, sensual and communicative needs, whilst her tightly-pulled hair threatens to break out like a caged animal.

To sum up, we can see in the description of the girls' school life many of the ingredients of Sadeian representation: fear and hatred of the maternal, female body, a rejection of nature and, to put it in Barthesian terms, of the referent in favour of pure discourse; there is also a strong sense of imprisonment, of cloistering. We sense an airlessness in the classroom, 'l'odeur du noir et du rugueux' of Mademoiselle herself; the pupils are trapped and often come across as powerless, just as they are in Régine Deforges' 'Le Placard aux balais' (1980: 40-55). In this Sadeian short story, the female protagonist remembers her schooldays; her teacher could almost be Wittig's Mademoiselle:

Elle devait avoir cinq ou six ans, elle allait en classe chez les religieuses de Nancy et avait une maîtresse, Mlle Jeanne, particulièrement repoussante. Vieille fille sans âge, toujours mal fagotée, ses épais bas gris tournaillant autour de ses jambes maigres aux pieds chaussés d'informes chaussures noires, les

cheveux gras et clairsemés tirés sur le sommet de la tête en un maigre chignon, la peau terne et souvent parsemée de boutons et de points noirs, les lèvres minces se pinçant sur une denture chevaline, de petits yeux noirs et rapprochés d'une absolue méchanceté: telle était Mlle Jeanne. Elle détestait les enfants [...]. En plusieurs années d'enseignement, elle était passée maître dans l'art du sadisme scolaire. (Deforges 1980: 49-50)

In this sadistic teacher's already closed, imprisoning world, the broom cupboard is the ultimate place of punishment, where the children are abandoned to their worst terrors. In *L'Opoponax*, we can see that such cloistering also contaminates the collective body, since in Mademoiselle's classroom, as in Sade, 'la clôture fonde une autarcie sociale. Les membres de ce lieu fermé forment une société complète' (Barthes 1971: 23). I now wish to look more closely at the schoolgirls' behaviour with each other, to see whether Mademoiselle has succeeded in bringing a Sadeian 'société complète' into being.

Dans la classe de Catherine Legrand il y a une élève nouvelle qui s'appelle Suzanne Mériel. Elle est très grande. Ses cheveux blonds sont comme après une indéfrisable, la raie au milieu de la tête les sépare, il y a deux barrettes à droite et à gauche d'où ils partent, ça fait des oreilles de chien sauf que c'est crépé. Elle a des joues violacées. On dit, la fille à la tignasse. Suzanne Mériel bien qu'elle soit grande ne sait pas lire, elle ne sait pas écrire. Mademoiselle se moque d'elle. Alors elle dit quelque chose mais ce ne sont pas vraiment des paroles, ça ressemble à des pleurnichements faits d'une voix basse et grinçante. On la met toute seule à un banc. On voit qu'elle a des croûtes sur la tête. Josiane Fourmont dit c'est des poux. On lui cherche les poux.
(50)

From this initial description, we can already guess that Suzanne Mériel is likely to become the butt of ostracism and bullying: she visibly and audibly displays characteristics which both the teacher and her pupils have grown to fear and therefore hate. She is very tall, closer in size to a mother, and is at the same time intellectually immature - literally an infant, since she cannot speak properly. She can be seen as a freakish impersonation of the mother-baby dyad which is the locus of fierce early conflict, and she is thus doubly vulnerable. The others are uncomfortably aware of her large body, which presents itself to their

inspection in such an emphatic way: her frizzy hair and her purplish cheeks become intense physical manifestations of that very femininity, linked to the sexually-active, reproductive body, which must be hidden at all costs because of its dangerous associations, which include bestiality. And, indeed, Suzanne Mériel is described as an animal: 'ça fait des oreilles de chien' - not a loved or respected pet, but a wretched creature whose 'croûtes blanches' (presumably cradle-cap, another reminder of the infant body) are mistaken for lice, in other words for dirt, by the children. She becomes the convenient recipient for everything they dread and can split off onto her, including learning difficulties which, as I have shown, they all risk developing within such a poor environment. Suzanne Mériel magnifies what is within each member of the classroom, and looks and acts sufficiently differently to become the loathed outsider - 'On la met toute seule à un banc'. And the leader, the one who initiates the bullying, is Mademoiselle herself; her mockery of the disabled child sanctions the victimisation and gives it its shape:

On l'attaque à coups de règle. On la frappe sur le dos et sur la tête. Elle fait le dos rond elle rentre la tête dans les épaules. Elle ne fait pas d'autre geste. On la bat plus fort. On entend la voix basse et grinçante qui sort d'elle sur un mode continu. On la bat. Les coups résonnent sur la tête, sur le dos. Toutes les règles de la classe s'abattent sur son dos, partout sur elle. On frappe en mesure, tout le monde à la fois, on crie. Elle se protège maintenant la tête de ses bras pliés, les coudes dépassent en avant de la figure frappés par les règles. La voix continue de sortir d'elle rythmée par les coups, basse, tenue. On rit. (50)

In this very Sadeian scenario (in the Barthesian sense), bodies disappear and pure discourse reigns supreme, fulfilling Mademoiselle's desire. It is her ruler, tapping the blackboard to break words into meaningless syllables, which inspires the girls' attacks on Suzanne Mériel, forcing her to retreat into herself like an animal in its shell; her too-visible female body is thus hidden from view whilst providing the necessary substratum for the sounds and movements of precisely-directed 'règles' - a strongly polysemic word in French, signifying rulers, rules, and monthly periods: the reproductive body which is

rejected, thrown back at Suzanne, with the help of weapons which are also fashioned from a damaging discourse on femininity. As I have already shown through the example of 'la pauvre famille's' treasure (44), the regulations which Mademoiselle applies when teaching the girls to read and write simultaneously hide, distort and dismember the human body, and particularly the female, making it an object of dread and fascination and activating the seeds of division and hatred between women which, as we saw in my last chapter, are there from the very beginnings of life as the infant struggles with her ambivalence towards her mother. The girls now find safety in numbers as they copy their teacher's contempt of the newcomer; like Sade's libertines, like many Sadeian writers and readers, they dispose of the real, lived body and replace it with an almost inanimate object, just alive enough to make the victimal sounds ('la voix basse et grinçante qui sort d'elle sur un mode continu') necessary to highlight their own triumphant cries and blows; music is undoubtedly being created here, with a specific logic, rhythm and momentum, providing excitement and pleasure for the bullies. Harmony, however, cannot prevail, for a member of the collective body and, indeed, a part of their own selves, is being tortured; we are far from the Golden Age where, Wittig writes, 'les anciennes amazones des empires étaient encore appelées les filles de la déesse harmonie' (B: 119). Death-inspired bullying will have no place in the Age of Glory, where it is possible to conceive of a stronger, sweeter music, reclaiming the bodies of all companion lovers: 'Tout le processus de la mort a cessé d'être en usage' (B: 174). In *L'Opoponax*, however, this age seems a long time coming as we witness what has been appropriately termed 'blood sports for girls' (the title of Tessa Watts' Radio 4 programme about bullying among girls, broadcast on 23 July 1992). It does seem that Mademoiselle has succeeded in creating a Sadeian society; as we shall now see, it spreads beyond the confines of her classroom, too:

On est dans la cour de récréation. Des grandes élèves entraînent les élèves plus petites pour les forcer à jouer avec elles. Les petites feront les malades, les grandes sont les médecins. [...] On entend une des voix qui dit, déshabille-toi. On obéit. Monique

Despiaud dit, mets-toi à genoux contre le mur. On a peur. On se met à genoux. On regarde l'espèce de mur lisse haut de deux mètres sans épaisseur, qui forme une encoignure avec un autre mur tout pareil mais moins long, l'un et l'autre plantés au milieu du jardin potager de l'école, c'est l'abri, on dirait, des jeux de Monique Despiaud, de Luce Fourmont, de Nicole Blatier. On sent une main sur les fesses mises à nu et vues. Une douleur aigüe un peu plus haut que l'anüs est provoquée par un bâton ou un objet pointu quelconque qui peut être de métal. On ne crie pas. (54-5)

The little girls become victims as their elders replicate the Sadeian practices gained from their inadequate schooling, thus expressing their rejection, envy and jealousy of their younger sister-figures in a way that damages and threatens to destroy the collective body. Abandoned in a world where they have been totally deprived of any form of adequate mirroring, where their teacher has envied them and derided their creativity, transferring her own neuroses onto them, the older girls are quite unable to love, teach or welcome the youngsters in their turn. Their fragile, damaged identities can only, it seems, gain strength at the newcomers' expense. Many ingredients of the Sadeian story are there: the victims are separated from each other, imprisoned in the 'clôture' of the two walls; all they can do is describe the physical aspects of their prison, but not, it seems, with any intention of escaping: the narrative itself has become Sadeian, with the disembodied voice of the masters giving instructions which the victims follow, because the whole scenario has extinguished their free will; they have no right to speak or even to shout ('On ne crie pas'). The older girls are like Sade's libertines, as described by Barthes, in that they alone have right of speech: 'Le maître est celui qui parle, qui dispose du langage en son entier' (Barthes 1971: 36). They also have absolute power over the little girls' bodies; they strip them, and decide upon the positions which their victims are to adopt during their 'operation'. As in the abuse of Suzanne Mériel, a careful, 'reasoned' stage-direction, aimed at maximising the bullies' pleasure, is at work here; everyone and everything has its role and place. This can be compared to the 'new language' which Barthes perceives in Sade:

[Raisonné le crime,] cela veut dire aussi combiner selon des règles précises les actions spécifiques de la luxure, de façon à faire de ces suites et groupements d'actions une nouvelle 'langue', non plus parlée mais agie; la 'langue' du crime, ou nouveau code d'amour, tout aussi élaboré que le code courtois. (Barthes 1971: 32)

In this code, everything is quantified and regulated; Barthes gives a taxonomical account of it, showing it to be as precise and cold as Mademoiselle's teaching: 'Le code érotique est composé d'unités qui ont été soigneusement déterminées et nommées par Sade lui-même. L'unité minimale est la posture' (ibid., 33). In the extract from *L'Opoponax* which we are studying, we see that the little girls' bodies are put into postures which reveal certain parts of their anatomy in a fragmented way, just as their teacher's ruler isolates words and breaks them up; postures and words, body-parts and syllables, form the lower layers of a pyramidal power structure. In Sade, as in the girls' games, there is a superior level: 'l'opération'. 'Elle demande plusieurs acteurs', writes Barthes; 'lorsqu'elle est saisie comme un tableau, [...] on l'appelle une figure' (1971: 34). Loving relationships become an irrelevance as lived bodies are flattened out; art is once more present, not as the music of Suzanne Mériel's bullying but, this time, as a visual, pictorial representation. We have a sense of all the girls - the masters as well as the victims - being thinned out, stretched onto flat surfaces, becoming painted façades for a hollow building; there is a 'mise en abyme' of this very process in the description of the two walls: 'l'espèce de mur lisse haut de deux mètres sans épaisseur, qui ressemble à un fronton, qui forme une encoignure avec un autre mur tout pareil mais moins long'. The girls are at best two-dimensional, flat reflections of each other; the third dimension, providing the depth essential to life, and the fourth, providing its spirituality, are totally absent.

It can be argued that Wittig takes a considerable risk in this passage, in which there is a definite collusion with Sadeian writing; this heralds her incorporation of sadomasochistic practices in *Le Corps lesbien*,

which will be discussed in Chapter 8. However, the passage, and the description of Suzanne Mériel's physical and mental abuse, have a key function in revealing the risks children, and particularly girls, face within society and within a particular representational field. It is also important to point out that these disturbing scenes are not allowed to predominate, but are incorporated in typical Wittigian fashion in a narrative which also promotes a number of redemptive factors. First, the girl characters are not all involved in the bullying; we have already studied Véronique Legrand's independent role in this section of the novel, but there is also Inès, who rescues Suzanne Mériel from her schoolmates' attacks:

On entend comment Inès parle maintenant avec Suzanne Mériel, comment elle se met à crier quand on essaie d'approcher. On suit de loin Suzanne Mériel qui marche soutenue par Inès. On les voit partir ainsi tous les soirs et arriver ainsi tous les matins. Inès vient avec Suzanne Mériel jusqu'à la porte de la classe ne se sépare d'elle que quand Mademoiselle fait signe que la classe est commencée. De même elle l'attend à la porte à midi et le soir, en ne parlant plus qu'à elle en l'accompagnant jusqu'à la porte de sa maison. (50-51)

In Inès, Suzanne finds physical protection and safety together with something which is even more important: companionship. Inès talks *with* Suzanne, provides her with a new mirror of herself and demonstrates that it is possible to break the Sadeian mould of 'choice', whereby one can only be libertine or victim, bully or bullied. She chooses, instead, to be with Suzanne, to communicate with her through speech and movement; her relationship with her thus resembles that of the *amantes*.

Other redemptive factors are more subtle, revealing their power through a careful reading of the text: shortly after the passage about the older girls' doctor-games, for example, one of the little girls waiting for her 'operation' is seen breaking off a branch from an elder tree, and offering its core to eat with the comment 'c'est bon à manger' (56). Thus are the third and fourth dimensions restored: the interiority, depth and nutritive power of the body are symbolised by the moist core,

connecting us to the way the Legrand father refashions his own body (47-8, discussed in my last chapter); the elder is a relevant choice of plant since it has not only culinary but also medicinal properties, like the opopanax from which the novel gets its name, and ushers in the fourth dimension through also being a magical plant, with strong associations both with God and the Devil. It is therefore no accident that the girl's name, Denise Baume, should reflect the good aspects of the tree, as the description of her knowledge of nature and Eve-like awareness of what is good to eat, together with her companionship with the other *petites amantes*, are indeed a powerful balm in this troubled part of the novel. Earlier, the little girls waiting to be taken to the 'surgery' had already experimented with eating elderberries, and had not liked their taste, being wrongly informed by Jacqueline Marchand that ink was made from them. 'On a peur de s'empoisonner. Mademoiselle dit que l'encre c'est du poison' (55): we have here the negative side of nature and of representation itself, promoted by a double misinformation about the nature of ink - a misinformation that is the consequence of Jacqueline Marchand's and, to a far greater degree, Mademoiselle's neuroses. Nature, ink, writing will remain dangerous and poisonous, a fact borne out by the Sadeian attacks against the *petites amantes'* bodies, until companionship between women can redeem the body in all its senses and renew its representation; Denise Baume heralds this process.

Another example of this renewal is provided by the description of the 'pèlerinage à Mandorle' (39-43). The place-name is itself highly significant, since the mandorla is a sacred space: the oval frame in which divine characters are represented, particularly in mediaeval art. In French, a character framed in a mandorla is said to be 'en gloire'; the mandorla thus represents both homage to the divine and the very mark of it, rather like the halo. It is also shaped like a vulva, taking its name from the Italian word for almond; the entry for 'amande' in the *Brouillon* reclaims the almond as a lesbian symbol:

Symbole autrefois de la vulve. On a retrouvé un grand nombre de bagues avec une pierre ovale, dans les tombes des anciennes cités. On ne peut plus douter que ces bagues, dites aujourd'hui amandines, ont servi de signe de reconnaissance entre les lesbiennes. (14)

The whole account of the pilgrimage is full of signs of a woman-friendly world: brightly-coloured balloons hang outside a hardware store, countering the sharp edges and corrosive power of the tools and chemicals sold there; in a rare moment of peace, Mademoiselle tells a story, seated under an apple tree - a promising activity, even though the content still reflects Mademoiselle's neuroses: she narrates a depressing tale of martyrdom, whereby a little boy is stoned to death for his faith. After she has finished, we are told that 'Catherine Legrand a de la terre plein les souliers et sous les ongles de ses mains à cause des trous qu'elle a faits en raclant sous le pommier' (41): gaining confidence from her new friendship with Reine Dieu, whom I shall shortly describe, she has been able to dig into the roots of the tree under which Mademoiselle was seated, as if to look for the other story that she needs to hear, concerning her own origins and her own relationship to her mother, her girlfriend, her *amante's* body and spirituality. Along her pilgrim's route, she is described as marching, running, playing, dancing and mock-fighting with her friend; they look for nuts and bolts on the road, as if to build their own world; they revel in the flowers and insects of the field in which the chapel, official destination of their journey, stands, and behind which they hide, preferring the pagan joys of nature, the outside world, and each other to the strictures of organised monotheism.

Although Mademoiselle exerts her negative influence on the pupils for some time, even she will eventually be rescued from the darkness she helped promote as her relationship with the girls deepens and improves. At the end of the next section, she becomes able to communicate the good parts of her inner world to them and thus participate in a female redemptive vision. Throughout this transformation, pestering her and

yet showing her the way forward, is a mischievous rebel, Catherine Legrand's first real friend.

2. Challenging Sadeian representation: Reine Dieu and the Age of Glory

The problem was how to pick the bike up. She tried lots of ways, but each time it bucked and slipped. She circled it with pleasure; that doesn't work, what next? She was pink and brown and slippery with heat, and mucky too, and I love her and I wish that I had seen her, little girl, little girl. (Jo Jones, *Come come*: 3)

This extract describes Reine Dieu's first appearance:

[Mademoiselle] est en train de regarder le cahier de Reine Dieu. Il a beaucoup de taches et de trous comme celui de Catherine Legrand. Il a aussi des dessins autour de quoi Reine Dieu a écrit les lettres comme on lui a demandé de le faire. Elle a essayé de gommer quelque chose par-ci par-là. Ça fait un amalgame à moitié en relief sur lequel on a envie de passer les doigts. Entre les reliefs c'est sale. Mademoiselle se remet en colère et même elle envoie le cahier de Reine Dieu rouler sous la table. (36)

Catherine Legrand readily identifies with Reine Dieu through the medium of her writing, which is just as messy as hers. She sees unspecified drawings there, which remind us of the designs Véronique and Catherine Legrand made in the dust with their urine (33-4); Reine Dieu's creativity is thus already lifted above the purely negative stains and holes which are of such concern to Mademoiselle and her pupils. There is a positive value in Reine Dieu's writing and drawing, which creates a link of desire and pleasure between the two girls, as expressed by the words 'sur lequel on a envie de passer les doigts'; the pleasure comes from the page's depth and materiality ('un amalgame à moitié en relief'), hinting at a body rescued from flatness and restored to life in its three dimensions. This process is reinforced in a dramatic fashion by Reine Dieu's response to the punishment which Mademoiselle inflicts on her:

Reine Dieu est punie à genoux entre les rangées des pupitres. On voit ses chaussettes beiges qui ont glissé jusqu'à ses chevilles où elles se mettent en accordéon au-dessous de la ligne rouge dessinée par l'élastique à l'endroit où il est resté le plus longtemps en place. Reine Dieu regarde de tous les côtés, s'assied sur les talons, se redresse, louche en regardant en haut puis en regardant

en bas, arrive à loucher en regardant de face, ses pupilles se dévisagent à mi-hauteur de l'orbite. (36)

Mademoiselle tries to build a Sadeian tableau by placing Reine Dieu in a duly humiliating posture, on her knees; she tries to deprive her of the right to move or even be human - but it doesn't work. This scene differs markedly from the playground doctors' game: Reine continues to display her youthful curiosity by looking everywhere; she is not caught in a still, flat gaze but remains resolutely three-dimensional, and, moreover, insists on viewing things through a multiple perspective herself, as revealed by the emphasis on squinting whilst looking upwards, downwards or straight ahead (activities on the fringes of physical possibility, like Véronique Legrand's unlikely 'foetal jumps' (33) . Reine Dieu's whole body is alive in its movement, and she is experiencing her situation as an opportunity for discovery and exploration, on her own terms. We guess that Catherine Legrand is witnessing her activities with interest, and this companionship shifts the perspective. When we are told that there is a red mark on Reine Dieu's legs, we do not think of Sadeian impositions on the female body (O's branding in *Histoire d'O*, for example) but of a living response to clothing which is described in a particular way: 'elles se mettent en accordéon' suggests that the socks have a life of their own, participating in a deepening perception of the body and a new kind of music. These socks are definitely more exciting than Robert Payen's plain, flat 'chaussettes en laine beige' mentioned on the first page of the novel; they do not, and perhaps dare not, constrict Reine Dieu's body nor restrict her movements. Garter elastic is a very different material indeed from the metal of Sadeian chains.

Dardigna (1980: 129-131) describes how Sadeian-inspired erotic writing, in its aim to suppress the threatening reality of the female body, often turns its women characters into statues, dummies, inanimate objects, denying their physical depth and movement. However, as we have just seen, Reine Dieu is most definitely not a simulacrum or effigy of the

female, and her body is alive, not erased; this is already one way of reclaiming female representation from the Sadeian. Another strategy Wittig employs concerns the image of the schoolgirl - her status, and her clothing. In contemporary Sadeian writing, the so-called 'innocence' of the schoolgirl, and her 'virginal' costume, can also be used to humiliate women and condemn them to eternal immaturity, which is another way of denying their adult, sexual and reproductive bodies. In her discussion of this, Dardigna quotes Réage's *Histoire d'O* (Dardigna: 164, Réage: 75) and also Robbe-Grillet's 'petite Japonaise en large jupe noire plissée et chemisier blanc d'écolière' (*La Maison de rendez-vous*: 30). These costumes are far more sophisticated than clothing in Sade, which was purely functional (see Barthes 1971: 24 on this), in that they work as an invitation to abuse and ultimately erase the wearer's body. 'Secret du sexe', writes Dardigna, 'd'autant plus attirant qu'il paraît nié par l'image affichée de la chasteté. Ce sexe, c'est le mensonge fondamental de chaque femme' (165) - a lie for which, moreover, 'each woman' must be punished.

In contrast we notice, in *L'Opoponax*, that Reine Dieu's clothing is breathing and moving with her; it is absolutely hers, and she herself decides what to do with it, and how tight, closed or open it should be:

Reine Dieu est à genoux dans l'allée. Elle tire sur sa ceinture, l'enlève pour en faire un bonhomme, la fait tomber par terre, la cherche à quatre pattes sous les bureaux, demande à Mademoiselle si elle peut retourner à sa place, fouille dans les poches de son tablier où elle trouve des bouts de ficelle et un élastique. Reine Dieu fronçe le nez en triturant l'élastique et les bouts de ficelle. Elle se met l'élastique dans la bouche et tire dessus jusqu'à ce qu'elle puisse l'accrocher au deuxième bouton de son tablier. Il lui claque dans la figure. Ses cheveux sont retenus loin derrière la tête par un ruban. Ils sont en broussaille autour de sa tête, les mèches qui sortent, toutes frisées. (37)

We note, first of all, that the word 'punie' has disappeared from the description of Reine Dieu's position; thus she now seems freer as she kneels in a space which is no longer 'entre les rangées de pupitres', but an 'allée' - literally a going-space: avenue or aisle. The cloistered

space of the classroom has opened up at last. What she does with her clothing underlines this sense of liberation: she removes her belt - a strong lesbian symbol, as described in the *Brouillon* (51) - to play with it, and in her game offers us a humorous subversion of the theme of bondage, since she fashions a little man (bonhomme) out of it before dropping it, preferring to go on an exploration of the world underneath the desks. She wears the 'tablier', classic schoolgirl's uniform in France, but is represented as being able to feel it from within: it has pockets which contain further tying-up objects, which she uses in her own way. The game with the elastic enables her to experiment with the fastenings of her pinafore, and the flexibility of the elastic underlines the child's vitality and her ability to take risks. 'Il lui claque dans la figure': this is not a punishment, but an acceptable consequence of Reine Dieu's willingness to experiment. Finally, her hair-ribbon, too, participates in the movement of the little girl's body; it fails in its task to keep her hair tidy, but reveals its liveliness as 'les mèches' escape. Representationally, this description rescues Suzanne Mériel; Reine Dieu's 'broussaille' reclaims the disabled child's 'tignasse', and her rebellious physical presence points to a way out of body-hating written practices, a process as effective as Inès's protection of Suzanne.

What develops between Catherine Legrand and Reine Dieu is somewhat of a paradox, since it is both very close - the girls' togetherness occupies many pages - and very free, as the following passage shows:

On marche sur la route goudronnée en tapant les pieds l'un après l'autre. Reine Dieu secoue la tête de droite à gauche. Elle étend les bras, attrape Catherine Legrand qui est en train de tourner autour d'elle en avançant de côté comme un crabe. Reine Dieu serre dans la main le col de la veste de Catherine Legrand et Catherine Legrand empoigne les boutons de la blouse de Reine Dieu. On secoue de toutes ses forces, on essaie de faire tomber. On rit. On tourne sur soi-même à demi-penché. La veste de Catherine Legrand que Reine Dieu tire à elle est arrêtée sur sa tête. Elle est dessous essayant de se dégager elle a dans la main un bouton de la blouse de Reine Dieu. (42)

There is more than a hint of trainee lesbianism in this game, in which two *petites amantes* spar in strong mock-conflict, uniting physical prowess and pleasure. Catherine Legrand turns around Reine Dieu crabwise, reclaiming both the animality so despised in the Sadeian order, and the circularity which is a feature of Wittigian lesbian eroticism; her attraction to Reine Dieu is represented in a way suggesting the movement of planets as they revolve around the sun. Joy and laughter unite them, transporting them into a world that has nothing to do with Mademoiselle's gloom and death-driven Sadeian practices; the girls are alive, moving together without merging, and their struggle reveals the risks involved in this redefinition of each other's bodies. We can already see that the passage above triumphantly disproves Pauline Réage's dismissive opinion of erotic relationships between women: 'on a appelé cela des jeux de pensionnaires, pas sérieux, qui n'engagent à rien. Se confier à un homme, on risquait énormément et c'était par conséquent beaucoup plus grave. Avec une fille, on ne risquait pas grand-chose, on ne risquait même rien du tout' (Deforges 1975, 123). As Reine Dieu and Catherine Legrand tussle, shaking the barriers of each other's bodies, symbolised by the clothing at which they tug, gone is the dreary syntax built around the verb 'se confier' in Sadeian fantasies; the girls cease to be victims waiting in the wings of femininity, they no longer entrust their bodies to any superior, phallic force that will demean and kill them. A renewed representation removes the voyeuristic masterful Look, replacing it with women's active, mobile, companionable pleasure in each other, the cornerstone of the new order.

This enterprise is most definitely not without risks, but it is a genuine commitment to representational, relational and erotic change for women. We shall explore the question of its dangers more fully in a later chapter, but for the moment this quote from the *Brouillon* helps us to place Catherine Legrand's and Reine Dieu's fight within its rightful context, which is that of lesbian love:

GUERRES D'AMOUR (LES)

Ce sont les seules guerres qui ont quelque agrément. Quand deux amantes décident d'entreprendre une guerre d'amour, elles se donnent mutuellement licence de développer toute la cruauté et la délicatesse dont elles sont capables. Les guerres d'amour se déroulent à la manière des épopées. Les amantes ont à trouver les points d'affrontement, de rencontre, les moments de trêve ou au contraire d'assaut, les nuits de veillée. Elles ont à trouver les modalités de leur guerre, son intensité, son ampleur. [...] Ce n'est que lorsque les amantes ont une confiance mutuelle très développée que la guerre peut avoir lieu. La cruauté de cette sorte de combat peut se comparer à la passion que mettent les petites amantes au jeu. Les jeux des petites amantes et de même les guerres d'amour ne sont jamais tragiques. C'est pourquoi on les appelle des guerres heureuses. (B: 114-5)

Through her play and fighting, then, Reine Dieu comes close to Wittig's definition of her first name:

REINE

Chez les anciennes amazones, on appelait reine, momentanément ou pendant une longue période, la guerrière la plus vaillante de la région ou de la tribu. Il y avait toujours en même temps deux reines des amazones, deux compagnes reines. Elles étaient amantes et se battaient côte à côte. (B: 207)

Catherine Legrand's passionate play with Reine Dieu heralds, in a clear concordance, her fight with Valerie Borge in what it is tempting to call the New Testament of the novel (256). In turn, the two teenagers' enactment of their love announces the power of *Le Corps lesbien*. As in the medieval novels by women described by Dardigna, it is tempting to place life and *jouissance* at the heart of Wittig's reclaim of the body, since she suggests the restoration of a female eroticism that owes nothing to Sade. We now need to put these life-affirming characteristics to the test in an examination of the maternal body.

5. The maternal body

So far, taking the first two sections of *L'Opoponax* as our starting-point, we have examined how the Wittigian text engages with a number of dominant discourses concerning the body: Freud's analysis of the impact of anatomical differences; Klein's discussion of the various threats to the body which the infant experiences in phantasy and which, colouring future relationships, are of particular relevance to women as so much concerns the mother; and Sade-inspired representational practices. We saw how in each case, a symptomatology was established in the text through a description of some key elements of these discourses which can be said to endanger women's (and men's) bodies: examples include Robert Payen's proclamations, illness and death, Catherine Legrand's acute separation anxiety, her struggle with sibling envy, the instances of bullying and sadism between girls. We then studied Wittig's textual revisionary tactics, highlighting how her concept of the *amantes* could begin to transform the representation of the body. The relationship between Reine Dieu and Catherine Legrand offered great hopes of such change: her active, mobile portrayal challenged a flat, two-dimensional view of the female body and made it impossible to view her as a victim.

But whilst Reine Dieu's role and behaviour opens up a fresh path for the *amantes*, it also highlights a new set of challenges and problems which become particularly apparent in the third section. Her failure at school is emphasised ('elle rate sa multiplication', 63) and, after many adventures, she fades out of the text after a fruitless attempt to construct a labyrinth (103): her creation is complicated, but without any key that might unlock its meaning; the children are ultimately presented with nothing more than a scrambled mess. Between these two events, a problematic area is highlighted: the relationship with the mother. In this chapter, I shall examine and discuss this relationship, starting with examples provided by *L'Opoponax* before broadening the argument to include other texts by Wittig, both fictional and non-fictional. We

shall see that the maternal or reproductive body is a highly problematic area in Wittig's writing, revealing conceptual deficiencies in much thinking about the female body and highlighting the need for a replacing of the reproductive body within a woman-identified world; the first condition of this process must be a radical rethinking of the relationship between mothers and daughters.

Reine Dieu est au tableau. Elle rate sa multiplication. Le tableau est derrière l'estrade de Mademoiselle, ce qui fait que sur sa chaise Mademoiselle se tourne à moitié pour la regarder et se tord le cou. On voit le chignon de profil et la moitié des lunettes, c'est-à-dire un des cercles d'acier avec le verre dedans. Le montant est accroché derrière l'oreille. On le voit bien à cause des cheveux qui sont tirés par le chignon. Reine Dieu efface avec les doigts le résultat de la multiplication. Ça fait du barbouillage blanc dans lequel on lit encore un ou deux chiffres, au milieu il y a des traces humides de doigt. Reine Dieu se met sur un pied. Ça ne l'aide pas. Elle se met sur l'autre. Mademoiselle se tourne vers l'ensemble de la classe. Elle explique une fois encore le principe de la multiplication. (63)

The choice of failure is highly significant: it is multiplication, and its abstract laws, that Reine Dieu cannot grasp. Multiplication can also be seen as procreation, which for the young child is shrouded in mystery and the source of intense speculation. How *do* we multiply ourselves? Freud describes the 'instinct for knowledge and research' of very young children and writes that 'the first problem with which it deals is not the question of the distinction between the sexes but the riddle of where babies come from' (1905/1977: 113); he goes on to describe what an intense interest older prepubertal children continue to show for this question, suggesting various anatomical pathways - out of the breast or navel, cut out of the body (114). Within this context, then, what does Reine Dieu's failure at the blackboard represent? There are two possible answers. On the one hand, Reine Dieu refuses to engage with the whole question of 'multiplication', not because it is too difficult but because at least a part of her instinct for knowledge is directed elsewhere, in an exploration of the world with a fellow 'reine', warrior-lover, at her side. As such, she is the faithful messenger of Wittig's views, to which we shall return, on the need to overthrow the Mother and the

reproductive body and create the lesbian body elsewhere, outside anatomically-bound theories of gender. Certainly there are clear signs of boredom in Reine Dieu's stance; we sense in her a desire to run outside with Catherine Legrand, away from Mademoiselle and her dried-up abstractions and into the fresher air of movement and lively communication. On the other hand, another part of her instinct, or desire, *does* want to know the answer to the riddle, but wishes the riddle could be expressed differently, in a language from which the moist, cyprinal body were not banned. The best she can do for the moment is produce 'du barbouillage blanc dans lequel on lit encore un ou deux chiffres, au milieu il y a des traces humides de doigt', but this apparent mess is an important way of communicating the wish for a newly-expressed questioning of her origins, and for a language capable of providing an answer. The 'barbouillage blanc' indicates an erasure of the old language of the body, exemplified by Freud in whose writing the female body is, as we have seen in our first chapter, so often erased, and provides a space upon which the *amante* may imprint her meaning; cyprine can be represented there, and the lover's fingers, together with 'un ou deux chiffres' which may be the survivors of the lost language of the Amazons:

On connaît plus mal la langue originelle «des lettres et des chiffres» à laquelle les anciennes amazones sont restées fidèles. C'était sans doute une langue à la fois beaucoup plus simple et beaucoup plus compliquée que celles qu'on a connues par la suite. La légende dit que la vieille langue était capable de créer la vie ou au contraire de «frapper» à mort. [...] On ne sait plus rien de ces «lettres et de ces chiffres». [...] On ne peut pas imaginer que cette langue était composée de «phrases» avec une construction et une syntaxe aussi rigides, rigoureuses, répressives que celles que nous connaissons. [...] La légende a été rapportée par les mères, les grandes mères qui avaient déformé la langue originelle et, voyant ensuite ce qu'elles avaient fait, se sentaient pleines de regret pour le passé. (B: 150-151)

This old language, distorted and yet passed on by women considered by Wittig to be inadequate (we shall return to the problems raised by such labelling), the 'grandes mères', was without doubt connected with the formulation of the relationship to origins, since it carried the magical

power of birth and death. Reine Dieu, then, becomes its inheritor without fully knowing it; she, too, wishes to know more, but Mademoiselle is an inadequate mother-figure, as we have seen - not a 'grande mère' conscience-stricken at turning against her Amazon origins and keen to pass on what she can of the old language, but a 'bad mother', neurotic and body-hating, still trapped within her own conflict with an archaic, vengeful mother. Much stress is laid in this opening passage upon her difficulty in looking at Reine Dieu; she will not leave the place of authority, her chair, nor will she turn it to accommodate the child, whom she has obviously dismissed as a 'cancre' even though the failure, if we view it as such, rests firmly with her poor teaching. This refusal to face her pupil, her daughter, results in pain for herself: 'elle se tord le cou', whilst her perception of the child remains partial, emphasised by the reference to 'la moitié des lunettes'. At the end of the passage, she abandons Reine Dieu to address the main body of pupils on the principles of multiplication, missing an opportunity to share her knowledge with her 'difficult' pupil by finding new words for her, a new perception of her. By the same token she misses the chance of learning what Reine Dieu could show her and tell her about being a daughter-lover in search of an appropriate companion-mother.

Reine Dieu, as we by now expect, does not give up such a search without a struggle. Noticing Mademoiselle's greying hair, and in a superbly ambivalent gesture - part attack, part caress - she lightly touches the white hairs without Mademoiselle noticing and, finally, pulls one out, attracting her teacher's fury. What motivates Reine Dieu's actions here? At the very least, she wants to be noticed, and attracting anger is better than remaining invisible. But there is also a wish for intimacy, for physical contact between women, highlighted by the gentleness of Reine Dieu's original touch: 'Reine Dieu [...] touche [les cheveux blancs] du bout des doigts. Elle fait avec la main légèrement un va-et-vient autour de la tête de Mademoiselle de haut en bas' (63-4). This desire for intimacy is also implicit in the contrition the child experiences: 'Reine

Dieu est ennuyée d'avoir mis Mademoiselle dans un tel état. Elle ne répond pas. Elle baisse la tête, son menton est contre sa poitrine. [...] A la fin Reine Dieu dit, mais Mademoiselle, c'était un cheveu blanc (64)'. The child may wish to annoy her teacher to get attention, but bound up in her action is the fear of losing her, the fear of her teacher's and her mother's ageing; somewhere in that tangle of emotions, a loving relationship could be woven. But it does not happen, and Reine Dieu moves into guerilla warfare, together with her friends; a few pages later, during a class outing to the woods, they sharpen spikes:

Josiane Fourmont Denise Baume Catherine Legrand Reine Dieu
avancent de front, chacune portant un pieu. Elles courent lentement
en pliant les genoux. Reine Dieu pousse un hurlement, tous les
pieux sont lancés. Celui de Reine Dieu passe par-dessus la tête de
Mademoiselle et se fiche en terre devant elle. Mademoiselle
sursaute se retourne en criant vers les quatre petites filles. (69)

Mademoiselle's reactions are, at the very least, understandable given the young Amazons' temerity and aggressiveness; but she cannot build upon nor even see the desire emanating from them, a desire which includes her in its scope.

By the time the third section opens, there have already been other instances of missed opportunities for showing what a relationship of equals between mothers and daughters might be like, even in cases where it seems that the relationship is positive on the whole. I shall give three examples; the first concerns Denise Joubert's mother's behaviour. Denise Joubert, after trespassing on monsieur Pégas' property, has been pursued by him and his dog and forced to throw herself into a fast-flowing river; she is rescued by her friends, and, after her arrival on the scene, the mother turns her ire on monsieur Pégas:

Elle se plante devant monsieur Pégas et se met à l'engueuler à cause de sa fille, espèce de sale type, on croit qu'elle va lui sauter dessus pour lui casser la figure. Vous vouliez la tuer, salaud, s'attaquer à des enfants, espèce de sale type, salaud. Monsieur Pégas ne crie plus. Il est beaucoup moins gros que la mère de Denise Joubert. Denise Joubert reprend son souffle. On lui donne un pull-over. Elle enlève sa robe pour le mettre. On ne

court plus. On voit monsieur Pégas et son chien s'en aller, suivis de la mère de Denise Joubert qu'on entend hurler. (32)

This is a marvellous account of a mother's spirited response to a dangerous bully and her courage in facing both him and his dog. There is much humour in the description of her loud shouts, insults and obviously considerable corpulence. At the very least, these may mean that her daughter's life matters to her and that she feels Denise deserves to be protected from abuse. However, she is so caught up in her fight with the man that she seems to forget about her daughter's real, living presence; just as it is up to her friends to rescue her, they are also the ones who give her dry clothes and stay with her. Not once does the mother talk to her daughter nor even look at her, and we even wonder if she will turn on her daughter in a violent fashion, when she has finished with monsieur Pégas.

As we have seen, Catherine Legrand's mother only occasionally relates to her directly and positively; mostly she remains a remote, rather abstract figure, often absent from the text. On one of her few appearances, she exercises her authority against her daughters in a malevolent way, as she forces them to sort their toys:

La mère dit, il n'y a plus de place maintenant il faut jeter tout ce qui est cassé. On fait un tri. [...] Dans le mauvais tas celui du rebut, il n'y a presque rien encore, des croûtes de pain, des morceaux de papier en lambeaux, des boîtes inutilisables. Le bon tas ramasse tout. On ne peut pas jeter un jouet sous prétexte qu'il est cassé. Les jouets qu'on délaisse pleurent la nuit quand on dort c'est écrit dans le livre de lecture. [...] Par moments sur la vitre une goutte de pluie plus grosse que les autres file de haut en bas mais le plus souvent en oblique, ça brille, c'est comme un train qui passe à toute vitesse dans la nuit. La mère dit, il y a encore beaucoup trop de choses, recommencez. [...] Véronique Legrand cache quelques objets derrière la chaudière du chauffage central pour leur permettre d'échapper à l'épuration. [...] Véronique Legrand fouille à pleines mains dans le bon tas pour retrouver le polichinelle en bois. [...] Finalement ne le trouvant pas elle s'assied par terre et pleure. (59-60)

The mother comes across as hostile to her daughters' imagination and their capacity to order and make sense of the world through play. Far

from joining them or holding them in the contemplative fashion that would make them feel alive and valued, she actually destroys the tools of their creativity. Worse: she forces her daughters to destroy them, in a neurotic attempt to purify their world, to impress upon them that the only good toy (person) is a whole, clean one. This is close to the world-vision of the Nazis and other 'ethnic cleansers'; her practice of forcing the victims to do their own dirty work also has sinister echoes from those phases of history, past and present, whilst the comparison with a train rushing through a rainy night brings to mind images of exile, displacement and deportation. Stemming from hatred, envy and a Kleinian fear of injured or maimed flesh, which in such a distorted vision includes the female body, the mother's gift to her daughters, her symbolic milk, is poison indeed. Véronique Legrand is seen providing her own antidote, generating a powerful resistance to her mother's empire by hiding things behind the boiler, which can be seen as the good mother. Her hands, symbols of communication between women and of a trusting relationship between mother and daughter, are emphasised in their healing capacity: there is a wholeheartedness implicit in the image 'elle fouille à pleines mains' which matches the generosity of her rescue attempt. Alas, Punch, the ugly, hunchbacked toy, has already fallen victim to the 'épuration'.

Véronique Legrand's tears herald my third example: the poignant requiem which the section which immediately follows can be said to represent. A girl called Marie-José Venant has died. Earlier, we had witnessed her coronation by her admiring friends in a joyful, rather pagan (in the sense of nature-loving) version of the Corpus Christi festivities: 'On lui envoie sur les joues et les yeux, des pâquerettes, des bleuets, des boutons d'or, des pissenlits comme on l'a vu faire pour l'ostensoir à la Fête-Dieu. On lui en envoie, on lui en envoie, elle devient saoule, elle rit, elle se roule par terre' (58), and the girls had then joined together in a flower-fight: a celebratory and amatory movement of bodies. Thus Christ had become displaced or, rather, lesbianised, the advent (Venant)

of the Christa of *Le Corps lesbien* (30) announced by girls' love for each other and for human parents in touch with the divine (Marie-José: Marie and Joseph). Alas, this child of special powers dies; when her friends come to her house, they see that Marie-José has been crowned with flowers, once again, and looks as sacred as at the beginning of her game in the field where she sat straight and still 'comme il convient à une reine' (58); now, however, the mobility and joy which followed are impossible for her and she has become an effigy, unable to respond to them. Her mother's grief is overwhelming:

La mère est venue sans bruit sur la pointe des pieds. Elle chasse les mouches qui se posent sur le voile avec un torchon de vaisselle dans lequel ensuite elle se cache la figure parce qu'elle s'est mise à sangloter. Quand elle l'enlève on voit qu'elle a les joues congestionnées, toutes rouges. Elle a du mal à parler. Elle dit qu'on reste là encore un moment, que ça lui fait plaisir. [...] Quand on traverse la cuisine de nouveau pour s'en aller la mère est toujours en train d'éplucher les haricots verts. Il y a devant elle sur le journal un petit tas presque transparent de fils, de pointes, d'espèces de capuchons par quoi les gousses de haricot s'accrochent aux tiges. [...] Pendant qu'on descend l'escalier on entend qu'elle pleure en criant. (61-2)

We are left speculating on the nature of the mother's relationship with her daughter, when she was alive. Certainly there was love, and the similarity between the child's attire on her deathbed and during her earlier 'coronation' indicates that the mother was able to share some of the *petites amantes'* vision of her daughter. She also asks the little girls to stay '[parce quel ça lui fait plaisir'; it is therefore likely that she found pleasure in her daughter's company: a powerful source of joy and creativity, which Mademoiselle and the two mothers (Joubert and Legrand) whom we have studied so far denied themselves and their daughters. It is also possible to view the vegetable débris on the newspaper as symbols of sexual organs: 'gousses' could be vaginas, 'capuchons' the hoods of the clitoris; the 'fils' and 'pointes' could be references to the penis. The whole collection is fragile, almost transparent, an obvious reference to the transience and mortality of the

flesh, underlining the mother's loss not only of her daughter but of the descendants of either sex she may have had through her.

The mothers I have described so far, together with Mademoiselle who is a mother-figure, offer us a range of portraits from the downright hostile and neurotic to the loving, but none shows us what might happen within a positive and fulfilling mother/daughter relationship. The episodes featuring them are rather like holes left behind by fossils; we can press clay into them to get a sense of what the original animal might have looked like from the outside, but we cannot fully reconstruct its interiority. Is this because of Wittig's highly critical views on the nature of motherhood? In other words, is she carefully following her theoretical views, making her fiction match them? Or do these views stem from the impossibility, within our present symbolic and conceptual systems, of adequately representing a relationship of equals between mothers and daughters? These questions are part of the wider discussion, which I now intend to address, concerning the place of the reproductive or maternal body within Wittig's writing.

In her two *Questions féministes* articles, 'La Pensée straight' (1980a) and 'On ne naît pas femme' (1980b), Wittig attacks the way in which categories of gender have been established within patriarchy. She views 'man' and 'woman' as artificial constructs, literally man-made rather than natural and created to keep women as an underclass; she argues that lesbians escape such an oppressive definition. Providing they are not seduced by the temptations of matriarchy which operates along the same lines as patriarchy, a point to which I shall return, Wittig asserts that lesbians are not women:

Mais détruire «la femme», sauf à nous détruire physiquement, ne veut pas dire que nous visions à détruire le lesbianisme (dans la même foulée que les catégories de sexe) parce que le sujet désigné (lesbienne) n'est pas une femme, ni économiquement, ni politiquement, ni idéologiquement. Car en effet ce qui fait une femme c'est une relation sociale particulière à un homme, relation que nous avons autrefois appelée de servage, relation qui implique

des obligations personnelles et physiques aussi bien que des obligations économiques («assignation à résidence», corvée domestique, devoir conjugal, production d'enfants illimitée, etc.), relation à laquelle les lesbiennes échappent en refusant de devenir ou de rester hétérosexuelles. (1980b: 83-4)

In order to eliminate such artificial categories of gender, then, women must first break off the heterosexual contract (1980a: 52), which includes the production of babies for men. Within these two papers, it is the subordination of motherhood to a patriarchal ideology that is criticised, an ideology in which women have no choice but to produce unlimited numbers of children to serve as objects of exchange between men, just as women themselves are used. This oppressive, enforced motherhood places women in mortal danger:

Au lieu de considérer [...] que le fait de faire un enfant relève d'une production forcée, nous le regardons comme un processus «naturel», «biologique», oubliant que dans nos sociétés les naissances sont planifiées (démographie), oubliant que nous-mêmes nous sommes programmées pour produire des enfants, alors que c'est la seule activité sociale «excepté la guerre» qui présente un tel danger de mort. (1980b: 77)

Wittig is, here, aligning herself with the French feminist current which, in the early part of the Seventies, rejected motherhood outright as slavery (a term Wittig uses several times in 'La Pensée straight'). The references to the dangers of maternity are almost certainly connected to the fight for free, legal abortion which mobilised feminists at that time. The historical background to these debates is described in Claire Duchen's *Feminism in France*; the following words illustrate the development or indeed shift in perspective on motherhood which took place over a decade:

In 1970, the family was analysed as the cause of women's specific oppression, and feminists almost universally agreed that motherhood, defining and limiting women, had to be rejected in capitalist society. During the course of the decade, this rejection was gradually seen as oversimplifying the issue, and a search for ways of making motherhood more acceptable began: a search for ways to retain womanhood and individual identity in motherhood. In the latter part of the 1970s, an attempt was therefore begun to find a third way of thinking about motherhood that conformed to neither

of the two caricatural poles which conceived of motherhood as either destiny or slavery. (Duchen 1986: 49)

Duchen defines 'motherhood as destiny' as an extreme view within feminism itself, whereby maternity, as a bodily experience, is 'specific to women and therefore to be prized' (49); some of the narcissism implicit in such a process of reclaiming can for example be found in the journal *Sorcières* (Duchen 1986: 62). This is the background to which Wittig is responding in her rejection of the biological arguments put forward as defining a specific feminine and maternal nature; she aims to remind feminists of the need to keep challenging and subverting these given 'truths'.

Wittig's non-fiction reveals a two-pronged strategy - against men and against women - in her wish to overthrow what can be called heteroppressive motherhood, that is, motherhood determined by patriarchy to be the cornerstone of heterosexuality and the female creative act *par excellence*. To what extent does her creative writing reflect this fight? What picture of the reproductive body is built up or, indeed, destroyed? I shall address these questions by looking first of all at *Les Guérillères*.

There are a few, highly significant direct references to motherhood in this novel, which will shortly be studied in some detail. By way of introduction, the following extract reveals the necessity of the fight against men which can be viewed as the first stage of the liberation of the warrior-women's bodies; women must reveal the contradictions and falsehoods inherent in men's speech:

Elles disent, ils t'ont dans leurs discours possédée violée prise soumise humiliée tout leur saoul. Elles disent que, chose étrange, ce qu'ils ont dans leurs discours érigé comme une différence essentielle, ce sont des variantes biologiques. Elles disent, oui, ce sont les mêmes oppresseurs dominateurs, les mêmes maîtres qui ont dit que les nègres et les femelles n'ont pas le coeur la rate le foie à la même place qu'eux, que la différence de sexe, la différence de couleur signifient l'infériorité, droit pour eux à la domination et à l'appropriation. Elles disent, oui, ce sont les

mêmes oppresseurs dominateurs qui ont écrit des nègres et des femelles [...] que chez eux la nature est ce qui parle le plus fort et caetera. Elles disent, oui, ce sont les mêmes oppresseurs dominateurs qui dorment couchés sur leurs coffres pour protéger leur argent et qui tremblent de peur quand la nuit vient. (146-7)

We have here a complete parity with the arguments put forward in Wittig's non-fiction, where the links between women and blacks are stressed (1980b: 84). Moreover, it is possible to see the boxes on which the men sleep as night as women: mothers of men's children and containers of men's wealth - sperm, babies, money. In this scheme of things, women and indeed children are disregarded as human beings; viewed solely as contributors to man's self-aggrandisement, they are caught in his narcissism, prisoners of his desire to have and to hold. Within a Freudian perspective, we can say that the men portrayed by Wittig are engrossed in anal narcissism: their wish to hold on to money (sperm, babies) can be equated with the refusal to give up their faeces in childhood. Freud writes:

Defaecation affords the first occasion on which the child must decide between a narcissistic and an object-loving attitude. He either parts obediently with his faeces, 'sacrifices' them to his love, or else retains them for purposes of auto-erotic satisfaction and later as a means of asserting his own will. If he makes the latter choice we are in the presence of *defiance* (obstinacy) which, accordingly, springs from a narcissistic clinging to anal erotism. [...] Since his faeces are his first gift, the child easily transfers his interest from that substance to the new one [money] which he comes across as the most valuable gift in life. (Freud 1917/1977: 299)

The men who lie 'over their money-bags to protect their wealth' (TG: 110), then, have chosen a narcissistic approach to their own body and its possibilities, which fundamentally affects their relationships with women, children and the whole of society. This excludes the possibility of love, leaving only greed and fear. The *guérillères'* solution is to declare war, strengthening their bodies to make them capable of fighting the men, and turning symbols of seduction and of maternal tenderness (breasts) into symbols of aggression (144). The text clearly argues the point that action, movement, hostilities and war against men are better

for women than remaining prisoners of male narcissism, the fate reserved for them in the following passage:

Qu'est-ce que le début? disent-elles. Elles disent qu'au début elles sont pressées les unes contre les autres. Elles ressemblent à des moutons noirs. Elles ouvrent la bouche pour bêler ou pour dire quelque chose mais pas un son ne sort. [...] Leurs mouvements sont des translations, des glissements. Elles sont étourdies par les reflets au-devant desquels elles vont. [...] Elles avancent, il n'y a pas d'avant, il n'y a pas d'arrière. Elles progressent, il n'y a pas de futur, il n'y a pas de passé. [...] S'il y a eu un déplacement initial c'est un fait qui contredirait le fonctionnement de l'ensemble, il instaurerait le désordre. Elles vont ou elles viennent enfermées dans quelque chose d'étincelant et de noir. Le silence est total. Si parfois elles tentent de s'arrêter pour écouter quelque chose, le bruit d'un train, la sirène d'un bateau, la musique de XX, leur mouvement d'arrêt les propulse de part et d'autre d'elles-mêmes, les fait osciller, leur donne un départ nouveau. Elles sont prisonnières du miroir. (G: 40)

The women's imprisonment is shown in many ways: they cannot talk together, they cannot move purposefully - their movements lead nowhere. This reminds us of the anxiety symptoms Catherine Legrand experienced in the first section of *L'Opoponax*; paralysis of speech and movement are clearly, for Wittig, the fate that is the most frightening and must be avoided at all costs. In the passage just quoted, they cannot stop their fruitless movements to listen to the outside world (trains, boats) or even to each other; because of their representational imprisonment, they cannot conceptualise what 'outside' means - they are all merged together, are all 'inside'. Men's appropriation of women and of the means of representation have made it impossible for women to represent their relationship to their own origins (their own mother), and consequently to each other. To hear 'la musique des XX', the music of women together, women must first be freed from the male mirror which so far has been their only means of self-representation. They themselves are trapped within men's anal narcissism, and Wittig denounces how motherhood becomes caught up in that trap, as I now intend to show.

By taking *Les Guérillères* as our starting-point and reading Wittig's later fictional works in sequence, it is possible to see a logical

development in Wittig's argumentation concerning the maternal body. *Les Guérillères* gives clear warnings that focussing on individual bodies, broken into parts, must stop if the women are to gain freedom. They grant themselves a brief study-period to collect together the symbols and images connected with their bodies, including those that stress their reproductive power: 'Elles disent qu'elles s'enorgueillissent à juste titre de ce qui a longtemps été considéré comme l'emblème de la fécondité et de la puissance reproductrice de la nature' (42); but rather than reclaiming such symbols, they eventually choose to abandon them (102). The spectacle of women turning inwards, fascinated by the swelling of their own bodies, is alien to the Amazons who people the *Brouillon*; in the Age of Glory, these 'fortes géantes' can be said to observe, instead, the *guérillères*' rules of movement, activity, togetherness and physical courage. Reflecting on what a lost Golden Age might have been, Wittig and Zeig suggest the following genesis, in which the mothers play a destructive part:

Au commencement, s'il y a jamais eu un commencement, toutes les amantes s'appelaient des amazones. Et vivant ensemble, s'aimant, se célébrant, jouant, dans ce temps où le travail était encore un jeu, les amantes dans le jardin terrestre se sont appelées des amazones pendant tout l'âge d'or. Puis avec l'établissement des premières cités, un très grand nombre d'amantes rompant l'harmonie originelle se sont appelées des mères. Amazone avait désormais pour elles sens de fille, éternelle enfant, immature, celle-qui-n'assume-pas-son-destin. Les amazones ont été bannies des cités des mères. (B: 15-16)

In this account of origins, the bodies of the city-dwellers, 'les établies' who were to coin the term 'mères' for themselves, underwent profound changes:

Peu à peu les établies ont changé de comportement. Elles ont de moins en moins quitté leurs cités. Elles ont abandonné les exercices physiques trop violents. Elles ont grossi. [...] Elles se sont repliées sur elles-mêmes. (B: 125)

We note here the negative value given to a focus on the self, at the expense of relationship with at least one other 'amante'; the mothers' fat bodies, far from being seen as positive and nurturing, are instead equated with a certain kind of laziness and indeed cowardice (they turn away from violence, often seen in the Wittigian world as necessary, liberating and purifying). It is within this narcissistic world that the reproductive body is fetishised:

Puis elles se sont prises d'émerveillement pour un de leurs processus physiologiques, l'enfantement. [...] Elles se sont appelées des mères. Elles ont élaboré toute une culture «nouvelle» où rien de ce qui enfante n'a échappé à l'analogie, puis à la symbolisation de leur propre engendrement. Elles se sont absorbées dans des mythes sur l'obscur, la béance, la germination, la terre-mère, la fructification des arbres. Le mot «déesse», qui au commencement, signifiait, celle-qui-est-fêtée, ce que chacune était durant tout un jour, chaque année, s'est mis à signifier celle-qui-enfante. Seules celles dont le ventre engendrait en grand nombre sont restées des déesses. (B: 125)

One aspect of women's physiology, then, is worshipped in isolation not only from other bodily processes, but also from its own outcome - the production of children, of new members of society. The babies themselves are somewhat forgotten, it seems, in the Mothers' scheme of things, in which one single distinguishing feature in their own physical geography becomes the point of reference for the rest of their bodily, natural and spiritual maps. The comparison with patriarchy is obvious; the pregnant belly and milk-filled breasts, in their physical prominence and symbolic function, are the equivalent of the phallus. The Mothers' ideology shapes their language, in which they are associated just as they are under patriarchy with what one could term the underside: 'Elles se sont absorbées dans des mythes sur l'obscur'. We can thus see that, just as the *guérillères* urged women to disengage from patriarchal discourse about the reproductive body, the *amantes* of the *Brouillon* warn us to be extremely wary of the Mothers' narcissism, which promotes fragmentation of the body, distortion of the world through language's abuse of female reproductive symbols, and perhaps most important of all, the destruction of the *amantes'* social organisation: female

companionship. In the lengthy entry for 'Histoire', from which the above quotes were also taken, we find the following description of the Mothers' social ethos:

A partir de ce temps les mères des cités ont cessé d'être des individus séparées, libres, complètes pour se fondre dans une conscience collective anonyme. Leur idéal se rapprochait de plus en plus du modèle de la ruche, une ruche qui aurait plusieurs reines pondant un oeuf toutes les trois minutes (ce qu'elles ne sont jamais arrivées à faire, bénies soient-elles pour cela). (126)

A collective organisation is not in itself without dangers for women: under the Mothers' rule, they risk being merged together, losing their individuality and autonomy - and thus their power to relate actively and creatively with one another. The idealisation of the beehive as social model results in an absurd *perpetuum mobile* where pregnancy and childbirth are both the ultimate process and the ultimate goal, stamping out the possibility of desiring and achieving anything else in any other way. Chief among the Mothers' erasures is the possibility of a love between women where knowledge of each other might allow for air (speech, pleasure, action, movement) to circulate, connecting the *amantes* and yet keeping them free. We are back, instead, to the dark mirror featured in *Les Guérillères*.

At this stage it is important to point out that, within the lesbian world which Wittig posits as desirable, procreation itself is not excluded. Clearly both the *guérillères* and the *amantes* find ways of multiplying themselves that do not place them in either the men's or the Mothers' power. In *Les Guérillères*, the women laugh at the man who asks 'qui fournira des spermatozoïdes [...]?' (140), their mockery indicating that they are ready to relate to biology on their own terms, rather than be imprisoned by it. Artificial insemination, which the women would control themselves, springs to mind as one example of such a woman-led dialogue with nature; it is indeed the favoured choice, in our society, of lesbians who wish to become mothers. But it is *not* mentioned by Wittig in this or any other text; indeed, she remains most evasive about the

strictly physical means of conception. This is directly linked, of course, to the curtailment of any meaningful engagement with the male body in her texts. There is an attempt to represent it - both to try and imagine its life and to suggest ways in which its experience and place might change, in a system which has broken off the heterosexual contract - in parts of *L'Opoponax*, but the enterprise falters as the novel gathers lesbian momentum and is nowhere picked up. The men who join the *guérillères'* cause at the end of the novel are pale copies of an androgynous model, almost ghostly, with none of the energy and three-dimensionality afforded to many of the first novel's males, whilst the evil pornographers of *Virgile, non* are caricatures; their crimes may be real but they themselves are turned into carnival effigies to be derided and torn apart: one of the scenes features Wittig (the protagonist) punishing a number of punters by whipping them, gleefully and often successfully targeting their penises, whilst Manastabal, unusually, seems to endorse such actions in the name of lesbian-feminist revenge, and indeed enjoys them as spectacle (114-5). The *guérillères'* laughter has a clear message: 'conception' will be achieved on the *amantes'* terms in order for the Age of Glory to come; it is of course a *social* conception, a rebirth in the abstract, not the anatomical sense. This explains why the virtues of the ear are extolled in the humorous 'explanation' and description of lesbian conception and birth processes (B: 189), and also underpins *Le Corps lesbien's* formula: $XX+XX=XX$ (C: 144). It can certainly be seen, and this is a problematic area in Wittig, that her totally separatist model of reproduction, witty and thought-provoking though it is, is built upon an opposition to the male and to the mother, who thus seem to be all the more present even if only as starting-points for measuring 'progress', the distance placed between them and the lesbians. Within the present state of genetics, however, such progress as represented by the equation $XX+XX=XX$ risks remaining impossible to place in reality, a flight of fancy resting on an untenable claim.

This risk partly explains the ambiguity of the following passage from *Les Guérillères*:

L'histoire que raconte Emily Norton se passe dans un temps où tous les détails d'une naissance sont réglés comme dans un cérémonial. Quand l'enfant est né, la sage-femme se met à pousser des cris à la manière de celles qui combattent à la guerre. Cela veut dire que la mère a vaincu en guerrière et qu'elle a capturé un enfant. Elles regardent par-dessus l'épaule d'Emily Norton les effigies des femmes bouches grandes ouvertes, hurlantes, accroupies, la tête de l'enfant entre leurs cuisses. (100)

We need to examine the links between violence and control in this passage. First, it is clear that part of the text's violence is connected with women reclaiming birth for themselves. Parturition is not imposed on them through the patriarchally-defined biological destiny that Wittig equates with slavery. Such freedom has its cost, as the references to war imply: the *guérillères* and *amantes'* path is marked by conflict. But at the very least, it seems that the warriors in Emily Norton's story experience an active birth, and it is no coincidence that the women are represented squatting. This position, which requires strong leg muscles and thus presupposes a fit, well-toned body, helps the woman to work with the contractions of her uterus rather than against them, as indeed does any position in which the woman is upright. It is relevant to note that the labouring mother is more likely to experience birth as violent if she is lying on her back: this increases the pain of her contractions, affords her little possibility of movement and allows various obstetric procedures to be done *to* her, rather than with her participation. This has an effect on how she represents her body and its processes to herself; some women have equated giving birth like a 'stranded beetle' with rape: they are forced to adopt a position that privileges the master's look, in that their body is open to inspection and control from someone whom they thus experience as an intruder. In Emily Norton's story, on the contrary, they remain in charge.

The violence of the passage above has another dimension, however: one that is already linked to the struggle with the Mothers as described in the *Brouillon*. Bearing this later text in mind, it is relevant to ask ourselves on which side of the Amazon/Mother divide we should place the women described in Emily Norton's story. On the one hand their physical strength and endurance, together with their reliance on warlike sounds and actions, mark them out as Amazons; on the other, they have an elaborate ritual connected with birth, and this is the province of the Mothers. Perhaps the episode described belongs to the end of the Golden Age or the beginning of the Age of Silver (B: 126-7), when there was some contiguity between Mothers and Amazons, even though the latter had to defend themselves against the Mothers' insults; some overlap was even possible between the two worlds (see the entry for 'Enlèvement': 83-4). Ultimately though, it is not possible to say for certain whether Emily Norton's women are definitely Amazons or definitely Mothers; the book in which their story is told will, because of that grey area of doubt, probably form part of the 'savoir inutile' already rejected by the *guérillères* (68) and burnt as a result. Indeed, the lower-case section immediately following Emily Norton's account can be considered one of the turning-points in the warriors' thinking: 'Elles disent qu'elles doivent rompre le dernier lien qui les rattache à une culture morte' (102); the women reject all anatomically-based symbols, including the vulva, especially, one supposes, if this is linked to the reproductive body. It is decided, at this stage of Wittigian textuality, that further study of such a body is fruitless. However, the midwives' and labouring women's rather terrifying cries of triumph continue to ring in our ears, and precisely because we cannot decide to which camp they belong, they insist in claiming our attention. There is some bitterness in the events Emily Norton describes: the reference to a child being *taken*, rather than delivered, as a result of the birth process ('la mère a vaincu en guerrière et [...] elle a capturé un enfant') reflects the intensity of the conflict between the two 'sides'; the woman must, it seems, fight very hard to ensure that the child can be claimed as hers

(as free being, prisoner or hostage? We do not have the information to decide). But at the heart of the battle, the question of the reproductive body itself remains unresolved. There are references to active birth in Emily Norton's account; there are, in the *Brouillon*, allusions to the Mothers' complex rituals and ceremonies; and there are almost casual remarks, in the same book, about the fact that the Amazons and *amantes* bear babies (126), but, we are given to understand, don't make a fuss about it - what matters is the mother - daughter relationship that results: it is unproblematically posited as a relationship of equals (entry for 'Fille', B: 96-7). In many ways, however, the Wittigian text does continue to 'make a fuss' about reproduction, which seems always to crop up as a rather awkward surplus to the argument at hand. It is as if the midwives' warlike screams in Emily Norton's account, the (rather apposite) comparison between parturition and the battlefield, have the effect of revealing a gap in the representation of one aspect of women's experience that cannot be fully coopted by either 'side'. Wittig strives to set up a black-and-white conflict: on the one hand, the Mothers who wish to control the reproductive world and are narcissistically bound to the swelling of their bodies; on the other, the Amazons who effortlessly give birth, at the end of a seemingly invisible process. Clearly, Wittig views the Amazons' position as superior, and desires modern-day *amantes* to model themselves on the nomadic, active forebears she creates in her fiction.

The problem with this polarization is that it risks throwing out the baby with the bathwater: if we reject the Mothers' view, how can we represent, articulate, the reproductive body? Wittig remains deliberately evasive in her treatment of this question: in *Le Corps lesbien* for instance, female reproductive organs appear in the monumental upper-case list of anatomical parts and physiological functions which punctuates the text at intervals ('la matrice' appears on p.129). But this list is highly problematic in that it functions as a distancing device, rather like the bibliography of *Les Guérillères* of

which Wittig writes: 'des «prélèvements» ont été effectués, à la fois comme indications des références socio-historico-culturelles du livre et comme indices des distances que le livre tente d'opérer par rapport à elles' (209). Rather than being a source of information about the nature or function of the body, the upper-case list represents an attempt to map out what must be jettisoned, reshaped, reconceptualised.

The gauntlet is picked up by the *Brouillon*, in which the following entry merits serious discussion as, under cover of their typical wit and humour, the authors promote a radical transformation of the term 'conception':

OVULE

De nombreuses amantes sont friandes des ovules qui se mangent à l'époque des menstrues. Leur rareté fait qu'ils sont avalés, un par un, avec délectation. (192)

One cannot help being reminded of the rather esoteric offerings on sale at luxury grocers' shops, particularly caviare. The hedonism of the eating experience is stressed: 'friandes', 'délectation', within a strongly sensual, erotically-charged prose. In my eighth chapter, I shall examine the role of the mouth and of eating in Wittigian eroticism, and argue that phantasied attacks upon the mother's body are never very far: thus can biting, tearing and devouring be placed within a continuum with the dainty pleasures outlined above. Eating the ova stems from the wish to be fed by the mother, and of course brilliantly mocks that wish by stressing the minuteness of the eggs; by giving the encounter the feel of a visit to Harrods', moreover, the *luxury* of lesbian love is similarly both revealed and problematised. Wittig writes of the clitoris that 'quand ils sont à l'œuvre, il a été dit, «là tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté / luxe, calme et volupté»' (B: 191); there is the suggestion that lesbian love can be neat, ordered, calm - rarefied even. But of course irony is at work there: Wittig and Zeig are only superficially engaging with a *fin de siècle* delicate, upper-class sapphism. Whatever kernels of

delight come the lovers' way have been hard-won, and throughout all her creative writing Wittig describes the battles that rage both within and without - battles that very often centre upon the mother. Just as a fish has to be cut open so that caviare can be offered for sale in a luxury environment which erases all 'sordid' reminders of the origins (the mother) of the delicious food, so is Wittig's sometimes hyper-delicate prose a veneer for the attacks upon the mother's body that underpin so many of her strategies, both social and erotic. This being said, there is no doubt that symbolically, the eating of the ova is full of positive meanings for women; as well as representing and also mocking the wish to be fed by the lover as if she were the mother, it is an attempt to show how lesbian love allows for female creativity to be absorbed: the ova symbolically fertilise the recipient, suggesting a female-only circulation of gifts, a social order where the woman is distinct both from the man and from the mother, and can interpret and receive the other's body and its products in her own way. This rests upon Wittig's contention that choice and commitment to a lesbian lifestyle matter more than the physiological fact of birth. But just as the labouring *amante*, and particularly the physical and emotional processes she undergoes to bring a daughter into the world (into consciousness), are largely absent, so does the eating of the ova have a problematic dimension: it is also a contraception, in which the other's descendants are destroyed by the desiring lover. The circulation of gifts amongst *amantes*, it seems, partly erases the possibility of a female genealogy being created in any but the most abstract way. It is as if Wittig thinks the risks of being caught in the Mothers' narcissism are too great.

As we take our discussion of this difficult issue forward, it is important to remind ourselves that, to a very large extent, the narcissism Wittig denounces is not specifically female, but rather marked by *anal* narcissism and a retentive, instead of generous and loving approach. It denies or cannot yet acknowledge the existence and

function of definite (albeit 'difficult to see') female organs, as in Sadeian representation, and can affect both men and women - an appropriate term for it might be 'asexual-anal narcissism'. Part or all of their selves can remain caught within the domain of pre-genital, anal impulses, with no true difference felt between the sexes. For women this is a disastrous self-representation, since part of their body is erased, absent. In *Parole de femme*, Annie Leclerc recalls her astonishment when, during her second stage of labour, the midwife - whose very role should surely have made her supremely aware, if not celebratory, of the existence and role of the female reproductive organs - shouted out the following words: "Dites-vous que vous faites caca, allez-y, faites caca, vous faites caca". Leclerc writes with characteristic wit: 'Je n'ai rien contre le fait de faire caca, mais tout de même c'est pas ça que j'étais en train de faire. Elle m'aurait dit, allez-y, vous faites un enfant, que ça aurait marché aussi bien...' (1974: 93). Her midwife and the nurses come across not just as women-erasing, but even woman-hating, envious and eager to diminish any sense of creativity and joy in Leclerc's labour and delivery. They try to spoil the experience for her, and we feel this is connected to their exile from a fuller representation of their own bodies and its processes. Like *Mademoiselle* and the schoolgirl bullies in the second section of *L'Opoponax*, they are adrift in a representational void, and faced with the choice between turning in on themselves (depression) or enviously and destructively turning their rage outwards (sadism), they choose the latter course. Ultimately, anal narcissism in women can result in damage to each other, and even death (Leclerc does indeed represent her experience at the hands of the midwife as a kind of attempted murder, which fails because of Leclerc's confidence in her female body and the joy she refuses to suppress).

But to what extent can Wittig be said to be representing her fictional Mothers within a sadico-anal light? After all, they extol the virtues of the female reproductive organs and construct whole representational

systems around them. It seems to be Life rather than Death that they are celebrating. But it is always a very defensive if not hostile position: the Mothers erect their cities by *excluding* the female lovers - those who have a sense of their vulvas and cyprine being the symbols of love, speech, communication and movement between at least two women. By contrast the Mothers, as we have seen, go into themselves and, although they form a group, merge together and lose their individual identities, uniting only in their rejection of their erstwhile sisters and in their focus on a bodily process which does not truly lead anywhere. Babies are produced, but they are not destined to be *amantes*, just future narcissists, flat and two-dimensional. It can be said that the *Brouillon* presents this state of affairs relatively gently and even has some sympathy for a (very) few pages of the Mothers' history: 'Il y a encore eu de bons moments. Les grandes mères avaient leurs heures de fête' (127). Ultimately however, Wittig views the Mothers' position as being tied to death, as becomes evident in Wittig's later texts: *Virgile, non* and 'Paris-La-Politique'.

Within the bleak vision of Hell promoted by Wittig in her rewriting of Dante's *Inferno*, a special place is reserved for mothers - one cannot give them an upper-case initial since they are truly demoted, part of the miserable crowd of the damned. Their children are not even qualified as such; they are referred to as 'annexes'. This, we are led to believe, is all that remains of the Mothers' cities of old; but perhaps damnation was always there, underpinning their rules and structure. This is how the inheritors of their culture are portrayed:

Dans la rue dans les magasins sur les places dans les jardins publics dans les voitures sur les trottoirs dans les autobus et même dans les cafés, partout où elles sont, elles ont leurs annexes. Par temps de guerre, par temps de famine, les annexes continuent régulièrement de s'ajouter à elles, comme si de rien n'était. Elles font donc boucherie double que ce soit à l'étal ou bien les pieds dans les étrivières. (V: 51)

In *Virgile, non*, those women who do not listen to the calling of a lesbian paradise are condemned to become the slaves of men, building up

a sociality among themselves which, instead of challenging their enslavement, aims to justify it as their 'natural' role. It is a self-regarding, narrow outlook: the women, for example, are represented as wearing blinkers on p.75. Rather than fighting their oppressors, they create their own fetters and the production of 'annexes' is part of this process. Prisoners of foreign narcissism (the women become the property of their owners, compared to ornaments and pets, accessories to the masters' love of self), they create their own narcissistic web around and through procreation. Within this unhealthy scheme, neither themselves nor their children can exist without the other; at the very least, impairment of movement and communication hovers over the mother's initiative:

En effet leurs figures ne brillent pas et leur démarche n'est pas alerte. Elles portent un sourire sans éclat mais permanent car il est leur étoile jaune. Elles ont les bras au corps, les épaules serrées, elles traînent les pieds et elles sont souvent arrêtées dans leur progression ou ralenties, tirées en arrière par les mouvements désordonnés de leurs annexes. [...] Mais pendant ce temps elles disent:

(Je les adore)

Ou encore:

(Je ne sais pas ce que je ferais sans.)

Et c'est vrai que, quand elles se trouvent par hasard délestées de leurs annexes, elles tombent à plat ventre par terre à tout moment dans leur désorientation, ne sachant pas où aller. (52)

Their bodies are described as extremely constricted and at the same time toneless, floppy - all spark is gone from them and their posture is lifeless. They are all in mortal danger, as the mention of meat ('boucherie double') in the previous extract and yellow stars in this one indicates. Indeed, references to the Holocaust abound in *Virgile, non*, and the hottest place of Hell is reserved for the women who, like the mothers above, dig their own physical and representational graves. Pregnancy is described once, as a horrendous practice done to women, even though they pretend that they agree to it: 'Comme on peut être engraisé de force, on peut être engrossé de même, on les voit passer avec un abdomen proéminent et disproportionné par rapport à la taille des squelettes, fait d'autant plus frappant quand ce sont des enfants'

(95). These nightmare images show women and girls feeding on their own hunger; pregnancy seems to offer these starving people a possibility of fulfilment, but it can only further deplete their resources, and bring them closer to death. No paradise of *amantes* and angels will be allowed them in an afterlife, either.

An even more extreme view of Hell and the Mothers' place within it is offered by 'Paris-La-Politique'. Wittig describes the genesis of this short text in her introductory remarks:

Il existe des textes parasites qui «tombent» tout entiers du corps principal sur lequel ils s'étaient greffés. Tel «Paris-La-Politique» sorti de *Virgile, non*. Paris-La-Politique est en termes d'équivalence l'enfer proprement dit selon Dante, tel qu'il ne peut pas apparaître dans *Virgile, non*. (P: 10)

It is unsettling that Wittig should describe an aspect of her own creativity in rather derogatory terms - references to 'parasitic texts' underline the extreme diffidence with which she approaches anything connected with the birth process. Clearly *Virgile, non* did not willingly harbour 'Paris-La-Politique' in its bosom; rather she views the latter as sucking its nourishment from the main novel and falling off when it was ready. This text touches upon a particularly painful area for Wittig - her place within French feminism and her quarrel with *écriture féminine* - and does not figure within *Virgile, non* because it cannot participate in its happy ending, so strongly flavoured and scented by the Californian lifestyle. San Francisco is Wittig's adoptive companion-mother, mutually chosen, it seems, in flashes of delight; Paris is the one who had to be left behind, the loathed and feared bad mother.

In the following extract, women are involved in the ultimate anal-narcissistic activity: the veneration of 'baudruches' - balloons which carry the additional connotation of windbags, empty theories. Wittig locates these objects of worship in the intestinal tract:

En effet déjà on apporte les baudruches. Certaines sont faites de caecum de boeuf, certaines autres proviennent du caecum de mouton. Leurs formes sont diverses quoique la bouffissure soit chez toutes

un trait commun. Que dire de ces vessies sinon qu'à tout moment on essaie de nous les faire prendre pour des lanternes. C'est là le plus pénible, outre qu'elles puent la graisse cuite après que le soleil les a chauffées pendant quelques heures. Néanmoins on se masse autour d'elles et on s'ébaubit. (P: 11)

It is clear that these balloons refer to bodies seen as dissociated part-objects and fetishised as such. They have no function and no life of their own, just like the Mothers' pregnant bellies which they are obviously parodying since, despite their uselessness, they are seen as the organising agents of the world. Their admirers are described as irrational, deranged cult-followers:

Car l'engouement que toute une chacune manifeste pour les baudruches donne au carnaval un aspect sinistre. Les aires battues montrent des espaces vides et d'autres où toutes s'agglutinent, grouillent, forment grappe, s'agitent, bourdonnent. Arrêtez c'est un supplice à voir et à entendre. Mais le plaisir des assistantes doit être immense si j'en juge par leurs figures, elles bavent en filets de chaque côté de la bouche, elles sont mouillées de sueur et de larmes. Pourtant loin de me réjouir de leurs transports je les trouve détestables. (11)

We are back in the Mothers' beehive, but with much more sinister overtones than the original image suggested (B: 126). The narratrix seems extremely alone and vulnerable, like Catherine Legrand at the beginning of *L'Opoponax*; indeed, the danger in which we sense her to be has an archaic quality, as the 'bees' - not one vengeful Mother, but thousands - torture her with the sounds and sights of a pleasure which is so very close to death; their bodies are *in extremis*, like those of women in labour. In 'Paris-La-Politique', it is anal worship that shapes women's perception of the womb, making death and nihilism an inescapable part of their representation of the reproductive process. Hysteria and madness await them all, rather than the companion lovers' pride in the body's joyful possibilities:

Le délire est devenu raison, la folie est de mise. Avec une complète insensibilité pour les pauvres créatures qui sont quelquefois à vie enfermées sous ce prétexte, on proclame sur toutes les places publiques, vive l'hystérie. Et personne ne se sent plus de joie. Car il faut sur-le-champ tomber en convulsions, être dans les transports les plus extrêmes, trembler, se ruer de ci de là, hurler, rugir même, s'arracher les cheveux, grincer des dents,

serrer les poings, baver, écumer, jeter de tout côté des yeux hagards, se tordre les bras, trépigner, suffoquer, se rouler à terre et j'en passe. Toute infortunée promeneuse est prise à partie, sommée de se déchaîner, de ne plus se connaître, d'abandonner son quant-à-soi. Malheur à elle si elle refuse. (12)

Gone are the Mothers' careful rituals which characterised their past: chaos now reigns over the reproductive body, threatening to engulf the world. Wittig's anger against the Mothers is palpable throughout *Virgile, non* and 'Paris-La-Politique': she blames them for the choice they made and still make every day when they secede from a companion lovers' social and erotic organisation. This, she believes, is a suicidal choice for women; as early as *Les Guérillères*, Wittig denounces the focus on the reproductive body as ultimately death-driven. Swimmers, adrift in what resembles a prenatal state, bump against the rotting carcass of an animal (G: 11-12); in the same novel there are two accounts of the embalming of venerated mothers, the first of which (20) bears the positive connotations of the nomadic society which carries it out, whilst the second is the subject of a story dismissed as boring by the active warrior-women who have no need to worship dead flesh (98-99).

Wittig herself frequently seems seduced by the representation of 'Mère la mort', to borrow the title of Jeanne Hyvrard's novel. Perhaps the most haunting example of this is to be found in *Le Corps lesbien*:

J/e suis au Golgotha par vous toutes abandonnée. Tu dors parmi elles tigresse de papier, [...] tu ressembles à une des Gorgones terrible puissante rouge de rêve. Pendant ce temps privée du secours de vos forces j/e gis face contre terre, la peur m/e vient et le désir de vivre avec toi encore dans le jardin, pas une de vous ne sait rien de m/on angoisse, alors j//implore la grande déesse ma mère et j/e lui dis mère mère pourquoi m'as-tu abandonnée, elle en silence se tient tandis que vous dormez [...], un brouillard rouge passe devant m/es yeux, une transpiration m/e traverse les pores faite de sang, [...] j/e vois tout rouge autour de m/oi, [...] les têtes basses et serrées des oliviers ne s'écartent pas pour lui donner passage elle venant à m/oi pieds nus ses cheveux et ses vêtements noirs visibles entre les feuilles pâles, j/e m/e tourne vers vous, mais toutes vous dormez. (C:138-9)

'Je vois rouge' hints at the considerable anger within the despair the narratrix experiences. Abandoned by her lover, she calls for her mother but a still, silent figure appears, clad in black, with no special powers ('les têtes [...] ne s'écartent pas') other than as the messenger of death. We are reminded, again, of Catherine Legrand's mother's absence, of the daughter's sense of panic as, exiled from any form of maternal comfort, she stumbles alone through terrors and nightmares. The phantasies underpinning the above extract are early indeed; the references to blood affecting vision and covering the body, as well as the unyielding nature of the 'têtes d'oliviers', hint at the trauma of birth, which indeed brings mother and baby very close to death. This primal experience of extreme danger, of brutal wrenching and near-suffocation, sows the seeds of the sadistic phantasies which, for Klein, the baby experiences early in response to real or perceived maternal deprivation and in any case to separation from her. Certainly, feelings of extreme abandonment and rage mark this passage, dramatising the earliest traumas every child experiences as it is born, hungers for the breast, senses the mother's absence.

But there is more, which I think partly explains Wittig's considerable anger against the maternal or reproductive body, at least as it is construed within an anal representational field. The girl may find herself in a particularly bleak place within such a system when she tries to make sense of and symbolise her mother's absence. Irigaray expands Freud's discussion of the *fort-da* game by showing how it is in fact gendered, loaded in favour of the boy through its use of a presence/absence rhythm; one of the underpinnings of masculine forms of representation is thus that 'Men have to reject in order to grasp, abandon in order to keep, exclude in order to admit or choose' (Irigaray 1978 (FPE): 52, quoted in Whitford 1991: 160). Men introject the mother through this process which, although it helps them to distance themselves from their mothers, means that they never fully let go of them. But if the girl uses the mechanism of the *fort-da*, her identity

will be placed in danger as the flinging away of the cotton-reel (her mother) will also imply the periodic flinging away of herself into a representational void, because of the merging that occurs between herself and her mother. Whitford explains the issues in these terms:

Women, with inadequate symbolic material, fall into fusion/confusion of identity. Men through the *fort-da* keep the mother at a distance; women cannot use the mechanism of the *fort-da* without detriment to themselves. If they are not to hate and reject the mother, they must identify with her. But this identification is dangerous for their identity [...]. If the threshold is unsymbolised, the openness means that it is difficult to tell where one woman ends and another begins. (Whitford 1991: 161)

This difficulty is obvious in the passage from *Le Corps lesbien* under discussion, where the sleeping women merge as a mass and even the loved one is caught in what could be described as a blood-red nightmare ('tu ressemble à une des Gorgones terrible puissante rouge de rêve'). It is helpful to remind ourselves of the episode from the Gospels (particularly Matthew 26, verses 36 to 46) which Wittig is rewriting here. Jesus' disciples fall asleep in the garden of Gethsemane (not Golgotha), and it is there that he experiences the terror of abandonment and of his impending betrayal and death. Although he refers to God as his father, we can argue that he is also relating to the maternal part of a deity which cannot, however hard the patriarchal writers of the Bible try, be fully turned into the archetypal Old Man but insists on remaining a far more elusive figure, composite and many-faceted. The ways in which Jesus deals with separation are similar to what Irigaray describes in her analysis of the *fort-da* and its legacy in the adult male psyche. Three times, he prays that the cup of suffering be taken from him, and three times he accepts God's will. Thus a rhythm of rejection/acceptance of suffering is set up which, ultimately, will draw God into him, even though he has by the end of the episode - marked by an almost cheerful sense of energy in its acceptance of the inevitable - become distanced from his earlier experience of God as a force always there and always nurturing. This throwing/holding rhythm structures his

social relationships and helps him to define a clear code of conduct: the pain of seeing his friends asleep, three times also, is made tolerable in the end by his awareness of a renewed deity inside him, a force which, although it cannot be seen by him for the moment, is nevertheless within his grasp. He has *mastered* separation, and in lordlike fashion is able once more to lead his wayward disciples. At Golgotha, site of his torture and death, Jesus is similarly represented as being able to lament the earlier God's departure from his life (Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34) whilst also gaining the confidence to place his spirit in an introjected deity's hands (Luke 23:46).

In the Golgotha passage from *Le Corps lesbien*, no such mastery occurs. The disciples' sleep, the maternal deity's cup of suffering affect the whole of the narratrix's vision and perception. Separated from her lover, she loses everything, not just a part of herself, and her desperate appeal to 'la grande déesse ma mère' reopens a very ancient wound, from which the narratrix has never recovered. No mechanisms helped her deal with her mother's absence, and the merging of identities between them meant that such an absence spelt her own death, and threatens to do so now.

Wittig's writings about the maternal body, then, can be said to constitute its symptomatology, outlining many difficulties concerning the areas of reproduction, nurturing and separation from the mother. The adult woman's relationship to her fertility is threatened by the trap constituted by male or anal narcissism, which may ultimately enslave her and lead her to her own destruction. It will be apparent from the extracts above, taken from Wittig's later writings, that there is considerable rage against the maternal body. This seems at times to come close to the process Freud describes as inevitable as, under the sway of the Oedipus complex, the girl turns from her mother; but, to take up some of the points of my first chapter, we can argue that the rage itself forms part of the symptomatology which Wittig is eager both

to expose and to heal. It is the reproductive body caught within patriarchal or matriarchal narcissism which she denounces; meanwhile, the difficulty of reclaiming the mother-daughter relationship, a reworking of which could suggest, amongst many other benefits, a renewed pathway towards female fertility, generates considerable anxiety in Wittig's fiction, as the Golgotha passage exemplifies. And yet we have, serenely posited in the *Brouillon*, the assertion that a filiation between mothers and daughters exists and that it has a pleasurable, life-giving value within the *amantes'* islands. Between the two positions, there is a gap as Wittig deliberately attempts to remove the natural mother from the representational field, using very few examples indeed of daughters relating to mothers and vice-versa, and yet leaving flashes of intense desire for the mother's presence - a mother who could be experienced face to face, in companionship. To what extent is Wittig, within that very gap, that very desire, also providing the symbolic, creative material which would enable the *Brouillon's* vision of equality to come to pass? In her reshaping of the body, what is she putting in the Mother's place, so that mothers and daughters may truly coexist, heal their bodies, and build their world? The concluding chapters of this thesis will offer three main areas of enquiry, three bodies: the collective, the spiritual and the erotic.

6. The collective body at war

In the last chapter, I argued that Wittig aimed to remove or displace the maternal body, caught up in anal-narcissistic patterns, from her creative writing, but still allowed us glimpses of a renewed relationship between mothers and daughters; I referred to the risky space between the two positions as a representational gap. This is a departure from early writing about Wittig which stresses her texts' achievements: Marks, for example, writes in an eulogistic article that Wittig breaks with the tradition viewing love between women as a non-viable, nostalgic regression to the mother-daughter couple by putting in its place lesbianism, defined as 'the only conceivable rallying-point for the elaboration of a woman's culture' (1979: 376-7); following the same line of argument, Crowder adds that '[b]y replacing the mother-child dyad with the tribal commune as the social unit, Wittig's works at one stroke eliminate relations of inequality and power' (1983: 123). A model is thus set up whereby the mother and daughter pair has to be eliminated from the representational scene as a precondition to the development of the more desirable collective body. As we have already seen, the situation of mothers and daughters in Wittig's work isn't quite so simple; and anyway, whilst recognising and indeed sharing the set of priorities which inspired the two critics just mentioned, namely the urgent necessity to emphasise the positive features of Wittigian lesbian textuality, I also think that the splitting mechanisms they detect - her policy of denigrating the mothers so that the lesbian collective can be promoted - need to be problematised in the first place. This explains why I have included the words 'at war' in the title of this chapter; they refer not just to the fact that *Les Guérillères* features widely in it, but also to my observation that throughout the Wittigian corpus, the concept of the collective body is riven with dissensions, conflicts and considerable violence.

Mothers, of course, aren't the only group at whose expense the lesbian is born; men feature in that project, are also targeted, tarnished, attacked. It seems that these two groups are successfully obliterated in some of the writing - the feminisation of pronouns, the stress on the lesbian lifestyle are typically cited as evidence of success (see for example Shaktini's work) - but even if we leave aside for the moment the question of the desirability of such obliteration, it is obvious that it cannot be achieved in representational terms. Beyond the odyssey of *Les Guérillères*, the male and maternal bodies keep cropping up: the former, particularly, in *Virgile, non*, and the latter quite simply everywhere; the phantasies of *Le Corps lesbien* are especially steeped in the maternal. Hence perhaps, in part at least, the rage expressed in much of Wittig's late writing and the despairing isolation expressed by the narratrix of 'Paris-La-Politique'.

Sisters too, it seems, fall by the wayside when fundamentalism - Wittig's authoritarian, purist stance, based on a wish to keep so much at bay - threatens. She is disappointed that so many of them 'se privèlent du pouvoir de renverser les maîtres une fois qu'elles ont accepté des maîtresses' (P: 35). She puts them, under the label *zélées acolytes*, in the same bag as *les judas* (traitors), together, one supposes, with all women who are concerned to study what 'female', 'maternal', 'sisterly' and 'lesbian' might mean and who examine the question of sexual difference as a relevant and necessary part of that project; women who believe, as I do, that such an analysis benefits from the *propositional* model outlined in my preface, where the various elements can be held and contemplated together, rather than the rejection-retention model, linked to anal sadism, where one aspect must be jettisoned, attacked, negated in order for another to exist. Indeed, this brings us back to the arguments of the last chapter concerning the connections between the *fort-da* and masculinity. In order to make progress in the whole question of the study of femaleness from a female perspective, it is vital to find ways of working which *neither* need to rely upon the

rejection-retention model *nor* condemn women to fuse together in one un(der)represented mass. Wittig, however, is so critical of the risks of merging that she chooses, from *Les Guérillères* onwards, to build the collective body upon the premise of the rejection and evacuation of undesirables. But it takes considerable and *escalating* violence to maintain such a position, which is a problem in itself; and even so, the position cannot really be fully maintained, can never become stable. One of the most haunting passages of 'Paris-La-Politique', entitled 'L'altération du sens', is of the narratrix defiantly sitting on a heap of manure. It is *there*, it seems, that the true meaning of her words resides: their fight against heteroppressive slavery, against the mother, against the markers of femininity, indeed against both 'men' and 'women', and *for* the guerilla fighter, the runaway wife, the lesbian transfuge (as expressed in Wittig's 1989 paper, p.248). She does not want these meanings to be beautiful and smell good. I shall shortly be explaining in detail the various stages of Wittig's thinking and representation connected with these aspects of the collective at war. Just now however, 'L'altération du sens' deserves attention since it provides valuable insights into the nature and functions of Wittigian violence, without which the discussion of her collective body cannot usefully proceed.

The narratrix is profoundly disturbed when, as she sees it, *les judas* twist and bend her words, making them fit the very arguments Wittig opposes and causing her to be seduced by these translations. This is an understandable motive for an author's anxiety, but the text presents us with such unusual, complex and deeply ambivalent images that the narratrix's rage picks up other strands in its fabric:

Je regarde le fumier sur lequel je réside depuis des années se transformer en roses comme dans le Miracle de Genêt. [...] Je suis aimée par les plus redoutables judas de la ville et il ne me manque plus que quelques crachats sur les joues pour faire bonne mesure et me faire briller tout à fait [...]. Les rognures que je ramasse dans mes mains embaument et se transforment secrètement en autant de pétales arrachés à des milliers de fleurs. Enfin je m'enfonce dans

la chair végétale que j'ai si souvent rêvé de tenir en masse contre ma peau, les parfums entêtants des iris, des roses et du magnolia m'engourdissent le cerveau. [...] Avec une telle perturbation du sens, il ne me reste plus qu'à voir dans ces judas splendides les guérillères que j'ai jadis chantées. (P: 34)

The narratrix's wish to *hold on* to her heap of manure, because it is *hers*, derives from exactly the same mechanisms Wittig exposes and denounces in *Les Guérillères*, when she features men 'lying over their money-bags at night' (TG: 110) - the narcissistic clinging to anal eroticism described by Freud and discussed in the last chapter, with the retention of the faeces used by the young child 'for purposes of auto-erotic satisfaction and later as a means of asserting his own will' (Freud 1917/1977: 299). In this retentive mode, the faeces are not perceived by the child as a gift to others, the foundation of object-love; hence the narratrix's deep resistance to the manure being set to work for the common good, enriching the ground to produce flowers: the textual implication is that roses and perfumes, although tempting, are an irrelevance, an unwanted development of her work, as indeed is a concept of 'common good' which in this poisoned context cannot in her opinion mean what it says. Moreover, the extract carries a particular bleakness in its masochism - the sense of abandonment and of being the target of 'crachats'. All other women, really, are phantasied as suspect here: the mother, who will not receive the child's retained gift; the sisters, who are turned into traitors to the lesbian-runaway Word; and the daughters: the flowers and smells grown from the manure (from Wittig's textual body) are seductive but dangerous, inauthentic and 'wrong', as they were conceived through illegitimate union between the original words and the judases. The Christ-narratrix *has* to be crucified, in the face of so many enemies.

A Kleinian reading is highly relevant from this point of the chapter onwards. In fact, the retained faeces have already done the work of damaging all objects in phantasy; it seems they could only be a poisoned gift in any case. Hence the hatred that permeates this text, seeping

through its liberationist message; hence the guilt and despair as the narratrix experiences her own creation (*Les Guérillères*: mother in that it is an earlier text, daughter in that Wittig produced it) as distorted, spoiled. Just as the infant's excrement becomes its phantasied weapons and poison, which it dreads in turn, so are the narratrix's beloved flowers, which feature so strongly in her desires, both poisoned by her and poisonous to her. In an even stronger example of anal sadism, Wittig features judases offering dishes of excrement to their admirers: an insult which they strive to view as a gift, because they have been conditioned into terror of abandonment by a mixture of caresses and blows (28). Sisterhood, it seems, is now an abusive community, resting on the very worst phantasied relationship with the mother. Gone are the possibilities woven into the fabric of Catherine Legrand's contemplative, enabling relationship with her younger sister; gone are Valerie Borge and Reine Dieu. Viewing the bleakness of Wittig's last text, one is perhaps tempted to feel nostalgic and ask 'Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?'.

However, although an examination of the collective body's characteristics of exclusion and violence underpinned in part by despair will remain at the top of this chapter's agenda, it is important not to fall into the very patterns such an analysis denounces. Two things need to be borne in mind: one, that although Wittig's texts are obviously linked in many ways and can be viewed as stages of a representational journey, they are *also* individual works. To pick up an earlier point, they should neither be split into the mostly irenical (*L'Opoponax* and *Brouillon*) versus the mostly violent (everything else), with the implicit condemnation of the 'bad' pole of that split, nor should they be fused into one consistent mass; both positions would fail to do justice to the extraordinary subtlety and multiplicity of perspective present in each text, and the way the Wittigian voice can simultaneously build as it destroys, destroy as it builds, producing what can best be described as a *community* of works: both related and autonomous. Secondly, it is equally important to

bear in mind the magnitude of Wittig's political project and the far-ranging vision implicit in her challenges. Accordingly, I shall adopt the following strategy in my discussion of the collective body at war: *L'Opoponax* will be examined first as it carries a dimension - the representation of childhood and its gender - specific to this text. I shall then move on to *Les Guérillères*, showing what is positively achieved by the war within its pages and analysing how this relates to Wittig's political thinking as described in her non-fiction: her challenge to the individuality of 'man in nature'. Her definition and use of the concept of slavery will inform not only the study of *Les Guérillères* but also of her later works. What does such a concept make possible, and what is its representational cost? Is it the only way of making sense of the *desired* collective?

1. 'On a mis le fusil au milieu': *L'Opoponax*

As I have already shown, *L'Opoponax* invites us to look anew at the collective body of children. In the analysis that follows I intend to show how it unsettles the expectations we may have about children and posits an universal 'on' whilst simultaneously problematising - and *not* sidestepping as has been claimed - issues of individuality and of gender. Once more, *L'Opoponax* will come across as a subtle text, weaving problems and solutions together with great skill.

On a mis le fusil au milieu. Si quelqu'un arrive sur la gauche de Catherine Legrand ou sur la droite de Vincent Parme il ne le verra pas, il suffira à l'un ou à l'autre d'avancer en parlant de long en large devant le canon du fusil pour que l'un ou l'autre puisse pendant ce temps-là s'en saisir et le dissimuler derrière son dos.
(106)

This passage, taken from the fourth section, already displays Wittig's concern, and indeed fascination, with war and strategy. The youngsters' possession of a shotgun offers us a distinctly unsettling vision of childhood, reminiscent of Golding's *Lord of the Flies*. It is hard to decide whether the children are at peace or at war, but they definitely

come across as members of a tribe obeying its own rules, rather than the groups we have met so far and which were - nominally, at least - under the control of an adult. The gun is not described as a toy but seems to be a real weapon capable of inflicting damage, revealing the rawness of some of children's phantasies and desires. In this case, Vincent Parme and Catherine Legrand seem to have formed an alliance, and it is tempting to view the gun as a phallic symbol of power which they have provisionally agreed to share in order to fight an enemy or pursue a quarry that is never specified, though the flavour of the text suggests that it is the very concept of childhood that the young protagonists are simultaneously protecting and testing. But whose, or which, childhood? The extract above stresses the interchangeability of the children; 'on' continues to try to assert itself as representing 'any child' or 'all children': both of them, in this case, as is further demonstrated by the repetition of 'l'un ou l'autre'. If the strategy succeeds, Catherine Legrand becomes one half of a pair which itself is absorbed within the genderless category 'children'. But, if we look closely at the passage, we can see that this objective isn't entirely realised. First, there is the by now familiar tension accompanying Catherine Legrand's status as an individual within the novel: on the one hand the text invites us to erase her specificity, her status as character, with the incantatory repetition of her full name, the avoidance of 'elle' and a number of other signifier-based devices; on the other, it *wants* - I believe there is some urgency there, in the writing itself - to chart her progress throughout the years of childhood, to tell the story of her growth as a *petite amante*. Accordingly we, the readers of a *nouveau roman* suggesting, in Owen Heathcote's words, 'a fresh look in relation to childhood' (1993: 82), nevertheless experience a dual shock of recognition at each of Catherine Legrand's appearances: 'c'est elle' - a character whose fictional existence matters to us - and 'c'est moi', someone who appeals to our own memory, our own sense of childhood. This explains why, to return to the passage under consideration, Catherine Legrand is already in a representational position which

resists, at the very least, absorption into a dyadic or collective identity. Moreover, the text itself is actually quite difficult to understand and the children's movements require some deciphering, with 'l'un ou l'autre' confusing rather than enlightening. Guns are large, even bulky, and the 'il suffira de' indicates in my opinion much more a *wish* for success, a fantasy of achievement, than an actual outcome. Catherine Legrand and Vincent Parme may want to unite, almost merge, and work out a strategy that transcends the individual, but the gun gets in the way - which may explain why it is ultimately abandoned, left in the grass (107).

I shall now explore the question of the gender of the collective body, and Catherine Legrand's relationship to it. In many ways, the fourth section of *L'Opoponax* presents an almost idyllic picture of cooperation and exchange of skills between boys and girls; they play cards in the sawdust, they steal apples together, they take turns to lie down on a reclining cow. Likewise, the children's war, in which Vincent Parme and Catherine Legrand each lead an army (119-121), is much more obviously a game than the opening scene with the shotgun. However, there is a striking instance of the boys' viciousness towards Catherine Legrand, when she is defeated as 'chef d'armée':

C'est comme ça que Catherine Legrand est faite prisonnière attachée les bras derrière le dos avec les deux ceintures, c'est comme ça qu'on la ramène sur le champ de bataille et que ni Vincent Parme ni Louis Second ne crient plus maintenant honneur aux vaincus. On l'attache au tronc d'un arbre. Louis Second a une bonne idée il arrache de grandes ronces au bord de la rivière et frappe de toutes ses forces de haut en bas les jambes et les cuisses de Catherine Legrand laissées nues par les culottes courtes. (121)

Up to Louis Second's appearance, Vincent Parme and Catherine Legrand had opposed each other in a reasonably fair (albeit chaotic and violent) way, but she is now in a minority, her own army having deserted her: the seeds of 'Paris-La-Politique' are already there, it seems. Under the sway of peer-group pressure, Vincent Parme cannot resist turning upon the one who in other circumstances is his friend. An in-depth portrayal

of Vincent's and Catherine's relationship falls outside the scope of this chapter, but it is relevant to say that the text's representation of their companionship and obvious pleasure in each other also reveals, in many subtle ways, the drama of their social insertion into gender categories. The example above shows Catherine Legrand losing out because of two boys' attacks, just as Véronique and herself had suffered earlier: 'Quand [elles] prennent la route du haut du village il y a planqués en plus des oies et des chiens des garçons qui les attendent et qui leur sautent dessus avec des orties au moment où elles passent. [...]. Ils tapent avec ça sur les jambes et les cuisses de Véronique Legrand et de Catherine Legrand laissées nues par les culottes courtes' (113-4). Clearly the boys see the girls as a threat, with their bare legs becoming the focus for the abuse of their bodies. What is the reason for such a sense of threat? This extract, taken from the episode immediately following Catherine Legrand's defeat in the 'war', suggests an answer:

On fait attention de longer la ligne d'arbres et de buissons parce que le blanc de la chemise de Vincent Parme attire l'oeil de partout, du moulin on peut le voir, quand on est de l'autre côté de la rivière on peut le voir, quand on est sur les deux ponts on peut également le voir. Il faut se coller au vert sombre de la haie pour avancer il faut se coucher à plat ventre à tout moment. Catherine Legrand est moins visible à cause de l'écoissais à dominante rouge de sa chemise parce que dans la nuit le rouge de loin se voit noir mais Vincent Parme dit qu'on ne sait jamais ce qui fait que chaque fois qu'il s'aplatit Catherine Legrand fait la même chose et ils se poussent du coude dans l'herbe. (122)

We have here a dramatic demonstration of the problems of visibility, which brings back memories of Robert Payen's anxieties in the opening pages of the novel. Vincent Parme is represented at intervals throughout the fourth section as leading, ordering, telling Catherine Legrand and others what to do, asserting his superiority and simultaneously denying others' specificity: here, he assumes that she is as visible as he is, so that she has to follow a strategy that is unnecessary for her. The colours of their shirts can be said to symbolise their bodies under patriarchal representational systems, with

the visibility of the male contrasting with the absence or lack of the female; Vincent Parme is grappling with the notion of this lack, refusing in this instance to admit that it might exist (Catherine Legrand is 'one of the boys') but at other times defending himself against overwhelming anxiety by attacking its source as he sees it, girls themselves. Yet what is remarkable is that, if we return to the extract, Catherine Legrand is not actually represented as lacking anything at all; she *does* have a shirt (a body) with a colour (a sex) which only *seems* to be black (absent). It is actually a rich fabric dominated by red, the colour of life; it may be hidden but it is definitely there, and asks only to be seen in an appropriate light. Hovering over the fourth section is a question: could the two children swap shirts? Certainly Catherine Legrand is able to observe, with an extraordinary mix of insight and detachment, the workings of the 'opposite sex' in a way that is not matched by any of the other children. She shares with Vincent Parme a companionship sufficiently close to enable her to copy all his strategies (tickling trout, melting lead, walking out into the night), with the possibility of love and exchange glimmering between them: when he catches a snake, 'Catherine Legrand demande à Vincent Parme s'il le lui donne et Vincent Parme rit en disant, c'est pour toi que je l'ai attrapé' (125). Ultimately, however, Vincent Parme excludes her from his world:

Vincent Parme est en train de lire. Catherine Legrand est en train de lire. On entend la pluie frapper les feuilles du toit de la cabane. Vincent Parme se met à rire de toutes ses forces en mettant son livre d'images par-dessus le livre de lecture qu'elle est en train de lire. Catherine Legrand voit que ce qui fait rire Vincent Parme c'est que le capitaine Haddock s'est transformé en petit z'oiseau tchip tchip tchip en poursuivant sa b-b-boule de whisky. Catherine Legrand essaie de lire la suite mais Vincent Parme reprend le livre pour lui tout seul en le cachant avec ses bras de sorte qu'on ne peut pas lire en même temps que lui. (146)

Vincent Parme is seen invading Catherine Legrand's space, interrupting her own reading to force her to bear witness to his reactions; by denying her subsequent access to his book, he refuses to open up his inner world to her in a way that might imply some measure of sharing,

an interest in her views and responses. It is as if contact with Catherine Legrand, 'une petite fille qui n'est pas exactement une petite fille', is just too risky for his fragile sense of identity. He retreats to the safety of a text that is highly significant; *Les Aventures de Tintin* feature exclusively male heroes and anti-heroes (Tintin, Haddock, Tournesol) setting the world to rights: a woman-free world, with the exception of the 'dreadful' opera singer Bianca Castafiore, ever-present arch-Mother, despised and ridiculed into harmlessness.

Catherine Legrand, then, cannot join the collective body of boys, at least as it is represented by Vincent Parme. This is a watershed, a huge change for both of them; some of the nobility of *L'Opoponax* stems from the way it features Catherine Legrand meeting other individuals in singular conflict, fighting or playing according to rules carefully laid out, and bowing out of relationships that are on the point of becoming redundant or unworkable. Here, she is very close to the age of her menarche; a few pages after the extract about Tintin, she is represented in an all-girl school. A parting is imminent, which comes after years of latency to reinforce Robert Payen's message. How will she feel within and about her femaleness? The text above gives a remarkable account of one of the strategies open to her: deprived by Vincent Parme's anxiety-ridden authoritarianism of the possibility of reading a complete book (of having a complete body), she is seen returning to the literary extracts of her textbook, 'des textes coupés, des morceaux choisis, on se demande par qui, en tout cas on aimerait savoir ce qu'il y a avant et après, on a l'impression au contraire qu'on ne le saura jamais' (147) - an allusion to femininity and its fragmented patriarchal representation which denies both its origins and its future, its 'avant' and 'après'. But Catherine Legrand, whilst acknowledging her disappointment, develops a style of reading that enables her to do much more than just make do with truncated bits of body/text:

De toute façon dix lignes prises comme ça dans un livre ce n'est pas intéressant. C'est pour ça que Catherine Legrand préfère s'en tenir à un des textes en le répétant jusqu'à ce que ça lui dise

quelque chose et ainsi quelquefois il y en a un qui lui plaît vraiment. Quand on aura la permission de lire les livres entiers on y retrouvera les phrases qu'on a sues par coeur. Des tresses de perles attachées à ses tempes descendaient jusqu'aux coins de sa bouche, rose, comme une grenade entr'ouverte. Il y avait sur sa poitrine un assemblage de pierres lumineuses, imitant par leur bigarrure les écailles d'une murène. (147)

In my first chapter, I discussed the importance of the image of the mouth in Wittig's redemptive vision of the female body. Here, parted as if to smile, speak, or kiss, its lips remind us once more of the vital link between communication and pleasure, involving at least two *amantes*, on which her vision rests. The mouth/vulva equation is suggested by the comparison with the pomegranate, and it is 'par coeur' that Catherine Legrand will memorise both image and passage - an expression which, in this context, suggests that her mind and her autoerotic, homosexual capacity to love are one. Her imagination will continue to build a world of *fortes géantes*, with the 'écailles' on the woman's breast announcing the way she portrays the epic heroine Guibourc in the following section: '[elle] dessine chaque maille du haubert ça ressemble à des écailles, Guibourc est un poisson sans queue avec un oeil plus gros que l'autre' (154). In both cases, Catherine Legrand's repetition of a truncated section of text is not an expression of desperate loneliness and powerlessness by a 'rootless, dismembered' member of the second sex, but, on the contrary, a magic incantation which can summon up the world of Amazon warrior/lovers. Its strange fish-women will reappear in the *Brouillon*:

SIRÈNE

Parmi les amazones qui ont fait le plus de passages dans les corps des poissonnes de la mer pour obtenir des transformations ou des mutations, il y a les sirènes. Quelques-unes ont formé des races célèbres. [...] On les appelle les Persuasives, les Brillantes, les Ensorceleuses. Certaines sont sorties de la mer pour apprendre aux amazones à construire une ville, telle Tiamat. [...] Sous forme d'une sirène une amante peut voyager commodément. [...] Il est vrai que les sirènes sont très sociables et se réjouissent particulièrement quand des amantes les rejoignent. Elles se tiennent alors par la main et remontent vers la surface de la mer pour chanter le soir leurs longs chants de sirènes. (B: 219)

It is a whole social organisation which the Sirens represent, and which I believe Catherine Legrand is able to glimpse in *L'Opoponax*.

The world of the Amazons is also summoned up by Véronique Legrand who, rather than borrowing or creating weapons that are too large or heavy, fashions a bow and arrows which are appropriate to her own body and thus likely to be even more effective than the (male) gangleader's : 'on se demande si ce n'est pas préférable encore au pieu de Vincent Parme' (119). Catherine Legrand observes and copies boys' strategies, but all along remains aware of the need for appropriate weapons and an alternative warfare, one which might be inspired more by Artemis (in whose guise Véronique Legrand is often represented) than by Mars.

But is that the whole story? For all this reparative, restorative approach to the possibilities of Catherine Legrand's own sex, isn't there likely to be a measure of rage - in her, in Wittig, in us - about the sudden parting of the sexes which menarche and society alike reinforce? Considerable and justifiable anger, too, about Vincent Parme's betrayal and exclusion tactics, about the attacks from boys, which, however understandable from the psychoanalytic perspective of their castration anxiety, are nevertheless still most unfair from the girls' point of view? The mother, too, is likely to become, more or less consciously, the recipient of general anger for making Catherine and Véronique girls, sending them out 'into the world so insufficiently equipped' (Freud 1925/1977: 338). On the subject of this lack of equipment, Wittig's own position is implicit in a striking reference to the mother's role: when Véronique and Catherine Legrand try to defend themselves with knives, she confiscates them (114). That of course is understandable from the standpoint of everyday experience. Symbolically though, the mother's action can be seen as a tacit endorsement of the passivity of women, based on the 'nice girls haven't so nice girls don't' principle. The mother says 'no' to knives/penises, but nowhere does she suggest how they might defend themselves, and beyond that, how they might build and

lead safe, creative and *active* lives, relevant to their bodies. She is a *prisonnière du miroir*.

Hence it comes as no surprise, given these seeds of discontent, that the conflicts raging in Wittig's subsequent texts should choose both men and mothers as their targets. We shall now examine the forms taken by these conflicts in Wittig's account of a war against patriarchy.

2. 'CE QUI EST A ECRIRE / VIOLENCE HORS TEXTE / DANS UNE AUTRE ECRITURE': *Les Guérillères*

If *L'Opoponax* can be said to feature clearly-marked individuals and even a heroine, Catherine Legrand, together with an undisturbed narrative progression from her nursery schooldays to her adolescent love for Valerie Borge, *Les Guérillères* by contrast emphatically breaks with any suggestion of a singular, individually-marked heroine or character. The collective reigns, and the strength of its numbers has strategic importance in underlying the huge power shift that occurs in the novel and the possibilities of the new, feminine-plural order. The warriors are stripped of individual identities and referred to as *elles*; even when names begin to appear in the lower-case text, we can argue that they are not intended to be read in the conventional sense at all. Just opposite the first page where names occur (Dominique Aron and Anne Damien, 14) we see the following upper-case text:

CE QUI LES DÉSIGNE COMME L'OEIL DES CYCLOPES, LEUR UNIQUE PRÉNOM,
OSÉE BALKIS SARA NICÉE IOLE CORÉ SABINE DANIELE GALSWINTHE EDNA
JOSÈPHE (15)

'Unique' is subverted by what follows: dozens of women's names appearing at intervals throughout the book. What is unique is in fact a collective, the members of which are connected in the first instance by the circle of femininity ('ce qui les désigne comme l'œil des Cyclopes'). Within this new order, names are equal and interchangeable; women are no longer marked out as individual men's properties. The notion of a

surname becomes superfluous and what we have instead is the precondition of the collective body - its 'pré-nom'. Thus the surnames that remain in the lower-case text have no individual or nuclear-family meaning; it does not matter that Marthe and Valérie (26) are designated as Vivonne or Céru: they could just as well bear the surnames Aron or Damien of p.14. The division of women into groups marked by patronyms no longer holds, no more indeed than the fiction that Wittig believes 'woman' to be. Indeed, it is possible to argue that the narrative strategies adopted by Wittig in this text go even further in their threat to the concept of individual characters; Owen Heathcote, in his study of violence and sadism in *Les Guérillères*, points out that such strategies might be seen as contributing to the creation of a narrative voice that is both distanced from the text and in total control of it. Concerning the use of 'elles disent', he writes:

The delegation of the narrative to these unnamed others has [...] the opposite effect of Kristeva's *Polylogue* or of Duras' blending of inchoate voices, since the unrelieved unanimity of these voices makes them seem monolithic and authoritarian rather than elliptical and subversive. Furthermore, the almost incantatory repetition of 'elles disent' both distances Wittig from her own narration, and confirms her as the only possible source of that narration for the reader. She is both aloof and in total control. This combination of distance and possession is, as has been noted, one of the characteristics of the sadist: 'La possession est la folie propre du sadisme' [Deleuze 1967: 20]. (Heathcote 1993: 79)

Regarding the text's recourse to lists, he argues that the names may actually underscore the women's lack of identity:

The detachment of the names from the narrative and their apparently random positioning does [...] give them the same cumulative anonymity and homogeneity as the aforementioned 'elles disent'. However striking the names, their very originality seems to redound less on the individuality of those named than on the powers of the namer. (79)

Indeed, we can already detect in the use of names, in both the upper- and lower-case texts, the twin attacks described in the first pages of this chapter: against the father (surname) and the mother who also, from

the point of view of her child, has an exclusive 'prénom', a unique identity which precedes naming and through which the child begins to know itself. Wittig is saying 'no' to such a child-centred perspective, to the possibilities of *L'Opoponax* where, through the presence of recognisable groups (friends, sisters, lovers, families) of individually-named people, we could detect much that was connected to the question of a girl's relationship to the opposite sex and to her mother. In *Les Guérillères*, Wittig scoops identity out of the women's names she puts onto the page and leaves them dry, suggesting a world in which the door to the mother has slammed shut. On the other hand - and this is a typical Wittigian paradox - it is possible to see in the upper-case lists, as Heathcote acknowledges that Mary Orr does, 'a positive and necessary move in the rehabilitation of women's identity and history' (Heathcote 1993: 79, fn. 48). At the very least, Wittig's use of names certainly illustrates a *call* for a representation of women as distinct both from men and from the mother. One might usefully visualise the *Guérillères'* lists of names as being engraved upon a war memorial: they point to the problem and its solution embedded in the very concept of war and, by acknowledging that people have died, they are a nod in the direction of the mourning process for the *individuals* who had to fall and perhaps, even, for the mother; but above all they are a celebration of certain community values. As Erika Ostrovsky has pointed out, it is not for nothing that the list starts with the name 'Osée'; courage and sheer daring characterise the *guérillères*. And the names, she believes, 'are reminiscent of vast funerary steles or commemorative tablets that, as written word, affirmed the victory over death and annihilation' (1991: 39). I would add: victory over the breaking-up of the category 'women' into individual bodies.

In her attack upon the notion of individuality, Wittig challenges a certain concept of origins which, as many feminists point out, forms the basis of contract theory: 'in the beginning man was alone' (Benhabib 1987: 84, quoted in Zerilli 1991: 7). *Les Guérillères* can rightly be

viewed as a revolutionary text in the way it posits a plurality of women as its past, present and future. By contrast, the metaphor of the 'state of nature' invoked by Locke, Kant, Hobbes and Rousseau has at its heart an individual as yet untouched by the social contract. The gender of this individual is highly relevant: Carole Pateman (1988) argues that he is in fact male and that 'contract is far from being opposed to patriarchy; contract is the means through which modern patriarchy is constituted' (2). This process gives men access to women; *Les Guérillères* can thus be seen to be attacking the social/sexual contract which turns women into objects of exchange between men.

Thematically, this is clear from the systematic study and rejection of the 'féminaires', which imply a collective re-creation and reading; the injunctions 'Redoutez la dispersion. Restez jointes comme les caractères d'un livre' (82) are important: the term 'women', in itself, isn't enough as a rallying-point and may lead to confusion and disintegration of the group. What is needed is a collective which can define itself through a relentless process of questioning and creativity, in order to build a world in which *elles* can live. We have already seen how, within patriarchal representation, women's relationship to their own origins leaves them stranded in a dark mirror, unable to move purposefully (38-40); as the text unfolds, however, they break free from their role as currency between men and containers of men's wealth:

Elles disent que les tétons que les cils courbes que les hanches plates ou évasées, elles disent que les ventres bombés ou creux, elles disent que les vulves sont désormais en mouvement. Elles disent qu'elles inventent une nouvelle dynamique. Elles disent qu'elles sortent de leurs toiles. Elles disent qu'elles descendent de leurs lits. Elles disent qu'elles quittent les musées les vitrines d'exposition les socles où on les a fixées. Elles disent qu'elles sont tout étonnées de se mouvoir. (180)

Les vases sont debout, les potiches ont attrapé des jambes. Les vases sacrés sont en marche. Elles disent, la pente des collines ne va-t-elle pas repousser leur assaut? Elles disent, les vases désormais vides de semence resserrent leurs flancs. Ils se déplacent lentement d'abord puis de plus en plus vite. Elles disent, c'est le sacrilège, la violation de tous les règlements. Les

vases enterrés jusqu'au col et réceptacles des objets les plus divers, spermatozoïdes humains pièces de monnaie fleurs terre messages, elles disent qu'ils se déplacent, lentement d'abord puis de plus en plus vite. (206-7)

However, *elles'* textual/sexual revolution is not just a matter of themes; a detailed study of the section which immediately follows the injunction to 'rest[e]r] jointes comme les caractères d'un livre' reveals some of the ways in which it is inscribed into the book's fabric, its mobile and ludic textuality:

Elles jouent à un jeu. Il se pratique sur une esplanade de grande dimension. Le sol est partagé en bandes suivant les couleurs du spectre. Il y a cent cinquante cerceaux violets cent cinquante cerceaux indigo cent cinquante cerceaux bleus cent cinquante cerceaux verts cent cinquante cerceaux jaunes cent cinquante cerceaux orange cent cinquante cerceaux rouges. (82)

Women take over a large, open space for a game they will share as fellow-fighters and companions; having rejected domestication, their allotted place within the paternal/fraternal social contract, they are now free to inscribe new meaning upon a different kind of page. The game begins with a transformation of the sky/earth dyad, with the colours of the spectrum lying along the ground, *with* it, delineating fresh pathways for the women. Their ground is able to incorporate the vertical dimension, to provide a visible link between earth and sky. Traditionally, the sky/earth dyad symbolises the male/female opposition, as in the Ouranos-Gaia pair; it also suggests a 'higher', celestial (male) deity using its authority to create the weaker (female) Earth, out of chaos, as in the beginning of the book of Genesis. On the women's esplanade, however, earth and sky meet in a common element which is then spread into its constituent colours: the rainbow, traditionally one of the symbols of the covenant between God and Man (Gen. 9: 8-17), between the celestial and the earthly. *Elles'* rainbow is a reorganised link, a new covenant which no longer excludes them.

What, now, of the 'cent cinquante cerceaux'? Wittig's reworking of the circle is an important aspect of her sexual/textual strategy. As I have written in my first chapter, she wishes to get away from a representation of the female body which features 0 as its centre - zero, absence, lack. Here, the text plays with these age-old symbols of the female sex, firstly by making them proliferate; 'cent cinquante cerceaux' is repeated in an almost hypnotic way, with the sound [s] attacking our ears like the hissing of snakes (which, like circles, are also reclaimed as positive companion/symbols of the feminine-plural body in Wittig's novels; see for example B: 216). Visually, 150 shows the straight, phallic 1 and the round, feminine 0 disrupted by the hybrid 5 which stands between them, just as the esplanade is split in two in the next phase of a game which will further subvert male/female oppositions:

Les équipes sont composées de soixante-quinze personnes chacune, placées de part et d'autre de la ligne médiane de l'esplanade. [...] Une machine placée au centre de l'esplanade éjecte des cerceaux les uns après les autres à un rythme rapide. Ils s'élèvent à la verticale au-dessus de la tête des joueuses. Ils tournent sur eux-mêmes. Ils décrivent en même temps un vaste cercle qui va en s'élargissant, suivant le mouvement que la machine leur a imprimé. Le tracé de leurs déplacements serait une spirale immense. Les joueuses doivent se saisir des cerceaux sans quitter les bandes de couleur qui leur ont été assignées. (84)

There is considerable wit and humour in this disruption of sexual symbols. The phallic machine, as one would expect, ejects 'à un rythme rapide' and, initially at least, in a straight line. But it ejects hoops, the circularity of which is reflected throughout: 'tournent', 'vaste cercle', 'spirale'. Moreover, it seems this circularity is imposed by the machine itself, thus altering our first representation of it as creator of straight lines.

Women, then, take their pleasure from making circles proliferate, from marking the page with the snakelike feminine S of the 'cent cinquante cerceaux'; these new textual erotics bear the sign of the collective body. But the point of the game is not to abandon linearity altogether, since the players must stay within 'les bandes de couleur qui leur ont

été assignées'. Its aim is rather to achieve a creative conflict between linearity and circularity which could somehow transcend the opposition between the two. It is not surprising that the women's game soon resembles a fight, pleasure coming precisely from this playful tension of opposites: 'Il y a très vite un tumulte merveilleux de corps qui se heurtent en tentant de s'emparer du même cerceau ou de se retirer de la mêlée' (84). Indeed, we can read this game as a *mise en abyme* of *elles'* war; it is at once violent and controlled, following rules they have created themselves and using a technology appropriate to their redefined bodies, like Véronique Legrand's bow and arrows in *L'Opoponax*. Although it allows for some independent action - the women can choose to grab a hoop, or else to retire from the fray - their involvement and commitment to the war-game are most definitely hallmarks of a collective endeavour, where no individual emerges as superior, inferior or indeed different. It is the class of women fighters that matters, and it is important to explain what Wittig means by 'class'. I shall do this by bringing in examples from some of her later texts as well as continuing to examine *Les Guérillères*.

3. The woman/slave

We have already seen that Wittig views the category or class of 'women' as a patriarchal construct, a discursive fiction whereby, by virtue of their anatomical sexual characteristics, women are marked out as different, *the sex*, and therefore the property of men. The term *underclass* can properly be said to apply to the women, who will remain in slavery until they can fight the oppressors and free themselves (Wittig 1980a and 1980b). We can thus distinguish two stages of development in such a class struggle: initially all women are slaves; then they become *guérillères*. Linda Zerilli (1991) argues that at no stage is the Wittigian war-machine concerned with returning women to a state that might have preceded slavery: an original subject who was not a slave is not posited. Zerilli makes this point in the context of *Les*

Guérillères, where accounts of 'woman in nature' are examined only to be rejected, and the same also holds true of *Virgile, non*, where relentlessly bleak images of women in chains are relieved by the promise of a lesbian paradise, the only conceivable future at the end of the Wittigian holy war. The image of the slave is there to give impetus and to justify the lesbian's methods, which are violent at times; for example, the aggressive behaviour of the inhabitants of limbo, 'un lieu intermédiaire qui tient à la fois de l'enfer et du paradis' (V: 45), is explained by Manastabal, the narratrix Wittig's guide and lesbian conscience, in the following terms:

(Autant il est beau que ce lieu, tout réduit qu'il soit, existe, autant la concurrence est grande pour y entrer et la faim règne en ces lieux. Celles qui y vivent donc ne sont pas des anges mais des affranchies qui pour prix de leur liberté jeûnent. C'est te dire si leur humeur s'en ressent et il leur arrive de s'entretuer dans leur exaspération et impuissance. Néanmoins leur courage est grand et grande leur endurance même, quand elles n'ont pas d'autre choix que de vivre comme des bandits.) (V: 45)

The *affranchies* are violent because they are hungry, and they are hungry because they have turned away from the world which promised them food in exchange for their bodies. They have broken with the patriarchal, heteroppressive contract and are seen to suffer greatly (and to make each other suffer) as a result of this flight from slavery; Wittig and Manastabal praise their bravery, the decisive steps they are able to make towards their own liberation. Throughout *Les Guérillères* and *Virgile, non*, Wittig aims to build a powerful system of representation which could somehow free people from the categories of sex as natural givens and bring the lesbian into being, and the concept of the slave can be seen as the cornerstone of such a representational edifice:

Wittig insists that woman (as slave) is not a natural but a material, social, and historical category of oppression. But just as traumatic images of the state of nature, for example, have been used to legitimate the terms of the social contract, so too does Wittig invoke a rather seamless tale of slavery to justify her uncompromising and militant stance. Indeed, the material yet trans-historical category of the woman/slave condenses several key themes in Wittig's writings: that women's history has been

completely invented and that heterosexuality is a closed system which is compulsory and necessarily oppressive. (Zerilli 1991: 14)

Positing women-as-slaves as the 'degree zero' of patriarchal thought and representation, and also of feminist social overthrow, has definite strategic advantages, as Zerilli goes on to explain:

Wittig's narrative invocation of the term organizes the limits of the text's social vision. While the term 'slave' does not necessarily presume that all women will recognize their condition as such - that is, it does not presuppose feminist consciousness - it does make the claim that women share a specific material position in society and in language, from which such consciousness could emerge. Much like that of 'women', the category of the slave assumes that there is an empirical group which can be addressed by the author and, ideally, organized into a community, into a 'we', so to speak, on the basis of a shared oppression. (Zerilli 1991: 14)

The *elles* of *Les Guérillères* and the Wittig-Manastabal couple in *Virgile, non* attempt to stand in a clear role vis-à-vis enslaved women, formulating policies and implementing strategies for their salvation, because 'slavery, as Wittig uses the term, is a condition that admits little ambiguity; it defines the subject in her entirety; it cannot be negotiated but only overthrown' (Zerilli 1991: 15). In *Virgile, non*, the women/slaves are constantly described as zombies who seem to have lost all independent thought and, frequently, the power of speech and movement; we saw an example of this in my last chapter, with its reference to mothers and their *annexes*, and further instances can easily be found. Bound by their captors, women pretend they have chosen their situation: 'Mais si ça me plaît, à *moi*, d'être en laisse!' (28); at the free-for-all (*foire d'empoigne*), the narratrix meets a woman who is willing to escape her condition but mistakenly believes that she acted of her own free will by attending this lethal event, prompting the following comment from Wittig: 'Je ne relève pas ce que l'idée d'aller délibérément à la foire d'empoigne a d'ironique, car même quand on est totalement écrasé il arrive qu'on croie l'avoir choisi' (106). After the railway station massacre, she laments:

Je m'émerveille de voir des automates à ce point réussis et de les entendre mâchonner incessamment des listes d'obligations toutes plus serviles les unes que les autres. Servir, servir, servir, c'est tout ce qui les occupe et leur état somnambulique est à peine interrompu par mes hurlements. (36)

Women/slaves are not only their own worst enemies; they place others in mortal danger, too:

(Avouez au grand jour, misérables créatures, que pour mieux mener à bien vos corvées vous n'avez pas hésité à écraser, piétiner à mort, démanteler vos semblables, ni à transformer ce hall de gare en charnier. Ah on peut dire qu'être servies, c'est être criminelles! [...]) (37)

We have already seen how this anger against women who block the path to freedom and in effect turn against their own kind reaches fever-pitch in *Virgile, non's* parasitic text, 'Paris-La-Politique', in which some women are represented as choosing to remain in slavery because they have fallen prey to dangerous philosophies emanating from the women's movement itself; they become *judas*, traitors. Betrayal, then, can come from the women (as victims) themselves; this explains the isolation experienced by Quichotte in *Le Voyage sans fin*:

Quichotte a juré de combattre l'injustice partout où elle la rencontrerait. Or la réparation de l'injustice apparaît pour le monde beaucoup plus embarrassante que l'injustice elle-même. Elle fait apparaître l'injustice au grand jour, ce qui pour le monde est parfaitement de mauvais goût. Les victimes elles-mêmes si elles veulent trouver grâce aux yeux du monde doivent non seulement taire le traitement dont elles font l'objet mais encore renier et dénier bien haut qui les défend, les faire passer pour ridicules. De là viennent tous les déboires de Quichotte et non pas de l'inexistence de ce qu'elle combat. (Vs: 21)

Such imagery and rhetoric attempt to place the narrative voice in the strongest possible position, by suggesting that it is the only one to offer the possibility of women's salvation. I have already argued that, because Wittig's political theory is based on an oppositional model, a huge effort is needed in her writing to maintain that position of strength - an effort which includes and indeed implies violence. I have

also indicated that not only is her textual violence likely never to end, but indeed it is likely to escalate because the masculine and maternal bodies refuse to go away; this is compounded by Wittig's awareness, which she expresses in her article 'On the Social Contract', to which I shall return, that heterosexuality is everywhere: the fight goes on. However, subtle changes occur in the expression of violence from one text to the next, and the escalation does not occur in quite the fashion one might expect. In the pages that follow, I shall focus on the question of what one might term Wittigian *violences*, for there is more than one sort to be found in her corpus.

4. 'Une si parfaite fureur': Wittig's violences

There is no denying what Nicole Ward Jouve (1987) has called 'the passion of hatred' in some of Wittig's writing. *Les Guérillères* is exemplary in this respect, since it offers us a powerful representation of anger, particularly in its second half where, as Heathcote (1993) has noted, there is considerable acceleration in the rhythm of aggression. Wittig, in a recent paper about her crafting of the work, recalls the way fury determined much of its pace: 'Cette fureur, ce mouvement, c'étaient le moteur du livre encore inexistant et dans tous les stades du travail j'ai essayé de les maintenir, par exemple dans le rythme du livre' (1994: 118). The furious rhythm, indeed, joins forces with the violence of the imagery:

Elles font revenir à la vie ceux qui ont bâti leur célébrité sur leur ruine en exaltant leur esclavage soit dans leurs écrits soit dans leurs lois soit dans leurs actes. Pour eux sont préparés les machines à étirer les filières les machines à tordre à mouliner. Elles bouchent leurs oreilles avec de la cire pour ne pas entendre leurs cris discordants. (158)

Une si parfaite fureur les habite qu'elles bouillonnent elles tremblent elles suffoquent elles grincent des dents [...]. Alors elles les mettent en demeure elles les admonestent elles leur mettent des couteaux sous la gorge elles les intimident elles leur montrent le poing elles les fustigent elles leur font violence [...] (168)

De grandes lames dont le tranchant est comparable à celui des rasoirs sont disposées en quinconce parallèlement au sol à des hauteurs diverses tout autour du camp. Quand on arrive de face elles apparaissent comme une série de lignes brisées. La nuit elles sont invisibles. Des sentinelles veillent derrière des faux à ce qu'aucun assaillant ne puisse déjouer le dispositif. [...] Au matin des équipes relaient les sentinelles et ramassent dans des grandes corbeilles les tronçons de corps sectionnés par les lames. Ce peut être des têtes des bustes des jambes une par une ou jointes au bassin un bras, suivant la hauteur à laquelle les attaquants ont buté sur les faux. (170)

Elles se tiennent au bord des routes qui traversent les brousses, l'arme levée, tuant tous ceux qui passent, qu'ils soient des animaux ou des humains. Ils ne meurent pas sur-le-champ. Elles alors sont d'un bond près de leur proie et, faisant le signal, immédiatement rejointes par d'autres, elles se mettent à danser en poussant des cris, en se balançant d'avant en arrière, tandis que leur victime se tord au sol, secouée de spasmes et gémissant. (173-4)

The first example takes care to warn us that the tortures have a motive and a reason - it is *enmity* that is dismantled, and, having flattened out their enemies' skins and reduced them to the two-dimensional (just as I have shown, in my fourth chapter, that Sadeian discourse does to its victims' bodies), the *guérillères* gleefully match the deflated creatures to the pompous, larger-than-life statements which the men were fond of uttering when they were alive. There is wit and humour there, as female Sades use the male body as the basis for their own discursive analysis. Likewise the sliced-up body-parts gathered each morning mimic the partial and fragmentary representation of women's bodies within pornography, whilst the women's reclaim of the power of the sun can be read as their liberation from the 'mythes de l'obscur' denounced in the *Brouillon* as the province of the Mothers, and in *Les Guérillères* as the symbol of women's domination by men. The text makes the point again and again that the *mighty* have fallen, not the weak, speechless or helpless victims used by Sade, and that tyrants are being tortured by virtue of their own oppressive tactics. However 'fantastic and distressing' such a vision of social change appears, to use Linda Zerilli's words (1991: 12), the violence is shown as necessary, discursively and intimately bound to the feminist project of overthrow.

Justice is done in a consistent manner, down to the very choice of methods for the victims' execution: the right tools and materials are chosen for the women's vengeful activities, which are paradoxically often portrayed as if they were works of live art, with the *guérillères* themselves becoming creative performance artists. The bits of bodies picked up every morning in the *grandes lames* episode are listed with interest, as if the women were gathering materials for a new creation.

The importance of the discursive level of the work in assessing its violence is also stressed by Owen Heathcote. After noting, as I have already mentioned, that the narrative voice of *Les Guérillères* veers towards that of the sadist, and despite being obviously struck with the ferociousness of the writing, he is then at some pains to show how the textuality ultimately *lessens* the impact of the violence it features. He argues, rightly, that *Les Guérillères* 'is much less univocal than might at first be thought' and that it attempts to subvert its own discourse from within. For example, lists and cataloguing are occasionally described, in the lower-case text, in a much less authoritarian way than their upper-case counterpart; Heathcote refers to the following passage:

Le grand registre est posé sur la table ouvert. A tout moment, l'une d'entre elles s'en approche et y écrit quelque chose. Il est difficile de le compulser parce qu'il est rarement disponible. Même alors, il est inutile de l'ouvrir à la première page et d'y chercher un ordre de succession. On peut le prendre au hasard et trouver quelque chose par quoi on est concerné. Cela peut être peu de chose. (74-5)

What is suggested here is an altogether more tentative process of collective re-creation, which pulls against the violence to be found elsewhere. Thus, also, the text's fierce separatist stance can be seen to be undermined both by the welcome afforded young men at the end of the work and by a desire to suggest that *elles* might in fact be seen as a generic term, encompassing male and female. This desire is indicated at times in Wittig's own non-fiction (in 'The Mark of Gender', 1985, and also in her 1994 paper, p.121) and is clearly experienced by Heathcote (1993: 82) as a textual and linguistic possibility, which he contrasts

with Zerilli's and Suleiman's (1990) insistence upon the single-sexedness of Wittig's vision. Seeing *Les Guérillères* as a writerly text in which meaning - be it of violence or of gender - cannot be fixed, he writes:

The new language initiated and announced by Wittig needs to be taken up and taken further by her readers. And itself be the subject of further textual play. As Wittig writes at both ends of *Les Guérillères*: 'TOUT GESTE EST RENVERSEMENT'. If such reversals and inversions are to apply to the text as much as in the text, then the violence of the text has no special status. Wittig's violence must itself be violated. The sadism, likewise, is there to invite reversal, revision, and subversion. Rather than controlled and belittled by Wittig, her reader is encouraged and empowered to refute, redress and relive. (82)

Certainly, the uniqueness of *Les Guérillères* within Wittig's corpus stems from its radically multi-layered, polysemic structure; it is indeed a playful text, a hall of mirrors in which 'oppressive relationships can be recounted and countered, at least imaginatively, psychologically, and intellectually' (Heathcote 1993: 84), with the very failures and limitations of the textual/sexual project - its posited violent collective body - relentlessly exposed and worked back into the book's fabric. True to the tenets of the Nouveaux Romanciers, whose impact on *Les Guérillères* Wittig openly acknowledges (1994: 119), the text invites the reader's challenge, and in its very defiance of convention and linearity stimulates our creativity.

However, one problem with such a reading activity is that, by unravelling the text's threads too far, we risk dismantling some elements that beg to be examined and therefore need to be allowed to stay in place long enough for us to do so. It seems to me, accordingly, that not all the text's violence can be 'violated'. The fury, as Wittig indicates, seems at times to have an independent life, to be a driving force in the text; however writerly the violent passages quoted above may be, however witty and playful, there is still a readerly dimension which persists. Bodies scooped of substance, dried out, laid flat; bodies clubbed, burnt, stabbed, chopped up, eaten (139) - these are the bodies featuring in the deepest, earliest phantasies described by Klein.

The imagery on which the violence rests is often maternal, however much it seems based on the masculine body; in the passage describing how a naked man is chased through the streets by a gang of *guérillères* who are taunting him for possessing a penis, the writing suddenly breaks off into an almost nostalgic reverie: 'Quelquefois il s'agit d'un beau corps évasé aux hanches où la peau est miellée où les muscles n'apparaissent pas' (152) - the mother herself. With the benefit of Kleinian theory (1929/1986: 92) we can go as far as to say that this passage features a struggle with the father's penis *inside the mother*; likewise Wittig's slavery model, featuring a powerless slave kept, and fed, by a much bigger and mightier master, can be seen as grounded in the experience of the small child totally dependent on its mother's whim, and hating her for it. The power of the Bad Mother and her body also helps to account for the presence of violence in parts of *Les Guérillères* where we might not expect to find it. This point needs some clarification.

Wittig's notes on the genesis of the text confirm my own feeling that its beginning is in fact its ending, and vice-versa. The *elles* of the initial lower-case sections seem to me to be as much burnt out as reborn, with all passion spent as they grope their way towards *each other*. Here is the text at its most paradoxical: *elles* have, in the past - described at the end of the book - fought *ils* with vicious rage, fought not only against men but for the right to universality, the right to assert *elles* as the new generic pronoun that could stand for both 'feminine' and 'masculine'. And yet, as they gather round a crouching figure in a space so marked by the *entre-femmes* - the 'kiosque' (9), neither open nor closed - it is clear that their focus is upon the conundrum of their status as beings whose 'nymphes chasse[nt] l'urine'. They look at universality not from a neutral nor androgynous viewpoint, but through the lens of a *posited* femaleness, and question the female, not the male, anatomy. Men are absent from this post-war era; as Linda Zerilli has aptly pointed out, the conciliatory passages at the end of the novel, in which attractive young men are welcomed into the

guérillères' new order, 'pale beside the ferocious descriptions of their defeat as the hegemonic sex' (1991: 12); as I said in my last chapter, they seem to be so mawkish (see the lower-case text, 202-206) that the male characters become even more remote and artificial, chased out of the text rather than welcomed into it. After the war, *elles'* task as described in the first half of the book is to explore the collective body which they now constitute as women together:

La guerre appartient au passé. Elles cherche sa voie à travers le labyrinthe d'une culture morte, de signes anciens, de représentations, récits, faits, histoire, symboles anciens. Elles s'exalte soi-même dans des "féminaires", elles se prend au piège du narcissisme ou admiration de soi-même. Mais elles continue et se dépasse. (Wittig 1994: 121)

Mostly, then, the tone at this stage of the book is one of hesitation and cautious approach. But I come now to some violent texts that do not quite fit. We are already witnessing a paradox or, to put it differently, an experiment in the re-gendering of pronouns that hasn't entirely worked: contrary to the author's wishes, *elles* does not seem concerned with encompassing the masculine, with becoming *the* new third-person-plural personal pronoun. We are in the *entre-femmes*, but fury still (or already) stalks the pages, seeming all the more violent because it has no apparent motive. The women are no longer slaves; there are no more men. And yet

[Elles jouent à un jeu. Il y a toute une rangée de crapauds, les yeux exorbités. Ils sont immobiles. Le premier qui est atteint d'un coup de pied bascule d'un bloc sur le côté à la façon d'un mannequin bourré de paille et sans un cri. Les autres s'enfuient en sautant. (46)

Ou bien les trois chats sont retenus par la queue dans un piège. Ils vont chacun de son côté et miaulant. [...] Ils crient, ils se ruent, grattant le sol de leurs griffes. [...] Tous trois alors se battent, ils se jettent les uns contre les autres griffant et mordant, ils se blessent les yeux, le museau, ils s'arrachent les poils dans le cou, ils ne peuvent plus s'arrêter de se battre et le piège qui se jette dans leurs jambes ne fait qu'accroître leur fureur. (46-7)

It is possible to argue that these attacks against the animal world mime the attacks against human bodies caught in lifeless representations ('mannequin'), or else in a trap. The cats, particularly, could be seen as standing for women, with their violence against each other explained by their past slavery and their wish to be free (we are reminded of the souls in purgatory portrayed in *Virgile, non*). But the relish with which the cats' fighting is described shows what a thin line exists between denunciation of evil and collusion with it: Heathcote's dictum that 'Wittig's violence must itself be violated' doesn't quite work here. This is even more true in the highly problematic 'histoire de loups' which follows the episode about the cats. The sadistic dismembering and devouring of bodies, including that of 'la belle Marie Viarme', by a pack of wolves, elicits from its listeners nothing but the testy response 'si seulement c'étaient des rats' (49). However witty this remark may seem, however funny the narrative's dry 'Les commentaires ne sont pas recommandés après que quelqu'une a raconté une histoire' (48-9) - a clear warning to any literary critic - some of the violence sticks; the fury perhaps was always there, and not just in the story of the fight against patriarchy. Once more we can usefully draw upon Kleinian theory to provide some understanding of a rage which does indeed precede the text, precede words themselves, since it stems from the infant's struggle with and sadistic attacks against a maternal imago. And, indeed, the narrative tone mimics children's speech, as if it were trying to get as close as possible to this irretrievable psychic world: 'Ou bien elles jouent à un jeu', 'Ou bien les trois chats sont retenus par la queue', 'Ça commence comme ça' (47), 'Fabienne Jouy a terminé son histoire quand elle dit' (48). Maybe it is possible to think of this mock-naive narrative voice as somehow encapsulating these early struggles, holding them up to us, and begging the question of how to deal with them, and with their legacy of sadism, within a community of sisters, of *amantes*: a question which I will take up in my eighth chapter, when I discuss *Le Corps lesbien's* sadomasochism.

What kind of violence is at work in Wittig's latest fictional writings (her three 1985 texts)? It ceases to escalate, and starts to turn inwards, breaking up the collective body and threatening its individuals. As we read *Virgile, non*, we detect important changes of emphasis and an altogether bleaker, more pessimistic view of the possibilities of joint endeavour. Gone are the triumphant bands of warriors peopling Wittig's second novel. Instead, we are faced with a demoralised army, conceding defeat and resigning itself to remaining amongst the damned. In the following extract, the warriors explain why they failed:

(Sais-tu de quelle dure, opiniâtre, incessante bataille tu parles? De surcroît s'il n'y avait que les coups directs, jamais je n'aurais cédé. [...] Mais les coups sont toujours dans le dos, à la nuit tombante, ou bien quand on n'a pas son arme, après un pacte d'alliance, des serments de bonne entente, après un traité. [...] J'ai beau avoir un bouclier, la bataille a toujours été à armes inégales. Malgré tout j'ai essayé. [...] Des Pygmées ont pu attaquer avec des arcs et des flèches une armée technologique moderne. Des Hébridiens de même, avec des arcs et des flèches pour toutes armes se sont soulevés en Polynésie. Bien que je ne sous-estime pas les vertus de la guerre de harcèlement, je sais aussi que dans les cas que je viens de citer, les belligérants n'ont dû d'échapper à la déroute qu'aux ordres reçus par les armées technologiques de ne pas les écraser. Dans mon cas, pas de quartier, tous les coups sont permis. [...]) (68-9)

This passage, with its echoes of Catherine Legrand's courage and also of her defeat at the hands of Vincent Parme and Louis Second, makes an important statement about the relationship between separatist groups, fighting for their rights and independence, and the dominant culture. As in Wittig's 1980 articles we find a comparison between colonised peoples and women, with an emphasis on the way each group needs to fight the class enemy. What is new here is the way the text suggests the inevitability of failure if the oppressed groups rise up *en bloc*, because such an uprising seems to have been anticipated and even to some extent planned by the masters. A 'cat and mouse' game is set up whereby the colonised group is allowed to express some measure of rage and opposition, but thus marks itself out all the more clearly as a future target. In this sophisticated game, which brings to mind the

reasons for Foucault's views on the futility of 'sexual liberation' (1976: 211), the cat allows the mouse to have a sense of independence, but this does no more nor less than reinforce the structure of power which marked it out as mouse in the first place. Wittig has clearly become particularly pessimistic about the possibilities of women's war and, in the extract above, the warriors are even seen to scorn the bows and arrows so dear to her in *L'Opoponax* and the guerilla tactics of her second novel. It is as if the characters of *Virgile, non* recognise that *Les Guérillères* rested upon a different belief of the power of the collective. By the mid-eighties, Wittig's fiction suggests that mass resistance has been abandoned in favour of individual defections; the key image is that of the *transfuge*, the runaway, resorting sometimes to banditing in order to stay alive as she makes the perilous journey from the dominant heteropressive culture to the lesbian world. She may take one of the following forms, adorning her body with the signs of violence:

([...] Ah Manastabal mon guide, tu le sais, il y en a de toutes sortes et des plus remarquables. Il y a celles qui vont la tête rasée avec au front gravé la sorte de menace qu'elles sont. Il y a celles qui s'avancent les épaules ceintes de cuir noir avec dans leurs manches des couteaux. Il y a celles qui portent des vêtements cloutés et des lames aiguisées sur le devant de leurs bottes. Il y a les maffiosi dans leurs costumes sombres, des revolvers à leurs baudriers.) (V: 45-6)

But lest this may be read as a hymn to butch culture, a glorifying of a new kind of *Guérillères* eighties-style, the text warns through Manastabal's voice:

(Tu parles de gestes, de vêtements, de contenance. Tu célèbres la beauté louche des bandits et tu t'enorgueillis d'être en leur compagnie, soit. Si ce n'est pas pour oublier, au profit des formes, de leur déploiement et de leur gloire, ce qui les a rendues nécessaires: la cruauté d'un monde qui force au crime. [...] Ah Wittig, tout cela est de la petite guerre. Que peut-on y gagner quand c'est le monde entier qu'il faut reposséder?)

Et moi:

(Mais, notre pain quotidien, Manastabal mon guide.)

Et je me demande si Manastabal, mon guide, a quelque plan d'envergure pour la conquête du monde. Mais comme elle me parle de l'enfer et des passeuses qui y sont postées pour opérer des

sauvetages un par un, je ne peux pas m'empêcher de m'impatienter de la lenteur du procédé et de faire remarquer que de ce train-là dans cent ans on y sera encore. (45-6)

Wittig's article 'On the Social Contract' (1989) sheds some light upon the theoretical shifts in her perspective that may, in part at least, be said to explain this new liberation policy. She describes the impact of Rousseau's treatise of the same title upon her own present views of class, slavery and the founding of a freed group; she contrasts these with Marx and Engels' beliefs, expressed in *the German Ideology*, that in an industrial, capitalist society the oppressed proletariat must rise up as a class against the social order and destroy the state. Although Wittig does not explicitly say this, I think it is clear that the latter analysis of proletarian struggle informed *Les Guérillères*, whereas she now finds Rousseau's pre-industrial notion of social contract more relevant to her discussion of gender, heterosexuality and lesbianism:

In [Marx and Engels'] opinion, the term 'social contract', which implies a notion of individual choice and of voluntary association, could possibly be applied to the serfs. For in the course of several centuries they liberated themselves one by one, running away from the land to which they belonged. And it is also one by one that the serfs associated to form cities, hence their name *bourgeois* (people who have formed a bourg). [...]

I always thought that women are a class very much structured as was the class of serfs. I see now that they can tear themselves away from the heterosexual order only by running away one by one. This explains my concern for a pre-industrial notion as social contract. For the structure of our class in terms of the whole world is feudal in essence, maintaining both side by side and in the same person forms of production and exploitation that are at once capitalistic and pre-capitalistic. (Wittig 1989: 239)

Wittig's essay lists the aspects of Rousseau's notion of the social contract which she finds useful in the struggle against compulsory heterosexuality. His work formed part of a political-philosophical current which questioned the notion of a theocracy, the establishment of the divine right of kings, and Wittig endorses the challenge Rousseau

issues to the 'Might makes right' principle (243) which has underpinned any previous notion of the existence of a social contract. Like Carole Pateman, she then reveals there is a hidden agenda at the heart of Rousseau's, and indeed all philosophers', thinking; however she goes beyond Pateman's emphasis on a gendered contract, privileging patriarchy, by asserting that heterosexuality is its driving principle:

[...H]eterosexuality, whose characteristics appear and then disappear when the mind tries to grasp it, is visible and obvious in the categories of the heterosexual contract. One of them which I tried to deconstruct in a short essay is the *category of sex*. And it is clear that we are dealing here with a *political* category. (247)

Wittig goes on to quote from her 1982 article:

The category of sex is the political category that founds society as heterosexual. As such it does not concern being but relationship (for women and men are the result of relationships), although the two aspects are always confused when they are discussed. The category of sex is the one that rules as 'natural' the relation that is at the base of (heterosexual) society and through which half the population, women, are 'heterosexualised' (the making of women is like the making of eunuchs, the breeding of slaves, of animals) and submitted to a heterosexual economy. [...] Its main category, the category of sex *works specifically, as 'black' does, through an operation of reduction, by taking the part for the whole, a part (color, sex) through which the whole human group has to pass as through a screen.* (1989: 248)

She then reiterates the call to break off the heterosexual contract, the purpose of which is to reduce women 'to sexual beings meaningful only through their reproductive activities or [...] to beings in whom everything, even their minds, is sex' (248). Women must now escape by stealth, avoiding the detection which would make them targets of the dominant culture; hence the emphasis on individual, rather than mass, defections. 'We are doing it', Wittig writes in her concluding remarks. 'Lesbians are runaways, just like maroon slaves and runaway wives, and they exist in all countries because the political regime of heterosexuality represents all cultures' (248).

This jettisoning of open group struggle is problematic, however. Does Wittig not risk recreating a secret body, returning - in its emphasis on the underground, on barely perceptible signs and networks of communication - to the very spaces left vacant (and thus marked out) by a dominant culture? One great difficulty I have with Wittig's slavery model is that she makes it seem ultimately inescapable. In the concluding remarks just quoted, it seems that it is heterosexuality itself which breeds the resistance to it: lesbianism exists in all countries because heterosexuality is everywhere. If the two are so intimately twinned, then at the very least we have an explanation for the sheer pain, the utter despair, which we perceive at times in *Virgile, non* and which fills 'Paris-La-Politique': 'On est comme les loups qui hurlent de liberté et de famine, les côtes exposées au vent tandis que les autres avec la marque du collier ont le ventre plein et le poil luisant. [...] Mais l'espace où l'on puisse se mouvoir librement, où est-il?' (P: 35). Likewise, we can understand Quichotte's determination in *Le Voyage sans fin*, but like Panza tremble for her safety as she struggles to liberate the oppressed, against all odds:

Panza Quichotte tu ne vois pas qu'ils te prennent pour une folle?

Quichotte Quand bien même le monde entier me prendrait pour une folle et pas seulement ces arriérés dans le village qui n'ont jamais rien vu, je dirais que le monde entier est fou et que c'est moi qui ai raison. (52)

We need to ask ourselves, both as readers of Wittig and as students of gender and sexuality issues, whether resistance to heterosexuality really is the only reason for the lesbian's existence. Certainly, in the context of a large proportion of Wittig's own creative writing (*L'Opoponax*, *Brouillon*, *Le Corps lesbien*) such a theoretical belief does not seem to apply, since a world is posited in which heterosexual slavery has no place, now or in the past. Likewise, the despair apparent in *Virgile, non* at the slowness of Manastabal's rescue attempts gives way to total joy as the narratrix realises that paradise has been

attained not just by herself but by a multitude of companions, who seem to have known in advance of any dealings with men exactly what their lesbian guardian angel would look like. We are given no explanation about such phenomena, and of course the choice of a supernatural world (paradise) as the setting for such a representation is convenient: it is with much humour that Wittig plays with the convention of the *deus ex machina*. However, we are left wondering about the absence of a link, or ladder, between the wretched oppressed creature, resorting at worst to suicide and at best to banditry as she runs away from her condition, and the wise, perceptive angel's companion. Admittedly joy is more difficult to describe than pain, but it is vital to explore the 'something else' which motivates the runaway and might enable her to find her companion-lover in a relationship of equals. This exploration opens up the question of Wittigian spirituality, which is the subject of my next chapter.

7. 'Son propre élément de merveilleux': nuns, goddesses and the 'divine'

Whatever reservations I may have voiced at the end of my last chapter, it is very important once more to stress the powerful impact of the female sociality Wittig brings into being and to pay tribute to the passion with which she pleads for the liberation of the oppressed. The fight against slavery is the organising and driving principle behind much of her writing, both non-fiction and creative. However, this oppositional model does not by any means account for every aspect of Wittig's collective body; as we read her fiction, we come across evidence of lesbian communities *already posited*: the world of the 'amantes', the companion lovers. Moreover, these communities seem to be inspired by goddess-like figures who are in a creative dialogue with them, offering the lovers a number of representational homes and determining some of their behaviour. It seems to me that neither the eroticism nor the violence of the Wittigian lesbian body can fully be understood without an examination of the divine figures present in her work. Bearing in mind the Kleinian strand running through the whole of this thesis and underpinning my study of love and violence between women by stressing their source in early conflicts with the mother, I shall be asking to what extent these Wittigian deities can ^{be} seen as mother-figures helping to set the tone of adoration and sadistic attack through which the companion-lovers meet.

What has been written, so far, on Wittig's treatment of religious figures and themes? Some critics have highlighted Wittig's deliberate resistance to, or even attack upon Christianity: in her postface to *L'Opoponax*, Duras writes of the nuns that 'En jalonnant le temps de l'enfance d'obligations vides de tout sens et non explicitées elles offrent à l'enfance la liberté d'y contrevenir' (286-7), whilst for Elaine Marks the j/e of *Le Corps lesbien* is 'the only true anti-Christ, the

willful assassin of Christian love' (1979: 376). Wittig herself has openly declared her opposition both to religion and to the concept of an all-powerful God: 'Ni dieux ni déesses, ni maîtres ni maîtresses', declares the narratrix of 'Paris-La-Politique' (35), offering us this motto as her tentative guiding principle. I interpret this as meaning that if the mythical formation called 'deities' oppresses us, blessing the mighty and thus consolidating the system which has slavery at its heart, then Wittig, as narratrix, author and essayist, has no choice but to reject it. In *Les Guérillères*, accordingly, religious ideologies are thrown out as obsolete if they equate the fiction of femininity, grounded in selected parts of the female anatomy, with whatever side is necessary for the maintenance of mastery, however defined:

Elles disent qu'on leur a donné pour équivalents la mer les larmes ce qui est noir ce qui ne brûle pas ce qui est négatif celles qui se rendent sans combattre. Elles disent que c'est là une conception qui relève d'un raisonnement mécaniste. Il met en jeu une série de termes qui sont systématiquement mis en rapport avec des termes opposés. [...] Elles disent qu'elles peuvent tout aussi bien être mises en relation avec le ciel les astres dans leur mouvement d'ensemble et dans leur disposition [...] ce qui brûle celles qui combattent avec violence celles qui ne se rendent pas. Elles plaisantent à ce sujet, elles disent que c'est tomber de Charybde en Scylla, éviter une idéologie religieuse pour en adopter une autre, elles disent que l'une et l'autre ont ceci de commun c'est qu'elles n'ont plus cours. (112)

But if the link between femininity and mastery could be dissolved, together with its mechanistic reasonings, then might it not become possible to represent a new deity as well? Wittig proceeds very cautiously upon this path, offering and retracting images and sources of inspiration. In *Les Guérillères*, for instance, we witness an invitation to 'célébre[r] la belliqueuse Minerve, la guerrière, la plus courageuse des déesses' (141). It very much looks as if a goddess is posited as an inspiration and model for the warrior-women - one who, incidentally, is not concerned with their fighting men 'quand ils ont cessé d'être mes ennemis', but is instead celebrated by a circle-dance which depends for its momentum upon a female-identified energy, quite different from that provided by the fight against patriarchy. But Wittig urges us not to

take such an invitation too far; she does *not* advocate a cult of the Goddess, but argues instead that her use of the concept is part of her desire to experiment with literary genres:

Dans les anciennes chansons épiques il y avait toujours une dimension surréelle, surnaturelle avec apparitions de personnages légendaires. Ce procédé s'appelle le merveilleux chrétien. Il a une fonction poétique qui est d'agrandir les héros de la fable. *Les Guérillères* n'aurait pas été une épopée sans son propre élément de merveilleux. Mais ici il s'agit d'un merveilleux païen, avec l'apparition de déesses qui ont de ce fait une fonction décorative. Elles ont aussi comme dans le merveilleux chrétien la fonction poétique d'ajouter une dimension aux héroïnes de la fable qui glanent quelque gloire, non pas de la possibilité des déesses mais de leur description; car comme en peinture elle ajoute une couche de plus au récit. Cependant les séquences de dénigrement, ironiques, qui prêtent à rire, sont assez nombreuses pour avertir le lecteur qu'il a affaire à des déesses de papier. (Wittig 1994: 122)

I want to work with the notion of reflected glory which is suggested here: that, by placing a character alongside a description of a supernatural being, the former will become enhanced even if the description is 'empty', without any possible or at least credible referent - and especially not a mother-like referent or support. This is rather similar to Lacan's argument, expressed in 'Le stade du miroir...', that the child finds its 'self' through a mirror-image: it is therefore born in and as alienation. His use of the term 'support' for the person holding the child is a direct criticism of Klein's emphasis on the mother, whom he pushes away just as Wittig does. For Lacan, as for Wittig the theorist, no preverbal self is possible, and no properly constituted Other either.

Whilst glimpsing once again the problems that may be posed by the evacuation of a mother-figure that has never really been represented in the first place, it is possible to see that Wittig's 'reflected glory' theory does have textual advantages in contributing to a representation of *amantes* as not merged together. Here, it seems that they are allowed to develop an extra dimension by being touched by the radiance

emanating from a 'trace-goddess' who, because she does not really exist, cannot therefore in any way explain, engulf or dominate their existence. We are within the realm of companionship, privileging contiguous yet airy relationships: just as it might be argued that they communicate in ways which allow for space amongst them, so their relationship with the divine, their source of *merveilleux*, could be equally mobile and free. In the pages that follow I wish to study more closely the roles of the goddess-like figures Wittig places before our eyes, principally in *L'Opoponax*, where I believe the nuns play a key role, but also in her other texts. Does Wittig succeed in her distancing strategies - her *séquences de dénigrement* - or are there instances of desire for a spirituality that is more than *de papier*? In which case, the *dénigrement* too would become another instance of attack against a Kleinian mother, perceived as all-powerful and even monstrous, and yet passionately desired. What can the ambivalent 'glory' detected in the writing tell us about such a force? Intertwined in this question is the way Wittig's use of religious figures and rituals relates to her challenge to the representation of the female body, and in particular this chapter will foreground the function and meaning of menstruation, as a physical, reproductive and spiritual phenomenon. In Wittig's hands, we shall see that it becomes both catalyst *and* problem.

As a starting-point for my examination of *L'Opoponax*, I wish to return to Duras' evaluation of the place occupied by the nuns in the novel. She believes that their sole function is to give the girls something to rebel against, and offers us the following portrait:

Gardiennes idéales des murs, en file indienne, toutes pareilles, anonymes comme la matière même de l'adulte, dans les couloirs, dans les dortoirs, passent les religieuses de la catholicité. Sur leurs jupes noires et ternes bat le flux de l'enfance. A l'ombre de leur dévotion se passe la scrutation païenne, virginale, terrible de la mort et de la vie. (Duras 1964: 286)

Nuns as sinister figures, clad in black, out of touch with the children in their care because of their own involvement with sterile devotions that make it impossible for them to have any understanding of real, 'pagan' life: this is a stereotypical view that bears scant resemblance to what happens in the novel. Wittig's writing subtly subverts the stereotype and radically alters the representation of the nuns, turning them into the prototype of the female communities who will inhabit the later texts. As we saw in my first chapter, they are already outside the heterosexual contract; it is important to stress that their influence on their pupils cannot be reduced to oppression nor to what Marcelle Marini, in an otherwise most perceptive article, has called 'acculturation' and can be summarised thus: within traditional French middle-class society, it is normal for girls to be brought up by nuns, who are thus 'used' by Wittig as markers of the pupils' insertion into the dominant culture with its expectations of femininity (Marini 1991: 152). Yet surely she must have seen that the nuns of *L'Opopanax*, especially those we meet from the fifth section onwards, are somewhat unusual. We have already encountered the Mother Superior (213), enthroned and smiling at Véronique Legrand's portrayal of Artemis - emissaries from two worlds, meeting in a redefined, female-identified space. It also seems the nuns themselves bring the girls much of the knowledge with which, to borrow Marini's beautiful expression, 'on fait miel' (153). The story of Guibourc and the Ladies of Orange can hardly be described as mainstream, and yet *ma mère de l'enfant Jésus* teaches it not only as an example of epic writing, but also of successful resistance to domination; the text invites us to compare and contrast this with the better-known story she goes on to tell:

Orange n'est pas prise, on la voit en plein soleil et Guibourc sue à grosses gouttes sous le haubert, repousse le heaume qui lui tombe sur les yeux. *Ma mère de l'enfant Jésus* dit qu'il y a eu un pays dans le sud, elle dit que le roi de France est venu à cheval avec une puissante armée pour détruire ce pays, qu'il a appelé ça croisade, elle dit que depuis ce temps-là il n'y a pas eu une civilisation qui puisse se comparer à celle de ce pays. On note sur le cahier, guerre des Albigeois. (O: 155)

In both stories, the principle of 'might means right' is actively opposed; the success of Guibourc in defending Orange, together with the lived body she is seen to develop on the page as she sweats in her uncomfortable but necessary armour, cast their glow over the second story. The narrative is constructed in such a way that the nun's account becomes a subtle restoration of Albigensian civilisation; with the figure of Guibourc so recently brought to life, we feel that not only is Orange safe, but also the Cathar strongholds. This announces the ways in which Wittig will use Sappho in *Le Corps lesbien* and *Brouillon*, treating her poetry as a whole body and not as a series of surviving fragments; the nun's choice of texts and teaching methods can thus be seen to fit into a larger, Amazonian redemptive vision. Later on in the fifth section, we read that Catherine Legrand 'retrouve [...] un passage que ma mère de saint Hippolyte a donné en thème [...], la mer et le ciel attirent aux terrasses de marbre la foule des jeunes et fortes roses' (196). It is highly unlikely that Rimbaud would be offered to young girls in a traditional convent school such as Duras and Marini envision; at the time of the book's composition, let alone that of Wittig's childhood if she is drawing upon her own memories, Rimbaud's homosexuality and opposition to Christianity would most probably have assured him a place on the list of forbidden texts which every Catholic school possessed and rigorously obeyed. The nun's name itself is somewhat revealing, since Hippolyta was Queen of the Amazons and a keen warrior, according to the entry in the *Brouillon* (123), whilst another name provides us with further evidence of Wittig's wit: 'ma mère de saint Jules' is, it seems, the convent's electrician, able to restore - with Noémie Mazat, owner of a fine pair of hobnailed boots (157) - 'l'installation électrique du parloir' (198). I should point out, however, that such disruption occurs in a very subtle way: Wittig is much too clever to wish to replace one stereotype of the nun (sexless, sterile) with another (sex-starved, turning to girls through sheer desperation). The lesbian nun, after all, is nothing new in literature, as we know from *La Religieuse*. I have chosen these examples to show that the nuns are

in no way anonymous, and I would also strongly dispute that they are 'toutes pareilles'; their names and attributes can be seen as codes or keys to a secret language which relates partly to a wider Wittigian Amazonian picture, partly to Catholicity as a source of 'merveilleux', partly to the uniqueness of Catherine Legrand's inner world and desires. The nuns are thus many-faceted reflected figures, and the source of their reflection cannot exactly be said to be God; but neither is it religious hypocrisy and vacuousness (Duras) nor the values of recognizable French middle-class society (Marini). I recognise that it is indeed difficult to define what the nuns are, but wish to posit that they are definitely religious figures, functioning within the text as messengers from an undoubtedly problematic and flawed other-world.

What contribution do they make to the concept of the female body and its representational transformation? To explore this question, I shall be drawing upon psychoanalytic models of giving and receiving. Duras certainly seems to be responding to a Freudian rejection/retention, anal model: she sees Wittig rejecting the nun in order to embrace the children and bring them to life, sees the nuns themselves refusing to give to the children in order to safeguard their own selves - refusing to give up their symbolic faeces. But a Freudian analysis of anality does not take us far enough in an exploration of the subtle interplay between giving and receiving, between the nuns and their charges. To do this justice, we need to refer to Klein's theories of mother/child ambivalence.

I have already argued (Chapter 2) that the nun in the first section can be seen as a prototypical Kleinian mother, possessing, from the child's point of view, both a good and a bad breast. The good breast gives (the 'panier du goûter', stories, warmth), the bad withholds or fails to deliver (the nun refuses to give the children her magical orange-peel, doesn't fasten Catherine Legrand's snow-boots). Klein argues that the imago of the denying mother gives rise to a storm of aggressive

phantasies in the child, who wishes to bite, attack and devour the breast and scoop out its contents. In turn, the child fears retaliation from a punishing maternal primitive superego, and indeed, in the first stirrings of the Oedipus stage (much earlier than Freud suggests), s/he fears retaliation from both parents, since she also wants to steal the father's penis from inside the mother's body, together with her children. The key dynamics identified by Klein are that the child, in the paranoid-schizoid position, wishes to *rob* the mother's insides to have them for itself (introjection), and, moreover, wishes to *spoil* them by sadistic attack which implies both cutting and tearing, and also damage through placing the bad parts of itself into her body - urine and faeces (projection). The depressive position brings acute guilt at the damage done to the mother and extreme fears of loss, and ushers in the wish for reparation and restoration. In the earliest section of *L'Opoponax*, we saw how the nun could appear as a vengeful fantasy-mother in her brutal attack upon Josiane Fourmont, for instance, and in the 'gifle' she gives Catherine Legrand when she is playing boats; she was also, at other times, munificent, kind and nurturing. The ambivalent value of the gifts circulating between the mother-figure and her children is very clear.

Further on, beyond the almost entirely negative portrayal of Mademoiselle, what can the secondary-school nuns be seen to offer? We are now presented with an exclusively female environment, and this adds a new dimension to the Kleinian picture. In 'Early Stages of the Oedipus Conflict', Klein writes that '[d]read of the mother [...] impels the little girl to give up identification with her' (1928/1986: 77). I think that the disgust Catherine Legrand feels at the smell of ma mère de saint François d'Assise's shawl (158) can be explained by this early dread, showing to what extent the girl, now just entering puberty, is still unconsciously under the sway of oral- and anal-sadistic tendencies and indeed is having them revived by her menarche, which may lead her to feel that the bad mother has succeeded in punishing her.

Wittig, of course, does not openly mention menstruation in this text, yet its trace is to be found both in the negative images of femininity - the dark, smelly shawl - and in the positive possibilities, on all levels: physical, intellectual, emotional and psychical, which the pubescent Catherine Legrand is seen to display. On the one hand, menstruation as *the sign of the Mother* is the enemy which Wittig taboos out of her writing; on the other, it becomes a uniquely lesbian symbol of exchange, of circulation of gifts between women, as in the section of *Le Corps lesbien* (60-61) which will be studied later on. On the psychical side, we witness in *L'Opoponax* a number of 'pretend' paranormal phenomena which are traditionally viewed as being connected with the onset of menstruation - the links between it and the poltergeist-like nature of the opoponax itself will be looked at further on in this chapter - and a range of creative activities initiated by the nuns, notably in the remarkable 'travaux manuels' session in which each craft is meticulously described, conferring powers of expression and autonomy upon the young artisans (193-8). The nuns are a mixed (good and bad, ambivalent) community but they *do* provide the girls with the possibility of what Penelope Shuttle and Peter Redgrove, in their pioneering work on menstruation (*The Wise Wound*, 1978), would call a shamanistic language at this troubled and rich time of their lives.

Klein writes that the onset of menstruation brings strong anxiety for the girl, since she perceives it as 'the outward and visible sign that the interior of her body and the children contained have been totally destroyed' (1932/1989: 85). Accordingly, Catherine Legrand fears attack by an 'odeur qu'on connaît', the smell of a woman's body - her own, her mother's, and the nun's, which have now become indistinguishable. I am convinced that it is the smell of menstrual blood, which every person knows more or less consciously, as Shuttle and Redgrove explain:

When we are little children, all our senses are sharp, and since we are little our noses just come up to our mothers' laps, where every month she bears an interesting smell. This is not just an ordinary smell, though, it is the first smell that we ever experienced, since

it is like the smell of our birth-blood, the first time we drew a breath of the air into which we were born. (Shuttle and Redgrove 1978: 76)

We are brought back, then, to an awareness of our origins which for a girl includes the tangled issue of her ambivalent relationship with her mother. No wonder Catherine Legrand rejects its dark mantle:

Ça fait du coup comme une gêne sur la poitrine ou quelque part ailleurs sur le ventre ou sur le sexe. Catherine Legrand a du mal à supporter cette gêne-là elle sort la tête de dessous le châle de laine noire en faisant des grimaces à Denise Causse. Denise Causse s'est redressée sur un coude en disant à Catherine Legrand en chuchotant de rester près d'elle encore de ne pas s'en aller de dire à ma mère de saint François d'Assise qu'elle est tout à fait malade maintenant qu'elle a envie de se coucher. Mais Catherine Legrand justement n'a pas envie de se coucher avec cette odeur-là partout dans la chambre [...]. Catherine Legrand rejette le châle en entier [...]. (158)

The disturbance caused by the smell is evidence of unconscious or pre-conscious memories: phantasised attacks during infancy upon the mother's breast, insides, and reproductive capacity, and fear of retribution against the child's own body. One escape for Catherine is to pull faces, in the hope that the grotesque will protect her, particularly as it is an invitation to Denise Causse to communicate with her, react in the same humorous, rebellious manner against the suffocating mother-nun. But Denise Causse offers, instead, the option of neurosis, suggesting that her friend should feign illness, accept the nun's destructive power and form a covert alliance with her, Denise, as two 'sick' little girls. Catherine Legrand has grown up sufficiently to know that she does not want this, that she needs air. It is particularly relevant that, just after this episode, she is described as wanting to kick a tree because the smell of its flowers is particularly heady (158-9), and this is followed in quick succession by the description of a mentally-handicapped girl kicking her mother, the latter violently shaking her into submission, and the appearance of 'une dame qui traverse la terrasse avec un bébé dans le ventre' - smells and violence against and from the mother are represented as intimately connected, re-dramatised in mostly projective form by the girl as she reaches the age of her

first period. One way of coping with this is a form of escape; she will be attracted, many pages later, to a statue of a woman whose pose characterises the qualities of movement and airborne-ness which we identified in Chapter 1 as positive Wittigian representations: 'Les jambes sont en mouvement. [...] [L]a femme a un aspect monumental, on a l'impression qu'elle va en s'amenuisant vers le haut et que sa tête est perdue dans les étoiles' (177-8) - Artemis perhaps, a goddess as far away as possible from stifling representations of the Mother.

To return to *ma mère de saint François d'Assise*, it is important to say that she is certainly one of the least attractive nuns in the novel; in charge of the sickroom, she seems to generate sickness herself, and that is what repels Catherine Legrand. She is indeed close to the stereotype Duras denounces. What she seems to want to do to the pubescent girls is medicalise them, to make their bodies submit to the will of a science which confuses much more than it heals. Thus, her menstrual blood is somehow displaced onto the shawl, and it is the girl's nose and lungs she wants to clear, rather than helping her, through this new perception of her womb's life, to open her whole consciousness to the female power and energy she now possesses. She wishes to stifle menstruation rather than celebrate or at least discuss, explain and acknowledge it, and by that stifling, that erasure of a vital threshold, sends the girl whirling back into the sadistic psyche Klein describes.

But does not Wittig, also, erase the threshold? Give in to the fear of the bad breast by refusing to acknowledge and celebrate this uniquely female moment of menarche? Not exactly. *L'Opoponax* is steeped in an awareness of girls' needs at that time of their lives: the need for space, the need for creative expression, the need for touch and for ritual, in order to make sense of and work *with* the dreams, psychic phenomena and disturbances which are all around and within them. The structure of the fifth section is relevant; it starts, not with the scene in the sickroom, but with *ma mère de l'enfant Jésus* teaching the story

of the Ladies of Orange. The impact of this text is so great that it is seen to organise the girls' social life. A distinctive, yet open society - not a secret club with sadistic initiation rites - is formed through the power of the Old French words, which act in an almost magical way upon the girls, transforming their perception of the world and offering a view of themselves as active, mobile young women:

Nicole Marre va en courant chercher le ballon. Elle passe à la hauteur de Laurence Bouniol en criant, rois Desramés a sa barbe jurée, ce qui fait que Laurence Bouniol répond en la croisant, ke Guibors ert à cevas trainée, que Julienne Pont et Marielle Balland qui courent en même temps qu'elles continuent comme ça, et en la mer noïe et esfondrée. A midi on se serre la main en disant, rois Desramés a sa barbe jurée ke Guibors ert à cevas trainée et en la mer noïe et esfondrée. On se met à rire [...] (156)

It is this positive, strong representation of a female world, with its key characteristics of movement, laughter, hand-to-hand contact, appropriation and reclaim of old texts, and the passing among themselves (the transformation) of the *balle* of femininity, which comes before and in a very real sense contains the sickroom scene; we could say that *ma mère de l'enfant Jésus* unwittingly offers the girls what they need to feed their developing powers and thus does much to defuse the negative impact of her colleague's dark shawl. The girls do not want to be smothered by phantasies of the maternal body; they are expressing their desire to make sense of their adolescent bodies for themselves, to build among themselves a home as the basis for a renewed sociality, in which even violence can be expressed on their own terms - for the *content* of the old text that so fascinates them is in fact very violent: there is nothing mawkish about these young women's world.

The nuns' participation in the rituals of the Catholic church provides the girls with an alternative to the strictures of heterosexual family life, a shelter radically different from the four walls of their parents' homes. 'Vides de sens', writes Duras about these rituals, and indeed Catherine Legrand is portrayed, at times, as bored: 'On a envie de partir

sur la pointe des pieds et d'aller marcher sur l'herbe nue là-bas' (162). Yet the open-air Rogations mass to which the girl seems to be reacting negatively is particularly rich in meaning; the congregation pray for a *moderation* of natural phenomena - sunshine, rain - to aid the processes of growth and fertility, for a balance between creative and destructive powers, good and bad breast. Disruption has already been evoked two pages earlier, with the girls cleverly breaking ranks on their way to Rogations (160-161), flustering both the harassed nun in charge of them - the very same one who has taught them the power of female resistance to oppression, through the story of Guibourc - and the driver of a car: flustering both their mother and their father, as the passivity of their latency period breaks and they return to the defiance and disobedience of a much earlier age. This confrontation is followed by a description of the countryside through which the schoolgirls walk which is full of a sense of rebirth and of the beauty of spring: the nostalgic feel of this passage (160-1) clearly marks it out as indicating a wish to return to a perfect state of new, unsullied nature, a wish to restore the damaged maternal body. The Rogations mass, then, far from being meaningless, can if it is read within a Kleinian context be seen as providing both the landscape and the language in which the reappearance of early conflicts can be contained and their damage limited, if not repaired.

However, it is important to also to point out that the container fashioned from the Catholic rituals of the novel is not completely safe from 'les séquences de dénigrement, ironiques, qui prêtent à rire'. There are textual strategies which undermine any belief one might have, or desire to have, in the substance of the rituals. The uniformed schoolgirls' newly-acquired skill of marching military-fashion ('on sait tourner à angle droit, on rattrape un pas comme si de rien n'était', 160), the nun running 'avec ses jupes qui volent derrière elle pour essayer de rétablir l'ordre' (161), the priest 'en surplis [qu'il bénit l'eau le pain le sel' after a dizzying display of contradictory utterances (162), are meant to be slightly ridiculous processes and

figures. Yet what is that, if not another form of attack upon the mother? Freud has written that humour directed at other people highlights the existence of the superego, and I interpret this as meaning that the creation of figures of fun, as in the instances I have just given, is one way of dealing with anxiety at possible retribution from parent-figures. Thus, through its treatment of rituals, the text displays ambivalence: it is curious about their substance (belief in God, in a nurturing mother), and at the same time resists it, perhaps because of the fear of conflict or at least of being denied nurturance. What we witness, as Wittig herself has explained, is literally a 'touch and go' strategy: we are brought close to an understanding of what such rituals might mean, so close that we can almost touch the thing worshipped - but are denied, through humour and the portrayal of a very evasive heroine, any real grasp of it. Like Catherine Legrand, we are directed elsewhere: we too are invited to 'partir sur la pointe des pieds et [...] aller marcher sur l'herbe nue là-bas' (162). And the text immediately offers us another excerpt from the story of the Ladies of Orange: the words seem other-worldly and strange, a different obstacle to the body of a very different mother - Ermengart, a warrior-woman determined to fight for her offspring - and at the same time the *only* way, the text suggests, that any sense of such a mother's body can be conveyed.

Again and again, it is suggested, it is the writing process which creates, the only reliable 'god' or key to other worlds: 'Catherine Legrand renonce à dessiner l'oeil arabe de Guibourc ou le nez camus de Guillaume. C'est plus facile de commencer le chapitre avec une lettrine [...] et on est content comme ça' (163); 'Elle essaie de représenter l'opoponax, mais ça ne donne rien, c'est pour ça que Catherine Legrand prend la décision de remplacer les traits par les mots'; 'Catherine Legrand demande à ma mère de saint Grégoire si elle peut mettre des légendes au-dessous des plantes qu'elle a' (195). The representation of the body through pictorial means is a huge problem for Catherine Legrand, and I read this as evidence of a troubled relation to the

mother. What is her body like, and what is her sex? 'Catherine Legrand laisse un blanc pour les jambes et pour les pieds ou pour la robe à laquelle on pourrait faire une traîne par derrière' (154): she cannot make up her mind. Nature can seem a poor source of materials (a withholding mother), providing scant or fragile elements: 'On n'a pas grand-chose. Des genêts, deux roses, un lys' (195); 'Les premiers bouts [de mica] qu'elle obtient tombent en poussière' (196). We can even argue that the written body Catherine Legrand creates speaks, at times (as if she, as writer, re-placed herself within the paranoid-schizoid position) of dismemberment, attack, refusal to nurture; this body is, after all, composed of disconnected fragments of literary texts, and even the process of writing these can seem painful: 'On fait la première lettre tarabiscotée' (163); 'elle n'a pas une belle écriture et [...] elle ne sait pas mettre les mots en ligne droite' (195). Then also there is the question of authorship, more properly of *daughtership*. After the enormous effort of writing on the ground, with a stick, the words of a poem intended as a gift for Valerie Borge, the latter's sole comment is 'ce n'est pas toi qui as inventé ces vers' (201) - just as *ma mère de l'enfant Jésus* had said of her own creation 'ce sont de très beaux vers, Valerie Borge, pourtant ils ne sont pas de vous' (174), causing her to run out of the class, presumably distressed. I have learnt from personal experience and observation that the cry of 'not you' is powerfully and repeatedly uttered by the daughter to her mother as she struggles quite literally to emerge, or more properly to de-merge, as an individual: it can also become a defence by the mother as she denies her daughter's creativity, refuses her gifts. They are not yours, you have stolen them: I cannot accept them. Valerie Borge, and the nun, choose not to see the uniqueness of the desire which turned the borrowings from literature into brand-new expressions of creativity. But we, as readers, can see such desire as love, and the snippets of poetry as genuine gifts: we can also see Catherine Legrand, and the project of the novel, as also placed within the depressive position - aiming to repair and restore the mother's body. All these processes, then, do not happen

in spite of the nuns and their rituals, but thanks to the space of worship which, however laughable their occasional failings and limitations, they provide for the girls. It is this space that I now wish to explore and assess.

Ma mère de l'enfant Jésus quand elle lit tout haut quelque chose qui lui plaît s'arrête pour faire une espèce de rond avec la bouche un o en silence et il y a dans chacun de ses yeux un rond tout pareil qui veut dire qu'elle a exactement là ce qu'elle espérait y trouver et ça lui plaît bien d'avoir ainsi de l'admiration. [...] Alors on la guette tout le temps on s'entraîne à deviner quand elle va faire ça et on finit par tomber dans le mille. On arrive même quelquefois à provoquer le rond. (163)

How are we to read the child's fascination with her teacher in this passage, which treads so delicately between rejection and acceptance of the nun's pleasure? On the one hand it is mocked ('une espèce de rond', 'on s'entraîne', 'tomber dans le mille'), on the other it is clearly attractive for the child who is discovering what a woman's response to sacred texts might be (not just, of course, any woman: the nun is situated outside heterosexual norms). To borrow from her own metaphor, Wittig 'ajoute une couche de plus au récit' by positing mysticism - carefully distanced by being firmly located in 'les livres sur les saints', *not* in supernatural phenomena - and allowing its effect upon the nun to be clearly visible. There are parallels here with Lacan's views on female *jouissance* and mysticism: something is described as undoubtedly happening to the woman mystic, a supplementary pleasure, neither within the phallic economy nor in reaction to it; this pleasure is not heaven-sent, but is rather the manifestation of a certain indefinable desire and its fulfilment. (I am referring here to Lacan's 'reading' of Bernini's statue of St Teresa in *Encore*, Ch.6.) What is distinctive in *L'Opoponax*, however, is the way ma mère de l'enfant Jésus is represented in her pleasure: she in no way resembles Bernini's statue. Her eyes are open, as well as her mouth, showing her to be in communion not just with her God but with other women. The reclaimed Os (of femininity) which Catherine Legrand searches out in them are neither empty zeroes nor the image of an immobile deathlike fulfilment: they

light up like flames, deriving their intensity both from the power the nun sees in the texts she reads, and from the presence of an all-female (though admittedly rather captive) audience. In that sense the three Os announce and prefigure those of the word Opoponax itself. Catherine Legrand is seen testing, teasing, trying to catch out the nun: she elaborately tricks her into believing her own hollow display of mock-mysticism ('je pense à Dieu, je pense à, et elle serrera les lèvres pour ne pas en dire davantage', 165). Yet ultimately, although the girl has learnt the trick of 'provoquer le rond', she remains as uncertain about the nature of the pleasure itself as the nun is. In fact the latter, like the good mystic that she is, remains unaware that she is even expressing such pleasure. 'It is clear', writes Lacan, 'that the essential testimony of the mystics is that they are experiencing [jouissance] but know nothing about it' (1982: 147); and just as he invites his listeners to screen off the 'something more' of *jouissance* until he has 'properly explained it', so too does Wittig. Catherine Legrand will be seen to discover it, her fledgling efforts prophesying the coming of a properly contextualised Age of Glory, such as will be found in Wittig and Zeig's *Brouillon*:

EXTASE

Mouvement interne du corps quand il tend vers une harmonie extrême. On a vu des yeux tomber au cours d'extases, des oreilles s'allonger, des cœurs devenir visibles à la surface de la poitrine, des ventres tourner en rond à toute vitesse, sans que mort s'ensuive pour les personnes concernées. Il semble qu'on ne doit pas redouter cette sorte d'état. (88/9)

This is a delicious mockery of religious excess. It is worth asking ourselves, however, to what extent such mockery is a defence, and against what. Certainly such transports of joy are *intended* to be located firmly within the context of lesbian love, and we are invited to hear the proclamation 'Dieu, c'est moi' - God is nowhere else than in my delighting self. Wittig, as an authoritarian writer attempting to exercise strict controls over her writing, cannot allow herself to posit God as a stable entity but rather as a kind of gap, an impression left

by something of a decidedly illusory nature. But I am convinced that the elaborate description of this 'divine imprint' and of its effects reveals a quest within her writing for a specifically female spirituality, one that might provide a model of space, communication and relationship, particularly to another woman (including the mother) who could act both as mirror of self and as an autonomous model. This paradoxical process of textual control and spiritual attraction is particularly apparent in the pages describing the girls' religious retreat, which I shall now discuss.

Quand on monte les escaliers de marbre on voit écrit partout clôture, au-dessous des pancartes, des barrières sont disposées pour qu'on n'ait pas l'idée d'aller par là. On fait une retraite. On n'a pas le droit de parler. On s'est transporté dans le couvent qu'on voit au fond du jardin. Là il y a des religieuses qu'on ne connaît pas parce qu'elles restent derrière les clôtures. On voit leur jardin quand on traverse le parc par l'allée des acacias mais on n'a pas le droit d'y aller. Il y a une niche de pierre qui a une statue gallo-romaine qu'on a trouvée dans la terre du jardin. Quand on va en douce auprès de la niche on peut voir que c'est une femme debout les bras écartés du corps. [...] Les jambes sont en mouvement. [...] La femme a un aspect monumental, on a l'impression qu'elle va en s'amenuisant et que sa tête est perdue dans les étoiles. On est dans une salle avec des grandes fenêtres derrière lesquelles on voit bouger des arbres, avec des tables, avec des chaises pailonnées. Le sol est en marbre comme il est partout où on a été dans le couvent. (178)

This extract gives the lie to the term 'clôture': there is nothing stifling about the place described. The marble stairs and floors tell of luxury, not poverty, and far from screening anything off, the boundaries act as doorways to other worlds; a garden is seen, trees move through large windows, and most importantly a statue stretches into the heavens. She is not precisely located - 'il y a une niche de pierre' gives no clue as to her whereabouts - and this, as well as the mobility of her body, indicates the link she forms between faiths, between ages, between women. Certainly she is not at odds with the world of the cloistered nuns who, indeed, keep her safe: it is possible to imagine them as priestesses guarding a shrine. The statue's monumental aspect, her contact with the stars, have already been prefigured and prepared by

Catherine Legrand who is also able to stretch her world-vision to encompass the universe; daydreaming about the possibility of the Earth being burnt up by generalised volcanic activity, she imagines the following possibility: 'Si on jouait alors aux billes avec les sphères qui sont dans l'espace on rangerait la terre dans les agates on dirait, c'est la plus belle, elle est en quoi, devinez, elle est en onyx' (171).

This constant shift of perspective, from human to other-worldly, contributes to the Carrollian feel of the retreat description. Not only does the statue grow and then shrink back, like Alice, but doors open onto unexpected places: 'Quand on regarde la porte de la chapelle, on croit qu'on va entrer dans une pièce pareille à celle qu'on vient de quitter mais on tombe dans un lieu où les vitraux roses ocres mauves tamisent la lumière, où les parois brillent, où l'or brille sur l'autel qui est une pierre simple. Des arums des roses des amaryllis sont dans des vases par terre' (181). This is indeed a magical garden, a place for vitally-needed creativity and healing, as I shall now explain.

I mentioned earlier the importance of the onset of menstruation, and the feelings of guilt and fear this can bring - in particular, the girl's more or less conscious feeling that the mother's retaliation against her body, which she phantasised as an infant and repressed throughout latency, is the cause of this inexplicable bleeding. Shuttle and Redgrove (1978, particularly 246-7) rightly deplore the lack of appropriate rites of passage at this stage, an absence which can result in a further 'driving underground', tabooing and outlawing of this aspect of women's physical, emotional and psychical experience, with disastrous effects on their self-esteem and creativity. Annie Leclerc (1974) also denounces the consequences of such a taboo. It seems to me that Wittig is hinting at that lack, that gap, by suggesting what such a place (at least) of ritual might be. She provides an alternative to Kleinian patterns of ambivalence:

On a des carnets pour y écrire ce qu'on veut. Ma mère de l'enfant Jésus ne les regardera pas. [...] On peut aller et venir dans la salle à condition que ce soit sans faire de bruit. On peut faire des travaux manuels, on peut raccommoder son linge on peut dessiner on peut faire des objets dans du bois avec des couteaux. C'est comme une grande récréation sauf qu'on parle tout bas en chuchotant, on peut aussi quand on veut parler à quelqu'un écrire sur le carnet ce qu'on a à dire et attendre la réponse également sur le carnet. On n'est pas surveillé parce que ma mère de l'enfant Jésus a dit, je vous fais confiance j'espère que vous le mériterez. C'est ce qu'on fait, on ne parle pas tout haut, on ne se met pas à courir dans la salle, on ne déplace pas les meubles, on est bien content d'être sans personnel.] (178)

We have encountered so many instances of vengeful mothering in *L'Opopanax* that these words act as a balm. The nun emerges as an adult, neither threatened nor threatening, able to trust her 'daughters' to express themselves on their own terms. Rather than reversing the image of the bad, punishing mother by becoming a nurturing one, she has been helped by the secret rules of the retreat-house - unstated, unknown to us - simply to allow the adolescent girls space, freedom from her, from each other. She appears here in a neutral role, away from the storms of mother-daughter struggle, and provides a model for the girls which brings out the adult in them, too; by mending their own clothes they develop their confidence in parenting themselves, whilst the permission to carve, draw or write 'ce qu'on veut', free from parental censure but nevertheless in safety, is vital for the expression of their true creativity. It is remarkable that knives are mentioned, with their potentially violent associations, as instruments of self-expression and artistic communication rather than destruction; likewise, some of the disruptive characteristics we associate with adolescence - running around, throwing furniture about - do not happen because they are unnecessary, although they are of course present in the text, despite the 'ne...pas', just by being mentioned: a skilful, typically Wittigian indication that the girls, at other times, do grapple with violent impulses. Just for now, however, they can work out their own meanings, specific to their time of life, and take a rest from the twin impulses of fighting their mother and demanding further feeding from her. The

peaceful, contemplative quality of the activities described may be enabling them to deal with the changes in their bodies, without denying them on the one hand - by remaining trapped in a false latency - nor being overwhelmed by them so that frenzied behaviour results. They have a safe home both for their need for space and their need for movement, communication, action. Shuttle and Redgrove provide thought-provoking insights into these specifically female needs in their discussion of two fourteen-year-old girls who became case-studies in psychiatric literature. One, described by Helene Deutsch (1973, v.1:184), suffered a psychotic attack at the time of her first menstruation and exhibited wild behaviour, repeating apparently nonsensical words which betrayed her terror of her newly discovered sexuality and fertility. Shuttle and Redgrove give the following commentary about this episode: 'We have spoken of the festival of the *Hysteria* and its serious psychological function in ancient times; this wild-haired, dancing, rouge-covered, twentieth-century maenad has discovered for herself what was once considered an appropriate celebration of her new, sexual, personality. There are no festivals for her, only doctors' (246). By contrast another girl, described by R D Laing (1976: 91), was hospitalized because

she preferred to stare at a wall instead of watching television, lost weight through not eating as the rest of the family did, and washed in cold water and not hot [...]. Laing points out that this girl behaved as people do when they embark on a course of meditation. She was by nature descending inwards, as a practitioner of yoga does [...].

Yogic calming and stilling of the mind, detachment, is one way of dealing with exceptional conditions and attaining trance-state; the opposite of yogic meditation, zazen, samadhi, is the aroused and hyperactive state of shamanism, the rapture in which a situation is danced out or dramatised in trance for all to see, and, if necessary, to act upon. If these two kinds of reaction are deprived of their meaning or function, then they are regarded as madness [...]. Our point is that if these energies find a receptacle, this behaviour finds a social context, then it is seen to be full of meaning. (246-7)

Although I am sceptical about some of the claims the authors make about female adolescent sexuality - its almost entirely heterosexual nature, for instance - their fascinating study is relevant to the purposes of this chapter in that it looks at the female body from a holistic point of view where the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual aspects are closely intertwined. They see the menstrual cycle as a process of descent and return, which they equate with Ehrenzweig's understanding of Klein's schizoid-depressive model: fragmentation (descent) is the first stage of creativity which must not just be tolerated, but indeed welcomed with a special kind of watchfulness before the second stage, integration (return) can happen. I am now going to argue that this model is useful for a study of the physical/spiritual links in Wittig, in revealing the crucial points of departure in her treatment of the question.

We have already witnessed a great deal of fragmentation in Wittig's writing. In *L'Opoponax*, Catherine Legrand uses bits, extracts, fragments of plants, minerals, works of literature to represent herself and her budding love for Valerie Borge. We are aware of the anxiety on which such creativity rests, of the pain of bringing her picture into being. When she comes to the retreat, she has the chance to 'calm and still the mind'; in a state of ascesis, on cool marble floors and seated on a simple chair, she can at last represent turmoil, change, disturbance. She will not go crazy, acting out the 'Hysteria' for which Shuttle and Redgrove seem rather nostalgic, but neither will she deny the power of the forces within her, forces which I believe have a physical component: the onset of menstruation. This will become, not tabooed, not driven underground by Wittig's treatment of it, but reinterpreted and above all displaced. This is powerfully shown through the creation of the central spiritual figure of the book: the opoponax itself. Catherine Legrand has just turned away from the possibility of reading the lives of saints (including, interestingly, St Theresa), a 'no' statement which, in typical Wittigian fashion, nevertheless leaves the presence of the things

rejected hovering over the page; in this ambivalent context comes the following:

Elle essaie de représenter l'opoponax, mais ça ne donne rien, c'est pour ça que Catherine Legrand prend la décision de remplacer les traits par les mots. Elle écrit donc en lettres capitales en haut au milieu de la deuxième page O P O P O N A X et deux points suivi de, peut s'étirer. On ne peut pas le décrire parce qu'il n'a jamais la même forme. Règne, ni animal, ni végétal, ni minéral, autrement dit indéterminé. Humeur, instable, il n'est pas recommandé de fréquenter l'opoponax. (179)

What is the opoponax? First and foremost in my opinion, a formidable challenge to stereotypical views of female adolescence. It is scattered, changeable, unstable as girls are supposed to be at that age; more, it has a distinctly demonic feel. In the passages that follow the one just quoted, Catherine Legrand gives it a poltergeist-like nature: it interferes with objects (jams desktops, causes taps to drip); it is also ghostly and causes hallucinations or altered consciousness. The stereotype here is that, when they start to menstruate, girls are somehow in touch with the occult, and that the presence of such a person in a house is enough to precipitate a range of paranormal phenomena. Shuttle and Redgrove argue that the demonisation of menarche is the consequence of repression, of tabooing; but Catherine Legrand picks up that demonisation and runs with it. *She* is almost entirely - an important proviso to which I shall return - in charge, well aware that the major part of the opoponax is her own creation, the symbol of her own 'descent', the articulation of her particular response to turmoil and of her own specific desire. Catherine Legrand is not the Regan of *The Exorcist*, neither is she Carrie in the film of the same name; she is not possessed by an external force: in a very real sense, she wants to do the possessing, and the 'return' is not to be understood as a return to a reinstated maternal femininity. What Wittig wishes to see returned, in the sense of restored (but it is of course a creation, not an exercise in nostalgia: some elements from the past are caught within a predominantly speculative structure, as I shall show in the next chapter) is the

lesbian body. Accordingly, the first appearance of the opoponax is immediately followed by the description of the chapel, a place of communication between 'amantes': the stained-glass windows project ochre, pink and lilac onto the girls, the arum-lily flower subtly reclaims the symbol of the Virgin Mary (the trumpet-shaped lily) and makes it vulvar, gold is associated with the age of glory ('les Lesbos noires et dorées'); it is a space of worship but also of mutual exchange between women - 'Laurence Bouniol est agenouillée devant la grille du chœur. [...] Anne Gerlier et Marie Démone [...] se montrent des images' (181). The representation suggests a process whereby girls can be watchful and aware towards the processes of their female bodies, minds and spirits, but *move beyond* splitting processes (the 'Marie' versus the 'Démone') by placing themselves within a female-identified context. Shuttle and Redgrove, I think, view the female cycle as a set of constantly-produced, closed circles, with each revolution of the body's monthly history offering a model for greater insight, creativity and wisdom which could be shared with men. Wittig does not discount the cyclical nature of women's bodies, but offers a far more open model, based on communication between women and remaining deliberately unstable - hence the figure of the opoponax, the very name being a meditation on the circles, on disruption, and on healing.

But is the opoponax *only* represented as a figment of Catherine Legrand's imagination? Some of its manifestations belie this: 'on est seul et [...] on surprend une forme noire qui est en train de glisser, qui est en train de finir de disparaître. Ou bien on se regarde dans la glace et il recouvre la figure comme un brouillard. Il ne faut pas se décourager [...] et alors il s'en va' (180-1). Erika Ostrovsky (1991) writes of it as a largely independent phenomenon, 'an enigmatic, fluid, protean, threatening force [... which] has multiform and manifold power' (18); she believes that Catherine Legrand is afraid of it at times, finding it difficult to control, but I can find no clear illustration of such fear. However, I agree with her that the opoponax seems frighteningly

autonomous at times; the phrase 'je suis l'opoponax' bursts upon the text unannounced, with the shock-effect of its je/vous enunciation setting it apart from the rest of the narrative, together with the violence of its messages: 'Cet avertissement vous suffira peut-être. Il n'a dépendu que de lui que vous périssiez et avec vous la classe entière' (242). Sadism lurks, couched in sadeian language, as if all the struggles of an earlier age (taken historically - Sade's power - and psychoanalytically: the small child's Kleinian struggles) had returned, rekindled by the fire of Catherine Legrand's passion for one of her own sex which, as well as troubling her, de-stabilises the narrative and indeed this thesis: the careful following of schizoid/depressive mechanisms which could be said to mark my earlier chapters, summarised as 'Wittig destroys only to build and create', cannot totally hold here and there is a very definite vacillation in Wittig's, and my, argumentation. There is no doubt that she wants to overthrow, no doubt either that she wants to (re)create, but the space between the two positions sometimes resembles a minefield, rather than a path. However, there is one certainty: the intimate twinning between the opoponax and lesbian love. Ostrovsky writes that 'its primary function is to express an intense feeling - without, however, naming it' (18); and, indeed, once Catherine Legrand's love for Valerie Borge is returned and thus validated, the opoponax disappears from the text.

Whilst bearing in mind that we should not conflate the deities found in Wittig's various texts into one single set of phenomena - the poltergeist-like nature of the opoponax, for example, is a distinguishing mark of her first novel, and has its own function and momentum in relation to the adolescent bodies and loves brought to life there - I want to stay with the sense of being in something of a minefield as I turn my attention to the deities featured in *Le Corps lesbien*:

Sur la colline elles font des rondes le soir. Bien souvent j/e les regarde sans oser m'approcher. J/e les connais toutes par leurs noms pour les avoir étudiées dans les livres de la bibliothèque. J/e dénombre leurs attributs, j/e considère leur maintien, j/e ne

regrette pas que leur sévérité soit restée attachée aux caractères des livres puisqu'elles en sont là devant m/oi si totalement dépourvues. Le cœur m/e bat quand parfois j/e te vois parmi elles m/a plus aimée m/on innommable toi à qui j/e souhaite du fond de m/on estomac de ne jamais mourir. (72-3)

This extract displays the same passionate desire for an immortal, ever-present being which we detected in the Golgotha passage, quoted at the end of my chapter on the maternal body. The fear of loss is given a concrete, physical expression by its location in the pit of the stomach, and one hypothesis that can be made about the appearance of the goddesses is that they are the representational result of such a fear. The dancing figures seem very different from the dark mother who appeared in response to the narratrix's despair at her companions' betrayal, but the difference could be said to be one of degree and of contextualisation: the lover can see her beloved dancing, she has not been betrayed by her, although she fears bereavement. The goddesses who appear, or are invoked, here, are carefully portrayed as *déeses de papier* - a by now familiar distancing device: they have been studied in books; and yet the narratrix, having created them, fears them and keeps her distance. Once more, there is a vacillation between belief and its erasure within the narratrix's discourse, which confers upon her a particular blend of vulnerability as she watches, alone and hidden, a dance from which she has excluded herself. She inhabits a space of doubt; hers is the pain of the agnostic, rather than the confident zest of the atheist.

Another striking aspect of this passage is the splitting process which is at work. We sense in the narratrix a quiet relief that the goddesses' attributes do not include *leur sévérité*, and later on in the same poem she comments that they *amicably* share the sacred mushroom, without wishing to become taller or smaller (than each other, presumably). This rewriting of *Alice in Wonderland* expresses a desire for a group of deities who could provide a model of equality and sharing, rather than the much riskier space inhabited by the Duchess and the Queen of Hearts. In effect, the Bad Mother is wished away. And yet

J/e te regarde tenir la main d'Artémis lacée de cuir sur ses seins nus puis celle d'Aphrodite, la noire déesse au ventre plat. Il y a aussi Perséphone la triple, il y a Ishtar à la tête/soleille, [...] il y a Sappho aux seins violets [...], toutes vous dansez [...]. Un trouble me vient à te voir à ton aise parmi elles les yeux brillants les reins tordus de spasmes ton bassin projeté en avant au rythme de ta danse. (73-4)

Although attributes are distributed to each goddess, it is important to note Artemis' and Aphrodite's description. Discussing this passage, Namascar Shaktini correctly notes that the latter has been transformed by Wittig: 'she is not the white fertility goddess, but 'the black goddess with the flat belly' (1990: 145) - the reproductive body is displaced. Shaktini analyses the 'alchimie du verbe' with which Wittig allocates colours to the goddesses, showing how she ends with an occurrence of lesbian violet; but I believe the route Wittig takes is less smooth than the optimistic lesbian displacements suggested by Shaktini. For me, the representation of Artemis and Aphrodite together - the one with her leather straps over bare breasts, the other with her black skin and 'ventre plat' (like Mandiargues' Rebecca in her motorcycling gear) - carries a definite connotation of bondage, of sadomasochistic control over the body: a hint of the *sévérité* which the narratrix found in the library's account of the goddesses. This poem, like its narratrix in retreat among the oleanders, seems to be resting from the excesses found elsewhere in the novel, and yet whilst displaying a desire for deities that could keep us safe and touch us with *leurs doigts complaisants*, does not forget the phantasies interrelating with other, more violent forces. At the end of the poem the beloved does indeed come to the narratrix *en grande extase*, the simple statement of their contiguity acting as a balm; the exchange of colours among the goddesses has formed a living, moving rainbow, a covenant between the human and the divine. But if the lover had *not* come, then the narratrix's rage might well have shattered that peace, releasing either *mère la mort* or the text's sadistic demons. This is indeed what can be said to happen in the poem in which menstruation is celebrated, and from which I shall quote the following extracts:

Tu es parmi celles qui sont fêtées le dernier jour du mois le vingt-huitième, celles dont les menstrues coïncident avec cette date. [...] J/e tremble que j/e ne sois pas désignée, au moment où la nuit venue les feux sont allumés et se reflètent dans la mer, pour lécher ton sang sur l'envers de tes cuisses le long de ta vulve entre tes nymphes dans les parois accolées de ton vagin. Le sort en effet m//est contraire, j/e ne le suis pas. Tu m/e regardes alors muette sans un sourire. [...] C'est une autre qui s'approche, se tient à genoux assise sur ses talons, essuie ses cheveux mouillés contre tes jambes, ouvre la bouche, tête à la renverse te regardant. J/e tombe à plat ventre aussitôt, m/a tête heurte violemment le sol. Des convulsions m/e prennent [...]. Deux d'entre elles m/e relèvent et m//entraînent m/e chantant quelque chanson [...]. L'odeur résineuse m'étourdit, un choc m/e vient dans m/on foie, m/es sanglots redoublent, une vomissure verte se mélange sur m/on menton et dans m/on cou à m/es larmes à m/a bave à m/a salive, j/e fuis leurs rires et leurs chants tout en courant jusqu'à la mer où je me jette hurlant des malédictions m/a très exécrable regrettant à voix haute le jour où ici-bas j/e t'ai rencontrée. (60-61)

Once more the narratrix is at odds with the worshipping community, excluding herself from its company and its rituals. Ostrovsky cites this poem as illustrating the way Wittig glorifies menstruation:

It overthrows the secretive, often shameful attitude of women in many societies regarding this physiological occurrence [...]. In place of such attitudes, Wittig substitutes the celebration of this specifically female attribute - not in terms of the potential of pregnancy, but as a phenomenon pertaining exclusively to the female body. (Ostrovsky 1991: 82)

However, it is the collective of women which is depicted as glorifying menstruation; the drinking of the menstrual blood which, as Ostrovsky goes on to point out, is an imitation and subversion of the Eucharist, has a strikingly negative effect upon the isolated narratrix. It is not enough, indeed it is not possible for her to worship the women whose menstruation coincides with the twenty-eighth day, however much the structure of the book itself seems to promote the creative importance of such a moment (Ostrovsky argues (pp.81-82) that the numbers fourteen and twenty-eight have specific functions throughout the novel, subjecting the traditional interpretation of ovulation as creation and menstruation as destruction to *renversement*). The trace-goddess inside or alongside the worshipped women, who makes of each of them, for a single day, the

priestess, the chalice and the wine itself, cannot find her way to the narratrix, because of the latter's destructive jealousy and sense of utter betrayal and abandonment. Her reaction is akin to a child's temper tantrum as her body becomes repossessed by the terrors of an earlier age. It all starts with the beloved's silent, unsmiling face: the closing down of the mother's communication with her baby, of any expression of her love; it is a maternal absence crueller than absence itself. Like the very young Catherine Legrand, the narratrix is attacked by *la chose*, cut off from the possibility of comfort or socialisation, if she cannot have and indeed be fed by the one whom she is terrified of losing; but because she is a woman of menstruating age, her expression of intense feelings also borrows from the register of demonic possession which pertains to a certain representation of female adolescence, as exemplified in *The Exorcist*: the green vomit, the turning inside out, the powerful and strident curses.

To say that this is a disruption of any glorification of menstruation, and indeed of any glorification of the divine, is something of an understatement; and yet of course, and once again paradoxically, Wittig *does* highlight the spiritual and psychical power of menstruation in this poem because the lover's blood is such an intense object of desire that its denial is experienced as excommunication. And as far as deities are concerned, what is the sea in which the narratrix throws herself in despair, but yet another mother/goddess, mother/death? Ostrovsky points out that Wittig uses menstruation for its shock value, 'at least for a squeamish or prudish reader' (82), by featuring the imbibing of blood; yet the ritual's woman-affirming nature, orderly and carefully contained - it happens on a beautiful beach, strewn with flowers - seems to me an attractive expression of sisterhood, a rather comfortable and comforting image of the trace-goddess: it is the deity or demon whose image dwells within the narratrix which disturbs me. She, or it, cannot be fully explained, summoned nor contained by the laws of the female community passionately brought to life by Wittig. To say it is 'just the mother'

would be reductive, although some of the conflicts belong to the mother/child relationship. But clearly something is posited beyond the ritual described on that beach and which fails the narratrix so utterly, as if to underline Wittig's own wariness about making too much of feminine physiological processes; much of *Le Corps lesbien*, as we shall see in the next chapter, gives a voice to the restless quest such a positing engenders.

The Wittigian concept of deity, then, resists the Christian god of love with all its might. The opopanax utters 'no' most forcibly, and is no stranger to weapons and to war. Its bellicose nature is so seductively portrayed that the text of the same name slips into worship of it, suggesting an independent existence; this hovering between atheism and belief, as we have just seen, also marks the treatment of divinities in *Le Corps lesbien* and keeps problematising the relationship to the body and to the mother. In the *Brouillon*, Sappho's status is, it seems, so powerful that the entry for her features her name, in capitals, followed by a blank page. Why? Is it because we have been so dazzled by her might that we cannot see the words, or is it because Sappho encapsulates the love that daren't speak its name, or else again because Wittig and Zeig falter in their otherwise energetic, all-revealing project, becoming lost for words? In a sense, the exact relationship between Sappho and the divine can be said to escape from us, leaving the question open; but Wittig at the very least posits a force to be reckoned with. It will provide the inspiration for my last chapter, in which we shall examine the transformative power of Wittigian eroticism.

8. The erotic body

As a prelude to this chapter, it is helpful to remind ourselves both of the gains and of the problems which Wittig's own brand of *écriture du corps* can be said to create in our understanding and discussion of the female body. I have argued and I hope demonstrated the ways in which Wittig successfully addresses, incorporates and challenges Freudian and Kleinian perceptions, Sadeian representation, negative images of sisterhood and of friendship between women, and the reduction of the female body to the purely maternal or reproductive. I have gone on to celebrate the redemptive power of Wittig's perceptions of the collective body and the ways in which it can be said to be underpinned by a quest for a female-identified spirituality. Whilst holding on to these positive achievements, I have also constantly revealed the tensions and anxieties within the writing itself which stop it, and us, from settling into complacency regarding the female body. Its question is relentlessly re-posed, the figures which could shape our understanding of it - daughter, mother, goddess and above all woman - exposed and denounced as fictions. And yet a new community is passionately desired, and to a great extent posited, in which a redefined body might be glimpsed through the *traces* left by all these fictions. It is within this decidedly unstable set of contexts that I shall now embark upon the most perilous exploration of all: that of Wittigian eroticism.

Instability is, indeed, one of the keys to any subtle understanding of Wittig's erotic writing. The restlessness of the text, pulling against its own viewing, savouring, contemplative nature, and the glimpsing mechanisms noted above - the body denounced, desired, erased, revealed, fragmented, reassembled, hidden and desired once more - are in themselves deeply erotic processes, highly charged: sparks fly. This is akin to Barthes' evocation of textual pleasure, where perversion resides in the writing's *scintillement*:

L'endroit le plus érotique d'un corps n'est-il pas là où le vêtement bâille? Dans la perversion (qui est le régime du plaisir textuel) il n'y a pas de "zones érogènes" (expression au reste assez casse-pieds); c'est l'intermittence [...] qui est érotique: celle de la peau qui scintille entre deux pièces (le pantalon et le tricot), entre deux bords (la chemise entrouverte, le gant et la manche); c'est ce scintillement même qui séduit, ou encore: la mise en scène d'une apparition-disparition. (Barthes 1973: 19)

We have followed this process at every level, in each of the bodies of this thesis; it accounts for the pleasurable *and* the dangerous - in other words for the seductive - nature of Wittig's writing, the quality which makes the reader savour every syllable and return, time after time, to deepen the reading experience:

cette [...] lecture, *appliquée* (au sens propre), est celle qui convient au texte-moderne, au texte-limite. [...] Celle qui "arrive", ce qui "s'en va", la faille des deux bords, l'interstice de la jouissance, se produit dans le volume des langages, dans l'énonciation, non dans la suite des énoncés: ne pas dévorer, ne pas avaler, mais brouter, tondre avec minutie, retrouver, pour lire ces auteurs d'aujourd'hui, le loisir des anciennes lectures: être des lecteurs *aristocratiques*. (ibid.: 23-4)

Barthes' definition (p.15) of the two 'bords' between which the tantalising glimpses occur is also highly relevant to this project: one is subversive, the other cultural, *however defined* - an important proviso given the many cultures (heterosexual, lesbian, female) with which Wittig engages.

In a very real sense, then, all Wittig's writing is in itself erotic; but, of course, there is much more to it than that. *Amantes* as well as *guérillères* people her work; arguably, the former have the upper hand, be they the girls of *L'Opoponax* or the Amazons of later works:

Catherine Legrand voit que Valerie Borge est à genoux devant elle, que sa nuque sort de ses cheveux entraînés par le poids à droite et à gauche le long de ses joues[.] [...] C'est la première fois qu'on le voit tout nu le cou de Valerie Borge, alors on se rend compte qu'on n'aime pas les cheveux longs, que ça fait sale par-dessus les vêtements, que c'est seulement bien quand ils sont tirés en avant par leur poids et qu'ils dégagent la nuque longue blonde de Valerie Borge. En fait ce sont les petits cheveux qu'elle a et le duvet qui

la font paraître blonde parce que les cheveux de Valerie Borge ne sont pas blonds, on voit qu'ils sont un peu mordorés. (O, 190-1)

Que ne suis-je Zeyna la très puissante celle qui secoue sa crinière et tient des foudres dans ses mains. J/e m/e vois sévèrement assise devant les tables servies en abondance refusant toutes les nourritures qu'elles m/e suggèrent réclamant les boissons de Ganymede la très absente. Enfin tu débouches en toute hâte rouge essoufflée [...] empressée de les servir toutes, mais c'est vers m/oi que d'abord tu t'arrêtes. J/e regarde la rigole de sueur entre tes seins et tes bras s'élevant la toison de tes aisselles illuminées par le soleil frisée et humide, j/e prends entre m/es mains ton torse droit où la taille n'est pas marquée, toi d'un coup de reins te dégageant de m/on contact [...], toi muette indifférente à peine souriant tu vas, tu viens sans bruit, tu n'embrasses pas m/a nuque quand derrière m/oi tu te déplaces. Un grognement m/e monte dans la gorge, un roulement se fait dans le ciel sans nuages, m/es foudres secouées te touchent au ventre au pubis tandis que tu t'abats le visage contre terre devant m/oi m/a très épouvantée m/a très troublée tes yeux fermés tes mains sur les oreilles, m/e criant grâce de telle sorte qu'enfin j/e peux t'élever à bout de bras jusqu'à ma bouche, qu'enfin j/e peux rire dans tes oreilles, qu'enfin j/e peux te retourner et te mordre aux creux des reins m/a déesse m/a très callypige m/on adorée. (C: 39-40)

Both texts are an extraordinarily potent evocation of desire not quite fulfilled; the first is more muted, at least on the surface - an expression of Sappho's subtle flame rather than Zeyna's thunder - but both feature profound disturbance in the loving, fetishising, treasuring subject. Catherine Legrand is in just as much torment as the mature lover of the *Corps lesbien*, and this is an unexpected by-product of Wittig's practice of piercing holes in her own text. This strategy stems from the theoretical desire to break with a certain representation and fiction of femininity, and it is worth recalling her explanation of this in 'On ne naît pas femme':

Nous avons été forcées dans nos corps et dans notre pensée de correspondre, trait pour trait, avec l'idée de nature qui a été établie pour nous. Contrefaites à un tel point que notre corps déformé est ce qu'ils appellent 'naturel', est ce qui est supposé exister comme tel avant l'oppression. Contrefaites à un tel point qu'à la fin l'oppression semble être une conséquence de cette 'nature' en nous, une nature qui n'est qu'une idée. Ce qu'une analyse matérialiste accomplit par le raisonnement, une société lesbienne l'effectue en fait: non seulement il n'y a pas de groupes naturel 'femmes' (nous lesbiennes en sommes une preuve vivante,

physique) mais en tant qu'individus aussi nous remettons en question 'la femme' laquelle n'est pour nous qu'un mythe[.] (1980b: 75-6)

It is Wittig's insistence on the negative - 'women' are *not* grounded in nature - that can help explain her representational strategies for bringing the lesbian to life on the page, and, indeed, in the case of *L'Opoponax*, for reclaiming the category of 'child' also: 'little girl' is similarly subjected to a rigorous analysis, with a rejection of the naturalising Freudian account of her sexuality, as we saw in my first chapter. It is the *petite amante* who becomes promoted, and she is born (borne) on a sea of negatives and understatements. As Wittig remarks in her recent paper:

[E]n écrivant *L'Opoponax*, je cherchais à trouver la phrase [...]. La litote sous toutes ses formes donne sa forme à ce livre. [...] Il n'y a pas de litotes dans *Les Guérillères*. Par contre on y trouve de très nombreuses prétérations. (1994: 120)

It is not difficult to see that the 'prétération', paraleipsis, is also a marked feature of her first and third novels, and has a definite erotic effect which Wittig's rather plain theories don't seem to anticipate (but maybe that's just a further instance of her wit and irony). Long hair is not loved, it looks dirty over clothing; Ganymede's waist is not marked, she does not kiss the back of Zeyna's neck. Thus are certain fictions concerning canonical beauty and godly power undermined. But the negatives force us to focus on the very thing denied, and the painful delay of the kiss, the hair only just tolerated when it parts to reveal Valerie Borge's nape become the textual equivalents of the rough texture Rodin features around or at the base of his statues: they stimulate our desire for the exquisite smoothness to which they seem to have just given birth - except of course that Wittig's erotic writing is never entirely smooth, there is always a certain level of restlessness. A tension exists between the desire to touch, hold and possess the beloved, implicit in the tactile quality of *petits cheveux* and *duvet blond* and explicit in Zeyna's moves towards Ganymede, and the element of contemplation - the wish to behold, evidenced by the very detailed

description of the neck and hair in the first extract and the divine context of the second. At the heart of all these crisscrossing textual brush-strokes lie the seeds of revelation and restoration: Valerie Borge may not be conventionally fair, but her hair carries the much richer description of 'mordorés', suggesting something glowing - the colours of autumn or of a bronze statue - whilst the straightness of Ganymede's torso gives way to a promise of satisfying curves lower down, in the reference to Greek statuary carried by the term 'callipyge'.

There are, however, crucial differences between the two texts in that the first is taken from a novel in which lesbian love is expressed with a degree of delicacy and caution (though of course the strength and violence of the *oponax* cannot be denied), whilst the second is within a fictional world in which much is posited as achieved: female lovers live, work, play and fight together in a utopian space, the islands, with Sappho raised to the status of goddess. Moreover, *L'Oponax's* erotic passages do not suggest the reciprocity afforded by the use of *j/e* and *tu* in the later text; there is a sense of the main protagonist pursuing and (only just) gaining another's love, rather than the extraordinary struggles, mergings and Sunderings which attempt to abolish the subject/object division in *Le Corps lesbien*. In the pages that follow, accordingly, I shall discuss each text in turn.

In the concluding section of *L'Oponax*, it is the process of *scintillement* which brings Catherine Legrand's passion for Valerie Borge to fever-pitch. Desire for the beloved's body is fuelled by the way the text frequently attempts to submerge or even erase it. The writing carries a wealth of images: the school year and holidays (254), travel (255), a flickering black-and-white, silent film (257-260), preparations for a religious procession (260-263), a school play (265-6), trips and finally a funeral, none of which could be termed the stuff of erotic writing. Yet all these contexts are electrified by the nature of the love they both conceal and promote. In the opening lines of the section,

this electrification is achieved by such a degree of abrasiveness - of positing only to retract - that the text almost implodes:

On dit, mon enfant ma soeur songe à la douceur d'aller là-bas vivre ensemble aimer à loisir aimer et mourir au pays qui te ressemble. On dit qu'il n'y a pas de rentrée où les marronniers ont une odeur triste où on ne regarde que le vert des tilleuls. On dit qu'il n'y a pas de rentrée où du groupe où on est on regarde les figures des autres groupes. Si les allées sont ratissées, si on a rangé les brouettes, les fourches, les balais à gazon, s'il n'y a pas de feuilles par terre, s'il n'y a pas de fleurs, si le sol du préau est sans poussière, on dit qu'on ne le voit pas. (254)

The use of Baudelaire instantly problematizes the question of setting: the love that concerns Wittig and torments her young heroine does *not* have a readily recognisable mirror called 'landscape'. The almost incomprehensible account of the *rentrée*, marked by an unseen and unsaid that nevertheless wants to become visible and spoken, but must not and cannot, indicates the pressure under which the whole narrative becomes placed as it enters an erotic domain traditionally defined as 'that which dares not speak its name'. The love between Catherine Legrand and Valerie Borge may be set in a girls' school, but at this point of the book the landscape becomes strange, alien, an anti-representation; the intense emotion generated by the love forces seasons, places, people to be fragmented, shuffled around, like leaves in a storm. It is an unsettled and unsettling reading experience, forcing us to focus on the problematic absence of the passionately-desired beloved, and making her flickering appearances all the more precious:

On dit que Valerie Borge a les mains les jambes la figure d'un brun luisant, que Valerie Borge porte un chemisier blanc sous la blouse, que Valerie Borge n'a pas encore retiré le pullover de laine qu'on garde tout l'hiver. On dit qu'on est en avril, que les fleurs sont tendres aux arbres ou bien que les fleurs les recouvrent. On dit qu'on est en octobre, qu'on repousse du pied les fleurs qui tombent. On dit qu'on marche en tenant Véronique Legrand par la main. On dit qu'on est l'opoponax. On dit qu'on descend la colline en courant. On dit qu'on cherche des musiques pour les poèmes qu'on connaît. On dit qu'on attend des lettres de Valerie Borge. (254)

In contrast to the negatives of the opening lines, Valerie Borge - with her glowing skin, a quality that is one of the hallmarks of Wittigian

eroticism - is elevated almost to the status of goddess, only glimpsed in stages but definitely the centre of the lover's universe: it is her clothing which marks the seasons and seems to generate them, causing scenes from the past to flicker upon Catherine Legrand's consciousness, almost as if she were dying. This is passion indeed; when the two are finally reunited after a summer break, the spasmodic rhythm of the writing suggests the world-creating nature of the event: 'On ne sait pas si Valerie Borge va venir, on se demande si Valerie Borge va venir, elle vient, on la voit passer le portail, quelqu'un marche à côté d'elle avec des valises, quelqu'un monte les marches du perron à côté d'elle, quelqu'un l'embrasse et s'en va' (256). There are seven distinct scenes, flashing upon the page like slides upon a screen, with brief, dark gaps in between: the commas; borrowing an image from another age and a different technology, suggested by the term 'le portail', the scenes are like the mediaeval carvings set in the arches of a church doorway, featuring the seven days of creation, there to teach and inspire the crowd of those passing under them. Seen in this light, the sentence describing Valerie Borge's arrival might suggest a redemptive vision of the world as source of creation and by extension of the mother's body, a post-Fall restoration of the covenant whereby the seven days of creation are transformed by the advent of the female lover into the seven colours of the lesbian rainbow. But this (re)discovery of each other as equals - mother and daughter, lovers together - is far from serene:

On court à la rencontre de Valerie Borge. Valerie Borge et Catherine Legrand se retrouvent dans la première cour près du perron, on se bouscule, on se frappe sur les bras, on s'entraîne. Valerie Borge et Catherine Legrand se mettent à se battre. On les voit rouler dans la poussière l'une sur l'autre, se tirailler se pousser essayer de se dégager, Valerie Borge et Catherine Legrand sont corps à corps[.] (256)

This is the direct forerunner of the sparring matches of *Le Corps lesbien*, a re-enactment of early fantasies of aggression against the mother, whose body is so maddeningly elusive and fragmentary, and at the same time a *transposition* of such fantasies to the world of the companion lovers - this is what makes this aggressive episode so

different from, say, the much younger Catherine Legrand's attack by 'la grosse petite fille qui s'appelle Brigitte parce qu'elle est grosse' (9-10), where the little girl was in mortal danger from a monstrous mother-figure. But the most important thing to be said about this extract is that the two *amantes* are flexing their muscles together, equally, the symmetry of their bodies conveyed by the expression 'corps à corps': the meeting-point of love and war, since it means both a fight and an erotic encounter in French. This is indeed the *lieu de l'action*, the only moment when the girls' active erotic contact is concretely portrayed. What makes this revelation astonishing and innovatory among modern lesbian texts is its openness, its honesty and frankness; yet it is not at all sexually explicit, constituting a quite different reading experience from Violette Leduc's portrayal, in *La Bâtarde* which was published the same year as *L'Opoponax*, of two young *pensionnaires*' first nights together:

La nuit et le ciel ne voulaient pas de nous. Vivre à l'air libre, c'était souiller le dehors. (90)

Je me glissai dans le lit. J'avais eu froid, j'aurais chaud. Je me raidis, je craignis de froisser sa toison. Elle me forçait, elle m'allongeait sur elle: Isabelle voulait l'union dans nos épidermes. Je récitais mon corps sur le sien, je baignais mon ventre dans les arums de son ventre, j'entrais dans un nuage. Elle frôla mes hanches, elle lança des flèches étranges. (91)

Isabelle buvait au sein droit, au sein gauche. Je buvais avec elle, je m'allaitais de ténèbres quand sa bouche s'éloignait. (93)

- Il ne faudra pas crier, dit Isabelle.

Je croisai les bras sur mon visage, j'écoutai encore sous mes yeux clos.

Deux bandits entrèrent. Ils m'opprimaient, ils voulaient, ma chair ne voulait pas. (94)

In contrast to Violette and Isabelle's trysts, the *Opoponax* lovers' contact takes place in the open air, and there is no sense at all of their love soiling the environment. No metaphors in the Wittig, either; the girls fight, they bite the dust, are portrayed together in their movements, and that is all. Moreover, there is no domination of one by

the other. The key difference, of course, is that Wittig chooses *not* to portray what Catherine Legrand and Valerie Borge do in bed, focussing instead on their place in the world, their need to fight it and to fight for it. In that sense, the eroticism of *L'Opoponax* is partly utopian, its strangeness a deliberate tactic to highlight how much representation needs to change, away from maternal and phallic metaphors, in order to account for and to *posit* the companion lovers' erotics, openly expressed.

'Il nous faut', writes Wittig in her foreword to *La Passion*, 'que cela nous plaise ou non, nous constituer nous-mêmes, sortir comme de nulle part, être nos propres légendes dans notre vie même, nous faire nous-mêmes êtres de chair aussi abstraites que des caractères de livre ou des images peintes' (1982: 16). The building of a legend, Wittig's attempt to shift Catherine Legrand's desire for Valerie Borge into abstract realms whilst at the same time conveying the reality of the flesh and of the terrible pleasure it evokes, is nowhere stronger than in the passage which could serve as a *mise en abyme* for the erotic sparring-match featured just now: the staging of the *Odyssey*.

On dit qu'on est sur le théâtre qu'on répète. On dit que ma mère de saint Hippolyte a choisi un passage de l'Odyssée, que c'est l'arrivée d'Ulysse à Ithaque. On dit que Catherine Legrand fait le lecteur, que Valerie Borge est Pénélope [...]. On dit qu'on entend la musique réclamée par Ulysse après la tuerie qu'il a faite. On dit que Catherine Legrand attend Valerie Borge dans les coulisses qu'elle est rejointe par elle qu'elle l'embrasse sur la joue. On dit qu'à cause de la musique on ne regarde pas le sang sur les sièges ni la cervelle collée contre le bois des tables. Ma mère de saint Hippolyte dit que c'est la principale action de l'Odyssée parce que [...] tout ce qu'on sait des personnages d'Ulysse de la guerre de Troie des périples des retours, c'est des gens assis devant des tables d'hôtes qui les racontent [...]. On dit que Valerie Borge a les jambes cachées par le peplos, qu'elle s'humecte les lèvres pour les faire briller, que le lecteur debout sur le côté de la scène dit, il dit, en regardant les lèvres de Pénélope. (265-6)

The two *petites amantes* are so deeply hidden that for most of this description they almost disappear, acting out a text that is in itself only indirectly known, and in fragments. Yet they are also very powerful, in creative dialogue with the nun (Hippolyte, as we know, was

an Amazon), the subtle flame of their love arguably the generative source of the whole production. Just as their fight in the playground was *la principale action* of the novel if this is seen as a love-story, so they are invited to convey Ulysses' butchery upon his return to Ithaca because it is the only thing that is directly enacted. By a process of collage, the girls' kiss is placed in the centre of this moment of the plot, so we deduce that it is the centre of their new universe - a complete shattering, not only of Valerie/Pénélope's suitors, but of the body as we know it: the gory mess which the music attempts to mask (another *paraleipsis*) also stands for the feeling Catherine Legrand may be experiencing, under the impact of the kiss and the music, that her body (both her *siège* and her head) is exploding. This fantasy, couched in very concrete anatomical terms, announces the outrageous erotics of *Le Corps lesbien*, as does the complex, often oblique viewpoint of the lesbian lover, who in this text watches Valerie Borge's lips with delectation, within the not entirely safe cover of a triple 'on dit'.

Part of Wittig's genius lies in her ability to convey, simultaneously, exultation and distress, within a strong, carefully-controlled text. In the extract above we witnessed a violent homecoming, in which Catherine Legrand's kiss both built this home and placed her at risk. The dangers and pleasures of her ways of seeing, of her attitude towards her beloved, can be even more clearly analysed by listening to the narrative voice of the following passage:

On dit que Valerie Borge est debout sur les collines que des rivières coulent qu'on entend, on dit qu'il y a des moutons qui avancent, que les nuages sont pommelés, on dit que le soleil est blanc, on dit que le soleil est bleu pâle, on dit qu'on voit Valerie Borge les cheveux serrés debout sur les collines, on dit qu'on la voit petite comme de loin quand on approche, on dit qu'on lui voit la peau de la figure avec un grain grossi comme quand on regarde de tout près, on dit qu'on voit Valerie Borge debout sur les collines comme si on était couché à ras de terre. On dit que Valerie Borge est debout sur les collines, qu'on la voit qu'on la regarde, qu'on entend l'eau des rivières couler, qu'on entend les cloches des moutons, qu'on la regarde. (276-7)

The narrative voice puts itself in question by highlighting the importance of the angle of vision in perception and, indeed, by the obsessive repetition of 'on dit', which connotes rumour and supposition rather than certainty. Within this context, the repetition of 'on la regarde' illustrates not so much the possession of the object, its imprisonment in the gaze, as a desire to discover her in her movement and her freedom whilst knowing that she is always slightly out of reach. This strategy is much closer to the way a believer might attempt to describe a goddess, and draws from the remembered or imagined experience of being a very small child in the presence of a gigantic mother, with the transformations of her body caused by variations in distance: a source of fascination and intense speculation.

This giant's relationship with the objects around it is noted, but they act as supporting elements for her activities, and do not 'become' her; no human attributes are granted to the hills, the rivers, the clouds: they are put on the page as simply and objectively as possible, just stated as being visible or audible. In particular, Valerie Borge's representation distinguishes her from the hills on which she stands; she does not merge into them, becoming conflated into one 'landscape as Woman, Woman as landscape' description. The narrative voice, bringing to life the nature of Catherine Legrand's gaze, does not lose her beloved to the maternal feminine, but instead restores the grain of her skin and her stature, seeing her ultimately standing proud of the hills, distinct but in companionship with them as it were: 'debout sur les collines comme si on était couché à ras de terre'. We can contrast this with the woman described and desired in Baudelaire's 'La Géante':

Du temps que la nature en sa verve puissante
Concevait chaque jour des enfants monstrueux,
J'eusse aimé vivre auprès d'une jeune géante,
Comme aux pieds d'une reine un chat voluptueux.

J'eusse aimé voir son corps fleurir avec son âme
Et grandir librement dans ses terribles jeux;
Deviner si son coeur couve une sombre flamme
Aux humides brouillards qui nagent dans ses yeux;

Parcourir à loisir ses magnifiques formes;
Ramper sur les versants de ses genoux énormes,
Et parfois en été, quand les soleils malsains,

Lasse, la font s'étendre à travers la campagne,
Dormir nonchalamment à l'ombre de ses seins,
Comme un hameau paisible au pied d'une montagne.

(*Les Fleurs du mal*, Paris : Gallimard (1961), 34)

The narrative voice is expressed by a *je* which, whilst no stranger to the metamorphoses of metaphor - he becomes cat, hamlet -, comes across as much more authoritative than Wittig's *on*. The poet takes possession of the *géante* who is in a very real sense his creation, the fruit of his desire. Within that fantasy, he posits her as the Other: monstrous child of nature, the unknowable queen of his lust; and she merges with the landscape, becoming conquerable territory in the assimilation of her knees with mountain slopes, her breasts with munificent restful hills. The poet names Woman as landscape and wishes to become the master and consumer of both, in a bid to return to the mother's body in all its terrifying and deeply attractive ambivalence.

In the Wittig, the treatment of the mother's body can be said to rest upon contiguity, the laws of coexistence or companionship, rather than the metaphorical relations present in the Baudelaire. This is part of Wittig's desire to return us to 'the undisturbed use of language, as it is in childhood when words are magic, when words are set bright and colourful in the kaleidoscope of the world, with its many revolutions in the consciousness as one shakes it' (1986: 69). The refusal of metaphor, the escalation of the use of *on* and the tendency to list and repeat a deliberately limited range of expressions ('on la regarde'), seem to me to be part of this strategy. But the tension comes precisely from the very impossibility of returning to the 'undisturbed', to a mother-language not riven with dissensions, differences, and ambiguities. Earlier, I used the word 'obsessive' to describe Wittig's repetition of 'on dit': such is the determination to bring Valerie Borge to life concretely, without recourse to adjectives or similes, just to show her

as 'there', that the viewing lens - Catherine Legrand's gaze - is placed under considerable pressure, as if its own existence were under threat; hence the image of the *on* lying not just on the ground, but almost flattened ('à ras de terre'). If Wittig's prose is evaluated as a showcase for her theory, then this representational pressure - tantamount to a crisis of survival for the beleaguered subject - is a problem. But as creative writing, it has immense power: passion is contained, muzzled, only just restrained, in the very rhythm of the prose, so reminiscent of a beating heart, and what Bataille calls the *terreur sacrée* of eroticism - the awe before the beloved, the terror at the possibility of losing her - is in that intimate contact with the ground of the text. The many shifts in consciousness suggested by the writing succeed in keeping open a sense of titanic struggle, close in spirit to Darius Milhaud's *Création du Monde* where, similarly, the melody is repeatedly dragged over asperities, creating a tense but beautiful coexistence of order and chaos, rather than the mastery of the latter by the former.

Throughout *L'Opoponax*, the representation of the nature of Catherine Legrand's love has tended to highlight its conflicts and turbulence. At the very end, though, it is allowed to express a quiet, tentative confidence as, on yet another journey, the girls find rest and companionship in each other:

Valerie Borge dort à côté de Catherine Legrand. Sa tête est inclinée, ses cheveux sont étalés autour d'elle, on voit que sa bouche s'entr'ouvre, on voit les lèvres sur les dents. Un cahot fait que Valerie Borge se réveille en sursaut, qu'elle se dresse sur le siège en regardant Catherine Legrand à côté d'elle en lui souriant en laissant sa tête rouler sur l'épaule de Catherine Legrand qui lui prend les mains et l'installe contre elle. (278)

Tout le monde se réveille dans l'autocar. [...] Valerie Borge fait semblant de dormir, la tête dans le cou de Catherine Legrand. Catherine Legrand voit en l'écartant d'elle qu'elle ouvre les yeux, qu'elle sourit, qu'elle referme les yeux. Catherine Legrand sent que Valerie Borge lui presse les mains. (279)

This description has some of the hallmarks of the world of the companion-lovers: the girls are side by side, equals, and their union is described as being through a part of the body they both share - their hands. We are reminded of the first description of Catherine Legrand and her mother together: 'Elle tient la main de la mère qui pousse la porte' (7), a description which, as I argued in my first chapter, is an attempt to represent the mother/daughter couple as companions, not as lonely figures struggling to come to terms with the effects of lack, at the expense of each other. In many ways this ending offers a redemptive vision of the mother, seen as one of a female collective of at least two; to repeat the quote from the *Brouillon*: 'Cette filiation fait des filles les amantes des mères et des mères les amantes des filles' (96).

Valerie Borge Catherine Legrand se remettent l'une contre l'autre quand elles ont fini de boire le café. Valerie Borge Catherine Legrand ne parlent pas. Tout le monde autour d'elles parle fort. (280)

Why do they not speak? On one level, the answer stems from their own 'ordre et beauté': they are fulfilled, and fall quiet - a suitable response to the slightly banal account of their last appearance. However, the use of the negative is a typically Wittigian strategy. Valerie Borge and Catherine Legrand's companionship has another dimension to their schoolmates', and the fact they do not talk is both symptom and triumph. Symptom because, as Wittig writes, lesbians live in a world where 'nous n'existons que passées sous silence' (1982:16); triumph because, after all, the text can afford at this stage to rest upon its laurels by featuring two battle-weary, tired-but-happy heroines: *L'Opoponax* as a whole has borne witness to the power of love between women. We have seen Wittig use and incorporate stories, poems and legends into the mundane and everyday, shifting our perception of it and allowing us to glimpse the Amazons' islands through the drab setting of a Catholic girls' school, which has become surprisingly eroticised in the process. The girls' silence, then, hints at the perennial oppression of their love, but speaks volumes about the regeneration such love

releases in writing and in the world. Moreover, if *L'Opoponax* is viewed as an autobiographical book, the contemplative nature of the girls' last appearance on the page hints at the integration of love for another woman in Wittig's life and project. There is a sense, ultimately, that the couple formed by Catherine Legrand and Valerie Borge are safe within her corpus, together with a reclaimed childhood and adolescence. It is peace, lilac and golden, that has the last word:

On dit, les soleils couchants revêtent les champs les canaux la ville entière d'hyacinthe et d'or le monde s'endort dans une chaude lumière. On dit, tant je l'aimais qu'en elle encore je vis. (281)

Safety, peace and gentleness cannot, however, be considered to be the hallmarks of *Le Corps lesbien*; if any of its own expressions defines its eroticism, it is the *double saut périlleux* which one of the lovers attempts during a lively festival, full of feats of daring (188). Indeed, the opening passage of the novel functions as a kind of changing-room in which we are asked to deposit all preconceptions we may have about love:

Dans cette géhenne dorée adorée noire fais tes adieux m/a très belle m/a très forte m/a très indomptable m/a très savante m/a très féroce m/a très douce m/a plus aimée, à ce qu'elles nomment l'affection la tendresse ou le gracieux abandon. Ce qui a cours ici, pas une ne l'ignore, n'a pas de nom pour l'heure, qu'elles le cherchent si elles y tiennent absolument, qu'elles se livrent à un assaut de belles rivalités, ce dont j/e m/e désintéresse assez complètement tandis que toi tu peux à voix de sirène supplier quelqu'une aux genoux brillants de te venir en aide. Mais tu le sais, pas une ne pourra y tenir à te voir les yeux révulsés les paupières découpées tes intestins jaunes fumant étalés dans le creux de tes mains ta langue crachée hors de ta bouche les longs filets verts de ta bile coulant sur tes seins, pas une ne pourra soutenir l'ouïe de ton rire bas frénétique insistant. L'éclat de tes dents ta joie ta douleur la vie secrète de tes viscères ton sang tes artères tes veines tes habitacles caves tes organes tes nerfs leur éclatement leur jaillissement la mort la lente décomposition la puanteur la dévoration par les vers ton crâne ouvert, tout lui sera également insupportable. (7)

Is this an erotic text? Yes, since the depiction of passionate encounters between two protagonists is its leading characteristic; no, or

at least probably not, if we choose our own pleasure as guide. As Jan Montefiore writes of the whole novel, '[t]his verbal eroticism is so violently physical as to prevent the book from being in any straightforward sense a pleasurable text' (1987: 156). But we are certainly in a new erotic territory, and it is helpful to suspend our 'no' and to see what happens if we posit that, yes, the reading experience is erotic. What is this book attempting to do to and with love? This is the question which the rest of this chapter will address. But, first of all, let us return to the opening passage and its challenges.

The text urges us, as well as *tu*, to say a number of farewells. At the most obvious level, this is directed against heterosexual love; in Dianne Chisholm's words,

Lesbian body language literally mutilates the idealizing, specularizing, objectivizing 'I love you' of conventional heterosexual lovers' discourse. An eviscerating lesbian eroticism shatters any illusion of Platonic love or aesthetic sublimation. (Chisholm 1993: 205)

Such a farewell has in many ways, however, already been expressed and its textual consequences mapped out by the time the text opens, as is suggested by its very title; *Le Corps lesbien* takes place within an entirely female context and does not thematically engage with heterosexuality. *J/e*'s injunctions to *tu* in the opening prose poem, then, are first and foremost concerned with the representation of love between women. What we are asked to witness, in place of love and tenderness - the lascivious sensuality of Colette's and Leduc's sapphism, for example - is an awe-inspiring display of, and challenge to, many of the bodies that have formed the subject of this thesis: the sadeian, the spiritual, the sisterly, the collective and the maternal. There is certainly a radical break with the notion of 'vanilla sex' as described by Pat Califia: 'Les lesbiennes sont particulièrement portées sur cette tendance sentimentale. [...] Les femmes 'à la vanille' s'envoient des fleurs, des poèmes ou des bonbons, ou bien elles échangent des bagues' (Califia 1981:

33, quoted in Braidotti 1983: 66). Thus we hear a voice that seems to carry the icy-cold authority of Sade issuing a series of orders around a mutilated body that becomes the basis both of discourse and of social organisation, until we realise that the speech is aimed directly at that body which, despite its injuries, is not only alive but living, and indeed somewhat superhuman. What suggests itself then, rather than Sade, is martyrdom occurring in the name of a deeply-revered deity, unknown and as yet unnamed - in other words female: part goddess, part demon. The language suggests a necessary sacrifice to a higher order, carried out in a twinning of horror and delight and enabling *tu* to achieve ecstasy; but this manifests itself as the turning inside out - the green bile, the intestines - and outside in (her eyes) which is the grammar of demonic possession, as I mentioned in my seventh chapter. Thus are 'high' and 'low', heavenly and infernal, the 'inside' of the individual and the 'outside' which marks her contact with the world, brought into violent conflict, unbearable for the onlookers: already we have an inkling of the tensions which will occur in some of the prose poems between *j/e* and *tu* on the one hand, and the collective of *amantes* on the other. Furthermore, this extract dramatises a woman-to-woman contact which draws from and problematises the earliest struggles with the mother, and it is this aspect that provides the most revealing path through the minefield of the text's erotic bodies.

The *j/e* and *tu* couple, which features in the book's one hundred and ten prose poems, has rightly been seen by Jan Montefiore as an attempt, not consciously articulated by Wittig, to bring into being a female Imaginary realm, as defined by Irigaray:

[I]f this Imaginary realm or mode of being is to be incarnated in any specifically woman-centred relationships, the participants must be either the original Imaginary dyad of mother-and-baby, or lesbian lovers. *The Lesbian Body*, intentionally or not, includes both, precisely because its representation of self-and-others engages with the earliest and most primitive Imaginary fantasies. (Montefiore 1987: 157)

Montefiore goes on to say that these fantasies are predominantly oral, and drawing upon Kleinian theory writes that 'the book is full of the passion to possess and devour'. We can indeed select the following examples among the many on offer:

tu prends le coeur dans ta bouche, longuement tu lèches, ta langue jouant avec les artères coronaires[.] (94)

Sur m/on ordre elles apprêtent m/es membres sectionnés m/es bras m/es cuisses m/es jambes dont les chairs sont retirées avec précision et longuement bouillies, elles te les présentent entourées de sauces diverses sur des plats brillants chaque mets portant pour te plaire un nom différent. Tu les consommes volontiers les uns après les autres sans que tu les reconnaisse sans que leurs appellations te frappent d'étonnement. (118)

J/e commence par le bout de tes doigts, j/e mâche les phalanges, j/e broie les métacarpes les carpes, j//humecte ton pignet, j/e désarticule avec beaucoup de délicatesse le cubitus, j/e fais pression sur le trochlée, j//arrache j/e détache le biceps de l'humérus, j/e le mange, j/e m/e repais de toi m/a très délectable, il arrive que m/es mâchoires claquent, j/e t'avale, j/e déglutis. (137)

Freud's statement that, among 'female inverts', 'there seems to be a special preference for contact with the mucous membrane of the mouth' (1977: 59) is opened up and made to proliferate as the devourings explore the body and its languages. Thus the heart, symbol of romantic love, goes back to being an anatomical organ, plucked out and licked with its attachments; the equation between the sexual encounter and the notion of consummation, consumption, is given an ironic twist by the cannibalism portrayed in the second extract, whilst in the third we witness a mock anatomical lesson, in which the dry list of terms, which already break up the body according to the rules of patriarchal science, is moistened and broken down in a different way (just like a badly-set bone that has to be refractured in order to heal) by the action of the lover's mouth and jaws, to formulate a new language of the body. Moreover, the dimension of irony and mockery gives the extracts above a strong erotic charge. This requires some comment, as irony and mockery are not commonly associated with the erotic text: usually, these two

textual tones speak more of a wish to keep a certain degree of distance from a being or concept. In the Wittig however, they generate a particular kind of textual/sexual elegance which works both with and against the cannibalistic fantasies. The text seems to say: 'I want to eat you, but through my words, phrases and rhythms I also play with my knowledge of your body, by *pretending* to keep you at bay'; the ironic dimension prevents the creation of a picture exclusively dominated by engulfment, annihilation and absorption of/by the lover. Just enough ironic distance is introduced to keep desire not just alive, but incandescent. Likewise, the restraint in the expression of pleasure makes the few, carefully-chosen terms through which it is allowed to glimmer all the more powerful: 'longuement tu lèches', 'tu les consommes volontiers', 'avec beaucoup de délicatesse', 'j/e m/e repais de toi m/a très délectable' - sensuality oddly coupled with the grossness of the actions performed to restore the full magnitude of the fantasies: 'il arrive que m/es mâchoires claquent'. Indeed, on continuing our readings, we are faced with Wittig's ability and desire to convey how sensuous pleasure, encapsulated in her controlled, ironic prose, can explode at any moment into the stellar, the oceanic, the massive aspects of erotic experience and fantasy: thus after *tu's* meal in the second extract, her vomiting is described as relentless, endless, huge - once more we sense that the body in love is turning itself inside out. Wittigian eroticism can certainly not be *reduced* to the sensual and the ironic, even though it magnificently incorporates both dimensions - as in the passage where, all her nerves exposed in a grotesque parody of a delicate, lesbian sensuality, complete with gently falling rain, j/e declares: 'Pardonne si j/e ris, elle énerve elle énerve prodigieusement cette pluie, tandis que toi du plus fin bout de tes doigts tu m/e joues insensément' (63).

By using Klein's description of early sadism, we can see that with typical ambivalence the text both courts *and* attacks the mother - a dual process that is, as we have seen, a strong ingredient of Wittigian textual pleasure. The negative pole of the process, and indeed the whole

question of *Le Corps lesbien's* erotic violence, has not fully been discussed within a psychoanalytic framework; Ostrovsky (1991) describes its manifestations as part of the desire for total union with the beloved coupled with the fear of loss, but does not really explain why they take the form they do. This question needs exploring.

There is a double violence in the text: that which emanates from the pre-Oedipal phase and seeps into Wittig's representation of the *j/e-tu* couple, and that which stems from Wittig's theoretical desire to *erase* maternal representations altogether in order to bring the lesbian into existence. With this dual charge fuelling both the desire for and the erotic contact with the beloved, it is not surprising that the text should be marked by such aggression. Certainly Wittig's use of the mother-baby pair declares war, as we saw in the opening extract, upon any sense or hope of being cradled, reassured, soothed by the mouth's contact with the maternal breast, the source of the 'special preference' Freud saw in the lesbian's pleasure: her *gracieux abandon*. *J/e* and *tu* take turns exploring, exploding, reassembling each other in a dizzying assortment of encounters, well summarised by Elaine Marks: 'reminiscent at times of a *pas de deux*, at times of a boxing match, at times of a surgical operation' (1979: 376). Here, for example, are three extracts showing how the role of the hands is radically different from the gentle contact which was, in *L'Opoponax*, the hallmark of companionship:

J//ai avalé ton bras c'est temps clair mer chaude. Le soleil m/e rentre dans les yeux. Tes doigts se mettent en éventail dans mon oesophage, puis réunis s'enfoncent. [...] J/e suis enfoncée sans issue par toi, tu m/e plonges, tu m/e perfores, tu m//empales, je commence un voyage lent à l'extrême, j/e suis peuplée de rugissements[.] (59)

Ta main ton bras par la suite sont entrés dans m/a gorge, tu traverses m/on larynx, tu atteins m/es poumons, tu répertories m/es organes, tu m/e fais mourir de dix mille morts tandis que j/e souris[.] (108)

J/e découvre que ta peau peut être enlevée délicatement pellicule par pellicule, j/e tire, [...] j//arrive sous tes cheveux, m/es doigts en traversent la masse, j/e touche ton crâne, j/e le tiens avec tous

m/es doigts, [...] j/e te tiens tout entière à présent muette immobilisée tous cris bloqués dans ta gorge tes dernières pensées derrière tes yeux arrêtées dans m/es mains[.] (9)

The phantasy here is to invade the mother's body and steal its contents, or at least to hold on to them. Other texts show a desire to soil the inside of her body, by filling it with mud (76) or by feeding it with poisonous or repulsive food (17, 117-8); damage also occurs in numerous other ways: burning (30), drowning and suffocating (89), bleeding (99), and so on. These relate directly to the phantasies described by Klein, particularly in her 1930 paper on symbol formation, in which she makes the following important point:

It is my experience that in the phantasied attack on the mother's body a considerable part is played by the urethral and anal sadism which is very soon added to the oral and muscular sadism. In phantasy the excreta are transformed into dangerous weapons: wetting is regarded as cutting, stabbing, burning, drowning, while the faecal mass is equated with weapons and missiles. At a later stage [...] these violent modes of attack give place to hidden assaults by the most refined methods which sadism can devise, and the excreta are equated with poisonous substances. (1986: 96)

This helps to explain why, in the Wittig, the attacking mouth - sucking, biting, licking, chewing -, although very important as the basis of many phantasies, coexists with and often moves on to other forms of sadism. Earlier, however, I mentioned that the violence against the mother could also be explained by Wittig's desire to promote a lesbian representation at the expense of the maternal, and this double edge is clearly apparent in the following passage:

J'ai découvert sur tes bras sur tes épaules sur le haut de ton dos sur tes reins sur ton thorax les marques violettes tout en ordre sur la peau de ton corps. Toi tu ne les dissimules pas, tu ne portes pas tes mains paumes ouvertes sur les endroits touchés indiquant que l'une d'entre elles a jeté son dévolu sur toi. Tu te tiens tous tes muscles raidis face à m/oi un sourire irradiant de ta bouche sur toute ta figure m/e regardant. M/es doigts touchent les reliefs les uns après les autres, une enflure amplifiant les points de contact j/e les perçois. Une douleur m/e vient du bout de m/es doigts à m/es poignets se propageant le long de m/es bras jusqu'à m/a gorge faisant éclater m/a poitrine. C'est à ce moment que j/e crache une partie de m/on poumon droit masse molle et douce au fond de m/a gorge et à m/on palais. J/e le prends entre m/es

doigts, j/e tire, j/e l'arrache, j/e le tiens tout au-devant de m/es yeux rose pâle encore vivant, j/e le secoue, j/e l'applique, j/e l'écrase sur ta peau contre les traces à forme de perles rangées les unes à côté des autres. [...] J/e t'enduis sans relâche de m/on ciment vivant, j/e te berce à l'intérieur de m/es bras, j/e te porte, j//appuie m/es lèvres sur tes lèvres m/a langue te forçant à ouvrir la bouche, j/e t'introduis les derniers vestiges broyés de m/es poumons que tu avales[.] (105-6)

This text does two main things: it displays a *regression* to very early dyadic phantasies (the suffocating 'meal' of the last sentence, a grotesque parody of the kiss-of-life: j/e, the 'mother', feeds her 'child' with the organ of breath and life itself, and in so doing destroys both of them) and also dramatically features the power of jealousy which implies at least three people; indeed, it is the jealousy which tips j/e back into her primitive sadism. Montefiore is thus only partly right in her statement that in *Le Corps lesbien* 'there is no family present' (1987: 157). There may be no obvious paternal prohibition, but the collective takes up an ambivalent position in some of the prose poems: enabling and empowering, but also prohibitive, divisive, a threat to the two lovers. The jealousy j/e experiences abundantly illustrates that the *elles* who have a claim on *tu*'s time and affections are in a sense j/e's sisters, provoking intense feelings of sibling rivalry: a family indeed.

How does that collective of rivals, lesbian sisters, show its love for *tu*? By placing purple marks on her skin. These are euphemistically described as being *en forme de perles*, and their colour has positive connotations within Wittig's textuality. Yet they are undoubtedly bruises, radiantly borne by *tu*, the sign of allegiance to Sappho, the non-mother. No tenderness there: *jeter son dévolu* is cleverly chosen to imply the direction of desire from the collective to *tu* without a hint of sentimentality, turning the bruises not so much into stigmata - although the mystical register flickers - as into tribal marks. There is a strong triumph in an overcoming of the mother, which can be characterised as a taming of the bad breast and a suppression of the

good; another extract (70) presents a ritual underpinned by the same motive: *tu* is carried aloft, parts of her body marked by cosmetics or bound (not restrained) with leather straps which emphasise the bareness of her breasts and belly whilst leaving her movements free: the effect is of a triumphant warrior rather than a captured victim, and she resembles the breast-baring fighters of *Les Guérillères*. As the extract about the bruises abundantly displays, however, *j/e* does not share at all in the triumph: on the contrary, just like the *j/e* of the menstruation passage discussed in my last chapter (60-62), she experiences an intense regressive crisis at the sight of her beloved's integration into a ritual aimed at shifting the lesbian body away from the maternal in its reproductive and nurturing senses, a ritual which also has the effect of separating *j/e* from *tu*. It is striking that her fantasy shows her turning *tu* into a kind of doll, a grotesque parody of a baby whom she rocks in her arms, with the pulmonary tissue becoming a magic substance that could somehow negate the collective's impact by covering (healing?) the bruises; the description of the lung reminds one of the placenta through which the mother feeds and oxygenates her baby in the womb, and which is held in some societies to have magical powers. In other words, the warlike tribal rituals only partly succeed in their aim: on the one hand, they remove the lesbians from the 'compulsory heterosexuality' of the female body by suggesting and acting upon fresh meanings for their 'reproductive' organs; by this transformation of the body they provide the island-dwellers with new symbols and, in a virtuous circle, further reinforce the sociality which has given them second birth. On the other hand, ironically, this very same process of liberation from the reproductive body has an unexpected byproduct: each individual lover has the space to remember and experience - usually very painfully - some of the early conflicts with the mother, and to get back in touch with the knotty issue of her own passion for her *and* her intense sadistic impulses towards her. At this stage, it is useful to take a few steps back from *Le Corps lesbien's* sex-segregated world and to look at what happens to the little girl's sadism, within the Oedipal family structure.

I am indebted here to Marion Bower's 1986 paper, in which she examines the relationship of women to pornography, and in particular the reasons why women might find such material arousing. Drawing upon Kleinian theory, she describes as I have in this thesis the nature and reasons for the earliest sadistic phantasies against the mother, and the dread of her retaliation. She notes that these are psychic phenomena which are common to both sexes, but then goes on to examine what happens to the girl's sadism when, or rather if, she changes the object of her desire from her mother to her father. For Klein, this occurs in response to oral frustration by the mother: the girl turns to her father because of her search for a 'good object'. Commenting on *Envy and Gratitude*, Bower writes:

In [an] 'ideal' situation the little girl identifies with the mother. The relationship with the mother is not abandoned and the relationship with the father benefits from the positive and more sexually mature emotions transferred from the mother.

The relationship with the father therefore inherits aspects of the relationship with the mother. (Bower 1986: 48-9)

Bower then refers to Janine Chasseguet-Smirgel's work on female sexuality (1981):

In the change of object the bad aspects of the relationship with the mother are split off and remain with her. The good aspects become transferred to the father, who is maintained as an idealized object. This maintenance involves a de-fusion of sexual and aggressive instincts [...].

The destructive forces expressed in sexual sadism do not disappear in women. However, with the de-fusion of sexual and aggressive instincts the destructive force is free to express itself internally against the self, as Freud suggested. The manifestations of this are what is called 'female masochism'. The existence of female masochism is not inconsistent with the simultaneous existence of female sadism, as in effect one aspect of the self seeks painful experiences for the other. (49)

But what happens when the little girl does not change her object? Bower makes passing reference to this question by suggesting that lesbians might be aroused by the kind of images promoted by pornography, in

which women are portrayed as sexual objects (47). Pursuing her line of thought, one can suggest that lovers of women may be particularly free to get in touch with the sadistic impulses of their early struggles and indeed, rather than turn them inside and against themselves, may choose to enact them with their partners, through sadomasochistic rituals. In *Le Corps lesbien*, Wittig alludes to the issue of lesbian S/M at many levels; very early on, for example, we find a dizzying array of instruments of torture:

j/e suis le fouet tressé qui flagelle la peau, j/e suis le courant électrique qui foudroie et tétanise les muscles, j/e suis le bâillon qui bâillonne la bouche, j/e suis le bandeau qui cache les yeux, j/e suis les liens qui retiennent les mains, j/e suis la bourreleuse forcenée galvanisée par les tortures et tes cris m//emportent d'autant plus m/a plus aimée que tu les contiens. (8)

It is remarkable that *j/e becomes* the whip, the electric current, and so on: this further underlines the link with the infant's phantasy that it is damaging the mother's body with its own, parts of which become dangerous, transformed into instruments of torture (the teeth, for instance). Elsewhere, we find instances of abduction and coercion (55, 75), and evidence of violent sex:

Tu obéis strictement aux règles de politesse de l'île quand tu viens t'étendre auprès de m/oi. C'est pourquoi m/a délectable j/e procède avec la plus grande jubilation quand j//arme m/es doigts de m/es ongles de fer, quand j/e te labore le dos et les reins, quand enfin tu m/e fais face en criant m/on nom. (56)

Tu talonnes m/on ventre pour m/e faire avancer. J/e reste immobile. Tu m/e frappes plus fort. J/e résiste j/e m/e raidis. Tu armes tes talons alors et tes jambes. Tu m/e pressures de toute ta force voix stridente, tu lacères m/es flancs de tes nombreuses pointes d'acier, tu les écorches, tu les mets à vif, tu vas et tu viens avec colère de haut en bas, tu cries, tu armes tes mains, tu m/e labores le cou, tu m/e mords à la hauteur des trapèzes, le sang coule sur m/a peau par tous ses orifices, des mouches par centaines s'y collent m/e dévorant. J/e alors ainsi harcelée dans tous m/es endroits j/e m//élance dans un galop furieux [...]. Tu m/e tiens très étroitement serrée, tandis que noire des pieds à la tête le noir emplissant m/es yeux j/e m/e lance tandis que tu enlèves les armes à tes talons à tes jambes à tes mains à tes bras, tandis que tu glisses avec précaution tes membres dans m/es plaies. (57)

The second extract brings to mind Nicole Brossard's words in *L'Amèr*, 'J'ai tué le ventre et je l'écris', in its relentless attack on the body, beginning with the maternal belly; indeed, the death instinct lurks in the reference to the colour black which fills *j/e*, whilst *tu*'s invasion of her body is graphically illustrated by the last few words. The mother/lover's body (its speed, its power, its movement) is stolen by *tu*, and a phantasy is suggested whereby the daughter/lover re-enters her mother, not vaginally, but through the wounds inflicted all over her body by her passion. This connects with Rosi Braidotti's views:

Mouvement des femmes. Mouvement des mères et des filles. Des soeurs. Corps Maternel nourrissant, menaçant, objet perdu, cherché, convoité. C'est à ce corps que s'adressent la provocation et la demande S/M. (Braidotti 1983: 75)

It is quite possible to argue that Wittig's text engages with the maternal body - and disturbs the women's movement - in rather the same way. She takes the risk of suggesting that sadomasochistic rituals figure in her desired sociality, and portrays an open society glorifying and living through and thanks to these rituals. But alongside them, underpinning them, lies a painful quest, an individual one. In this regard it is important to distinguish two kinds of sadomasochism: on the one hand, the (relatively) careful rituals of the island, where bruises for example are applied *en ordre*, the body adorned and bound according to a specific pattern; on the other, *j/e-tu*'s often frenzied exchanges of power, injuries, sensations. Both have a common source - the engagement with the mother's body - but the first is ritualised, collectively worked out and expressed, whilst the second is freer and riskier: often, *j/e*'s passion for *tu* comes across as a maverick force, at odds with the laws of the island which in effect attempt to bar the expression of her love for another woman in any other terms but their own. We have in previous chapters encountered *j/e* as pariah: in the Golgotha passage, in the menstruation ritual; in this prose poem, she is demonised:

J/e n'ai pas droit de cité dans le lieu où tu vis. Elles ont façonné un mannequin suivant m/a figure. A présent il brûle sur l'

vaste place, j/e le vois, [...] la fumée m//enveloppe à travers les nuages couleur soufre, j'aperçois la foule très compacte, j//entend les espèces de chants joyeux qui leur montent aux lèvres. Elles ont dénudé leur poitrine en signe de contentement. Tu n'es nulle part [...] ou bien tu es étroitement surveillée détenue dans quelque place contrainte de les écouter dans leur chant de mort où membres à membres elles m/e déchirent. [...] Mais dans le plus secret de m/on corps j//écoute un feulement doux et furieux, ton nom m/e parcourt et m//enorgueillit, pourvu que toi m/a chérie tu m/e retiennes et m/e recèles en toi, j/e vis à jamais dans la mémoire des siècles, ainsi soit-il. (150-151)

J/e is executed as a criminal or witch; the nature of her variance from the norm is not specified, but the text suggests that *tu* has gone over to, or been captured by women who resemble the Mothers, the city-dwellers of the *Brouillon*. Certainly they see *j/e* as a threat, whereas she sees herself as the holder of the truth, as a keeper of the secret name, which can and will live on through ages of chaos. The outcome of this passage is thus more promising than that of an earlier section (34-5), where similarly *j/e* is 'frappée d'interdit dans la cité où tu vis', exiled from the (maternal) walled stronghold, and in excruciating pain because she feels *tu* has rejected her. Perhaps these exclusions form part of the ritual, too: after all, in the passage above, it is an effigy that is burnt, whilst in the earlier scene *j/e* wonders if 'c'est temps où pour m/oi tu es impitoyable m/e mettant à dure épreuve te servant d'elles pour m//empêcher de te rejoindre' (35). In some societies, there are initiation rites which place the candidate in the wilderness, away from the tribe, all the better to welcome her back - indeed is symbolised in the passage describing 'la cérémonie des vulves perdues et retrouvées':

Les vulves sont figurées par des papillons [...]. Comme toi m/a retrouvée m/a très chérie les papillons reviennent d'un long voyage [...]. Les prêtresses leur souhaitent bienvenue et longue vie. (151)

Certainly this careful inscription of exclusion - a kind of lesbian *da* - would partly account for the constant re-affirmation of island and the fact that the book ends on a joyful note (a festival). But we should not underestimate the despairing rage that can come across to us as *j/e* laments her exclusion, particularly of course when she is cut

of *tu's* affections *and* out of collective life and rituals; the physical and emotional responses are extreme, often portrayed as akin to demonic possession where the body is scrambled, turned inside out: 'J/e reste assise en pleurant dans le fossé [...], j/e m/e roule dans les orties, tout m/on corps se couvre de cloques, une sueur de sang traverse m/es pores rougissant l'herbe tout autour' (35); this restores to us the intensity of childhood rages, when indeed our body seemed about to explode from the internal build-up of frustration, triggered by perceived maternal absence or neglect - a terrifying experience linked to terrifying feelings, that may be buried in later life but never entirely disappear. That is perhaps why in *Le Corps lesbien* there seems to be one of the Amazons, or possibly a part of each of them, that cannot ever feel totally included, wholly safe within the collective; this anxiety connects with that expressed in the following passage:

Il n'y a pas trace de toi. Ton visage ton corps ta silhouette sont perdus. Il y a un vide à la place de toi. Il y a dans m/on corps une pression au niveau du ventre au niveau du thorax. Il y a un poids dans m/a poitrine. Il y a des phénomènes à l'origine d'une douleur intense. A partir d'eux j/e te quiers mais j/e l'ignore. Par exemple, j/e marche le long d'une mer, j'ai mal dans tout mon corps, m/a gorge ne m/e permet pas de parler, j/e vois la mer, j/e la regarde, j/e cherche, j/e m//interroge dans le silence dans le manque de trace, j//interroge une absence si étrange qu'elle m/e cause un trou au-dedans de m/on corps. Puis j/e sais de façon absolument infaillible que j/e te quiers, j/e te requiers, j/e te cherche, j/e te supplie, j/e te somme d'apparaître toi qui es sans visage sans mains sans seins sans ventre sans vulve sans membres sans pensées, toi au moment même où tu n'es pas autre chose qu'une pression une insistance dans m/on corps. (31)

There is a deep sense of loss which forms the core of the lover's being, a nostalgia for a time before speech and organised thought, consistently with the Kleinian phantasies we have been discussing; we witness a desire to return to the earliest stirrings of life, hence of course the well-worn image of the sea. Within the book as a whole, incidentally, this image takes on fresh meaning in helping to understand why so many metamorphoses, from human to animal, protozoan to primate and back right down to the atomic inanimate, take place. We are invited to share

in a restorative dream, a renewed account of evolution and creation which could transcend distance between beings - mother and child, lover and beloved, different species, animals and things. The dream or wish portrayed above is no less fantastic: it is grounded in *je's* own body as 'une pression une insistance' which posit her as the would-be authoress of the beloved's existence - lover, mother, daughter, goddess; but the pain lies, at least in part, in the dread that the birth to which the pressure alludes may not happen, because the words and thought-processes necessary to imagine a bodyless being are lacking. We are left with 'une non-présence où tu t'abîmes' - where you (mother, daughter, beloved) both sink and suffer damage. The extract seems to ask the question: the body must re-appear, be re-presented, but how? Its anguish may remind us of the quests and explorations of some French women writers, Wittig's contemporaries, who are attempting to recreate the lost mother's body through their writing; the following example is from Chantal Chawaf's *Retable*:

Quelles traces pourraient renvoyer à sa vie, restaurer ses formes actionnées par le vent? résoudre son absence? atteindre ses entrailles? la morte, la marée haute de la morte, la caresse décomposée, les décombres de la chambre où la petite en cherchant les pulsations de sa mère, rampe de tous côtés? et la femme est morte où que j'aïlle. (Chawaf 1974: 98)

It may seem provocative, given Monique Wittig's own opposition to *écriture féminine*, to suggest her writing bears any similarity to it. Yet both feature a mother-quest; this is a hallmark of Chawaf's writing, its guiding principle, a gateway through which femininity may be glimpsed. 'Femininity' is of course anathema to Wittig, but discussion of her creative love-writing founders if controversy about its 'nature' pre-empts useful debate about the maternal body and the mother-daughter relationship, the common ground from which a new understanding *both* of sexual difference (Chawaf, Irigaray) *and* of lesbianism (Wittig) can grow. It will by now be apparent that I do not think Wittigian eroticism, and indeed her wider aim of shifting the balance of universality by bringin

a lesbian body into existence, can be given their full importance and meaning unless we examine how her texts negotiate the gateway from and to the mother. The sadism and masochism present in *Le Corps lesbien* are a *female* attempt once more to merge the aggressive and sexual instincts sundered by the 'compulsory' turning to the father, to write as if, or because, such a turning has not taken place; this gives the lie to Montefiore's suggestion that 'there is no reason why this violent pre-Oedipal realm inhabited by *j/e* and *tu* should be exclusively female' (1987: 157). If, as I do, we situate the writing at the point where the girl is faced with a change of object, we restore the full force of the mother-daughter conflict; hence the greed, the violence, the envy, and the fear of this text, based on the passion for the mother and the 'terror of her disappearance', to borrow these words by Adrienne Rich (1978: 75); hence its courage in picking up in its fabric references to aggressive aspects of lesbian sexuality which, placed in an appropriate context, can themselves stand as gateways, stages of lesbian consciousness. A later text provides us with evidence that Wittig has thought this question through: in a passage from *Virgile, non* which we have encountered in my sixth chapter (V: 45-6), the butch and leather dykes are given a glowing description by Wittig (the character), only to be reminded by Manastabal that they are the inhabitants not of paradise, but of limbo: their violent actions are neither to be condemned nor exclusively endorsed, since they are only partial and temporary resolutions of conflict. Applying Manastabal's wisdom to *Le Corps lesbien*, we can say that sadism and masochism are *intermittent* resolutions, threading through the whole of the text, a necessary stressing and re-stressing of the battle with the mother.

But intermittence, of course, implies something in between. If the text's aggressive moments are gateways, limbo-like spaces, then what can be seen through them?

Sara Maitland once said at a public gathering that joy was the only concept capable of confounding the devil, because it was the only feeling that didn't have its exact opposite in Hell. Although Wittig's erotic writing, as we have seen, is no stranger to despair, although it engages with great commitment in a fight with many kinds of hell, it is certainly also capable of being filled - or perhaps suffused is the better word - with a joy that transcends all opposites:

Les doigts sur les membranes font à présent un battement continu. [...] Les larmes abondantes se jettent dans le flot coulantes salées, j/e m/e noie, l'eau m/e rentre par les yeux cyprine larmes, j//y vois les noirs les ors les feux les cristaux les écailles. [...] Les doigts se palment pour nager étendus de part et d'autre des grands corps, ils se touchent se trouvent se prennent, la fenêtre s'ouvre brutalement sous la poussée de nos membres flottant sur une grande masse de liquide lactique bleuté, [...] adieu continent noir de misère et de peine adieu villes anciennes nous nous embarquons pour les îles brillantes et radieuses pour les vertes Cythères pour les Lesbos noires et dorées. (19)

What matters here is the movement which pushes the lovers forward, together. This lovemaking is, like surfing, an exhilarating experience; we sense that wave after wave will come, not *upon* the female lovers, but actively *for* them, so that they can swim, touch, move. The lovers' joy does not turn away from the mother; there is a fleeting reference to milk - 'liquide lactique bleuté' - indicating that neither the maternal nor the daughterly elements of eroticism are suppressed. But the milk, and the mother-daughter couple, are enriched by tears, the sea, clouds, all of which merge into the cyprine which is the dominant element. In the process of bringing the lesbian erotic body to life, then, the text rescues both mother and daughter from the dereliction to which under- or misrepresentation had condemned them. They are placed together, side by side: Demeter and Persephone transposed, neither merged together for all time nor separated for six months of the year. The possibility of a renewed relationship between them flickers, both responding to and inspiring the lovers' journey.

But lest it be thought that after such a reparative, restorative sailing, life in Cythera/Lesbos might become somewhat tame, let us look through another of the gateways at the following passage:

Tu es m/a gloire de cyprine m/a fauve m/on lilas m/a pourpre, tu m/e chasses le long de m/es tunnels, tu t'engouffres faite de vent, tu souffles dans m/es oreilles, tu mugis, une roseur te vient sur tes joues, tu m//es tu m//es (à l'aide m/a Sappho) tu m//es, j/e meurs enveloppée ceinte tenue imprégnée de tes mains infiltrée suaves flux infiltrée de m/es nymphes jusqu'à ma gorge par les rayons de tes doigts, m/es oreilles atteintes se liquéfient, j/e tombe j/e tombe, j/e t'entraîne dans cette chute en spirale sifflante, parle m/oi tourbillonnante maelström maudit adoré peine de plaisir joie joie pleurs de joie, j/e t'entraîne, tes bras enroulés autour de m/oi tournent autour de deux corps perdus dans le silence des sphères infinies, qu'est-ce que le m/oi, quelqu'une qui se met à sa fenêtre peut-elle dire qu'elle m/e voit passer, douce muselée agnelle de lait chat j/e te crache j/e te crache. (49)

Almost predictably we find the colour violet, which as Ostrovsky informs us 'appears forty-two times' (1991: 87) in the novel; we find the 'gloire' and Sappho with their suggestion of a new spirituality; once more, we find cyprine which symbolises a renewed communication, a new love. Likewise, we can now account both for this passage's sadomasochism - *je's* delight in being chased, invaded, 'killed' by *tu* - and its strong reparative stance: the joy found in touching, caressing, holding and being held. These movements stem from the ambivalent desire for the mother's body. But in its sheer vigour this prose poem amounts to much more than the sum of these parts and explanations. It is first and foremost orgasmic: a marvellously imposing and humorous account of the lovers' free fall into each others' bodies and selves. Thus, the sense of orgasm as sinking, losing consciousness, merging into the other, dying, is both emphasised and enjoyably mocked; *j/e's* cries for help - 'tu m//es tu m//es (à l'aide m/a Sappho)' - are not those of the passive victim, but rather the delighted/horrified screams uttered during a bungee-jump: an activity which, like Wittigan textual sex, is so strong as to seem dangerous, and indeed is rather dangerous, but definitely enhances the sense of being alive. *J/e* appeals to onlookers to help her and seems to want to cling to bits and pieces of philosophical discours

('qu'est-ce que le m/oi') but really at this stage the writing is sending any serious concern packing: it is taking risks and having fun. Indeed, we find ourselves returning to the image of the 'double saut périlleux' with which I began my discussion of *Le Corps lesbien's* eroticism. It deserves to be repeated in its context:

Le chant du groupe numéro sept s'élève à un moment donné, si célèbre parmi elles toutes qu'il est repris à l'unisson plusieurs fois répété. Le cercle se rompt, les bateleuses du groupe numéro sept prêtent leurs balles à celles qui désirent jongler. Des cabrioles sont faites par la majorité de l'assemblée. Toutes sont vues cul par-dessus tête entre les éventaires les girandoles les jets d'eau. Des cris des rires des heurts sont entendus. Quelqu'une commence debout un double saut périlleux. L'odeur des pralines mêlée à celle des fleurs perceptibles à travers les sautes de vent, est très forte. J/e te cherche m/a rayonnante à travers l'assemblée. (187-188)

The last prose poem of the book is a treat, featuring laughter, music, exchange, companionship, the triumph of the collective lesbian body. It is suggested that the participants' active and *mobile* bodies, fit and able, will easily resist the crippling effects of imprisoning phantasies they will be able to work, or rather play (dance, sing) them through. The circle is *open*, inclusive - providing one isn't scared of *cabrioles*. And with typical intelligence and subtlety the novel closes with the merest hint of tension: *j/e* is only *probably* at ease with her peers; what she is certainly doing is seeking out her beloved, on an individual quest which may put her, yet again, at risk: from the Kleinian mother, from *tu*, from *elles*. But this most erotic of texts proclaims loud and clear that some risks are definitely worth taking.

'S'il s'agit de tomber, write the authors of the *Brouillon* (232), mieux vaut le faire dans les bras de son amante, les yeux ouverts ou fermés, en avant ou en arrière. Si ce n'est pas possible, on peut tomber sur des tas de feuilles, de sable, de foin, de neige.' As well as a delicious mockery of the too-serious religious concept of the Fall, this entry is

definite allusion to the nature of the *amantes'* erotic life. The holding, passionate presence of a flesh-and-blood lover is recommended during the orgasm which the fall represents, but it is not absolutely necessary. It seems that the *amante* is more than capable of autoerotic satisfaction; to echo Irigaray and the discoveries of my first chapter, she carries (at least) two lovers permanently within herself, is always in a state of 'companion pleasure'. Moreover, the *Brouillon* seems to want to reassure us that her orgasm cannot, however violent her sadomasochistic phantasies, signify loss of self, death, obliteration. The fall, after all, does not mean hitting a dangerously hard, flat surface, but sinking into a yielding one. And although *Le Corps lesbien's* *j/e* occasionally comes across as very isolated and at risk, her orgasmic experience always features a pulling back from the brink, an inbuilt safety mechanism.

But can the same be said about Wittigian eroticism as a whole? To answer this question, I shall return to the point I made at the beginning of this chapter, concerning the fact that all Wittig's writing is erotic because of the processes of intermittence and *scintillement* it features. Just as, in the extract above, the piles of leaves, sand, hay and snow can be said to have an orgasmic function, so too does the Wittigian text become eroticised in places where one does not necessarily expect it to be. This is to do with the uses to which Wittig puts the concept of provocation, and is not necessarily a matter of themes. For example the sentence 'La mère de Fabienne Dires leur dit d'entrer et qu'on va commencer à goûter parce que c'est l'heure' (O: 103) is erotic because of the shock-effect of its last few words - an explanation which, by explaining nothing at all, opens up a fissure in the text, a space of desire and danger. 'Parce que c'est l'heure' is such a disappointment, and yet so consistent with the authoritarian voice adults often adopt with children, that by contrast the term 'le goûter' becomes retrospectively filled with desire and expectation, stimulating the polymorphously-perverse child in the reader. The text makes no

obvious effort to court us, and yet we become extremely hungry. A few lines later, because of that fissure, that hunger, a simple, nostalgic-on-the-surface sentence ticks away like a time-bomb: 'Dans la maison ça sent la cannelle et la tarte au citron'. Hunger turns to yearning; it is possible to say of those smells and indeed of much of Wittigian textuality, 'tu m/e tourmentes d'un lent amour' (C: 31). The process is *not* experienced as an entirely safe one; rather, the textual erotics destabilise and excite. Another example, also from *L'Opoponax* and already mentioned in the different context of my second chapter, is that of the nun peeling oranges. This comes across as a magical activity, with the nun elevated to the status of priestess - and then provocation strikes: 'ma soeur ne veut pas les donner' (9). Suddenly the mighty are fallen; there are 'ni dieux ni déesses, ni maîtres ni maîtresses' (P: 35) *except* the child in each of us, and in the nun who wants to keep her beautiful playthings to herself and refuses to share. The sublime cracks, to reveal archaic psychic mechanisms and behaviours, alive and extremely disruptive underneath, like the volcanic lava which appears in Catherine Legrand's reverie (171); and of course the process can work the other way, with the magmatic parting to reveal another dimension, as in the Cythera episode of *Le Corps lesbien*.

Where, then, is Wittig's eroticism located? I hope to have shown in this chapter that there are numerous answers to that question: it resides in the female body, in at least two female bodies, in the tussle with the mother, in sadomasochism and sensuality; it is also in the flow of the naming, the sumptuous layers of words - 'donne-m/oi les lèvres la langue la salive qui attire dans le lent le doux l'empoisonné pays d'où l'on ne peut pas revenir' (C: 8) - and in the jagged cracks which appear suddenly in the fabric of the text, threatening yet summoning the reader.

Conclusion

Some women love
to wait
for life for a ring
in the June light for a touch
of the sun to heal them for another
woman's voice to make them whole
to untie their hands
put words in their mouths
form to their passages sound
to their screams for some other sleeper
to remember their future their past

Audre Lorde, 'Stations', in Mc Ewen 1988: 119

Is Wittig's *amante* the 'other sleeper' of Lorde's poem, the companion-lover capable of healing and creating wholeness in the women who seek her out? Certainly the *Brouillon* suggests that *amantes* are committed to peace, recreation, harmony; for example,

Il y a [...] les rêves à paresse auxquels on accède par hypnose. Les amantes les pratiquent après de longues randonnées quand elles arrivent dans une oasis, dans une communauté, pour ne pas être en discordance avec leurs amies. (194)

La plupart des amantes des peuples utilisent des parfums qu'elles obtiennent par macération des plantes ou distillation. Elles traitent le cumin, le cinnamome, l'anis, les amandes, l'iris, la rose, le benjoin, la bergamote, le vétiver, le thym, la menthe, les écorces de citron et d'orange, les résines de pin, d'opoponax. Certains de ces parfums ont des vertus curatives pour la peau. De la même façon les essences dans l'embaumement des vivantes régénèrent les organes. (194-5)

The inclusion of *opoponax* in the above extract will not go unnoticed. It is used in its usual context, as a plant, but retains the new spelling which Wittig used in her first novel. The suggestion is thus that the textual body she has created ultimately has healing powers; it transforms and recreates 'nature' for the *amantes'* good. At the end of my examination of the concept of the body in Wittig's writing, do I

share this view, especially as I have in the later chapters revealed considerable areas of tension and disharmony within and around the Wittigian body? In many ways I still find it difficult fully to understand and accept her disconnection of body from gender, body from the reproductive, lesbian from 'woman'. Wittig, of course, would argue that it is not such disconnections I should question, but rather the context of compulsory heterosexuality which wove the 'connections' in the first place. Adrienne Rich also writes persuasively about the distortions heterosexuality imposes upon the female body in many senses of the word - physical, sexual, political, economical - in order to maintain its power, and makes the following important points:

One of the many means of enforcement is, of course, the rendering invisible of the lesbian possibility, an engulfed continent that rises fragmentedly to view from time to time only to become submerged again. Feminist research and theory that contributes to lesbian invisibility or marginality is actually working against the liberation and empowerment of woman as a group.

[...] [T]he failure to examine heterosexuality as an institution is like failing to admit that the economic system called capitalism or the caste system of racism is maintained by a variety of forces, including both physical violence and false consciousness. To take the step of questioning heterosexuality as a "preference" or "choice" for women - and to do the intellectual and emotional work that follows - will call for a special quality of courage in heterosexually identified feminists but I think the rewards will be great: a freeing-up of thinking, the exploring of new paths, the shattering of another great silence, new clarity in personal relationships. (1984: 226-7)

Accordingly, and despite my reservations, I hope this thesis will be seen as contributing to a process of rendering visible the 'engulfed continent' of lesbian writing.

For Rich, as for Wittig, the healing process for the lesbian body - the rescuing of the female body from its heterosexual definitions and meanings - necessarily includes an element of symptomatology. Its pains and injuries must be discovered, its dismemberings revealed, as Rich expresses in one of her 'Tracking Poems':

The problem, unstated till now, is how
to live in a damaged body
in a world where pain is meant to be gagged
uncured un-grieved over The problem is
to connect, without hysteria, the pain
of any one's body with the pain of the body's world
For it is the body's world
they are trying to destroy forever
The best world is the body's world
filled with creatures filled with dread
misshapen so yet the best we have
our raft among the abstract worlds
(In Mc Ewen 1988: 176)

Hence the carefully-controlled explosion of grief *Virgile, non* reveals, as the narratrix witnesses the horrors carried out against women in the name of heterosexuality. I think this need to express pain 'without hysteria' is also what Lorde means when she writes that the desired other woman, as well as providing healing and wholeness - indeed, it is one of her ways of doing so - should 'bring sound to their screams'. The damage runs so deep that Wittig does not, actually cannot, describe how the women might have been prior to their enslavement; what matters is to convey that, to repeat Haraway's words, 'we have all been injured, profoundly'. Thus the 'marronnes' on their way to freedom, in the dyke bars of limbo, do not hesitate to play, violently, with their body-image, starting from the 'misshapen so yet the best we have' to suggest new creatures: not exactly maffiosi, but certainly outlaws. As Manastabal points out, it is not surprising that their imaginations and actions should be violent, given 'la cruauté d'un monde qui pousse au crime' (46). But beyond that phase, an irenical organisation and a restored body are real possibilities: as I have said, the *Brouillon* features these, as well as the endings of *L'OpoPONax*, *Le Corps lesbien* and *Virgile, non*, with their strong evocations of pleasurable sights, sounds, feelings, tastes, smells; in each case a new birth can be said to take place, as the world of the *amantes* suddenly opens up to include the reader.

In this regard, I want to pick up an earlier remark about the *amantes'* commitment to peace and restoration, and suggest that the *Brouillon* as a whole plays a remarkable role in Wittig's corpus. It provides a detailed account of lesbian history, life, imagination; it reclaims the past, celebrates the present and suggests an entirely joyful future. Its key characteristics are well summed up by Ostrovsky: 'fact and fiction mingle, good humor and malice alternate, reality and fantasy appear side by side, tenderness and violence coexist, and opposites are inextricably joined' (1991: 132). It is perhaps the most playful and humorous of her texts. Yet I have no difficulty in seeing and using it as a reliable research tool, as I have done throughout this thesis. For under the playfulness there is a breadth of vision that explains and underpins much of Wittig's theory and practice as a writer, just as the *Encyclopédie* supported the philosophies of the Enlightenment. The *amantes*, as Ostrovsky points out, have many of the attributes held to be desirable in earlier texts and indeed 'In their complexity and vivacity, and in the kaleidoscopic nature of their portrayal, they are representations par excellence of the beings whom Wittig chooses to designate by a variety of terms (or not to name at all) and whose possibilities are endless' (1991: 133): they are the *petites filles* of *L'Opoponax*, the warriors of *Les Guérillères*, *j/e* and *tu* of *Le Corps lesbien*, the angels and saved souls of *Virgile, non*, *Quichotte*, *Panza* and the aunt of *Le Voyage sans fin*.

In Wittig's work, then, there are important alternatives to patriarchal, heterosexual representations. This indeed inspired my first four chapters, which describe and celebrate many achievements in *L'Opoponax* and beyond. Chief among them is the portrayal of a freed female body, redefined as that of the companion-lover's. We can turn to the *Brouillon* for her definition:

AMANTES

Les amantes sont celles qui, éprouvant un violent désir les unes pour les autres, vivent/aiment dans des peuples, suivant les vers

de Sappho, «en beauté je chanterai mes amantes». Les peuples d'amantes des amantes rassemblent toute la culture, le passé, les inventions, les chants et les modes de vie. (15)

Wittig thus suggests that a healed, rescued female body undoubtedly exists in her texts as (at least) a desirable possibility. But what about the stresses and tensions also visible in her writing? First of all, what about the problem I raise at the end of my sixth chapter: Wittig's assertion in her non-fiction, which is also translated into some of her creative writing (parts of *Virgile, non* and *Le Voyage sans fin*) that the lesbian is constituted in opposition and resistance to heterosexuality, as if that were her only genesis? This pulls against the *Brouillon's* representations of the *amante* and also against the drift of other manifestations of the body, not least in its links with spirituality. But perhaps we should tolerate this tension and, indeed, welcome it as richness, in response to the following questions so well put by Bonnie Zimmerman:

How [...] does the lesbian's sense of outlaw status affect her literary vision? Might lesbian writing, because of the lesbian's position on the boundaries, be characterized by a particular sense of freedom and flexibility or, rather, by images of violently imposed barriers, the closet? Or, in fact, is there a dialectic between freedom and imprisonment that is unique to lesbian writing? (1985: 202)

I wish to argue that the answer to all these questions is 'yes' in Wittig's case, and hope to have shown that she also powerfully describes the means of liberation. There is a way forward representationally, personally and politically, most of her writing persuasively argues.

A second area of stress concerns the precise relationship between the lesbian body and the feminine. Wittig repeatedly asserts that the lesbian is necessarily outside categories of gender, since these are fictions in her opinion. This remains a problem; in Judith Butler's words:

It might well seem that Wittig has entered into a utopian ground that leaves the rest of us situated souls waiting impatiently this

side of her liberating imaginary space. [...] Has Wittig decided that heterosexual norms are cultural norms while lesbian norms are somehow natural? Is the lesbian body that she posits as somehow being prior to and exceeding binary restrictions really a body at all? Has the lesbian preempted the place of the psychoanalytic polymorph in Wittig's particular sexual cosmogony? (1987: 136)

Certainly there is a sense, as I have just argued, that the figure of the *amante* can bring healing and wholeness; it is thus possible to see her as 'somehow natural', and the overall balance of the *Brouillon's* picture of the Age of Glory would seem to confirm this. Freed from the shackles of heterosexuality, says the text, this is what the female body's possibilities might be. And yet elsewhere in the corpus there is violence, attack, fragmentation, fierceness; an anti-body flickers, prompting one to reflect that 'le corps' of *Le Corps lesbien* might be said to refer to a corpse. I interpret Butler's second question as meaning: is the lesbian body no more than a figure of speech, a discursive phenomenon, with only tenuous links with the lived body? In this thesis I have tended to argue that this is not so, by using psychoanalytic models to reveal some of the phantasies underpinning the writing. But before I rest the discussion of this question, it is important to place it within the context of lesbian feminist theory and examine how Wittig can be situated with regard to Rich's concepts of lesbian existence and lesbian continuum. Here is the latter's own definition of the terms:

Lesbian existence suggests both the fact of the historical presence of lesbians and our continuing creation of the meaning of that existence. I mean the term *lesbian continuum* to include a range - through each woman's life and throughout history - of woman-identified experience: not simply the fact that woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman. If we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support [...] we begin to grasp breadths of female history and psychology that have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of "lesbianism". (Rich 1984: 227)

Wittig would identify herself unequivocally with lesbian existence, but I want to suggest that her relationship to the concept of the continuum is more ambiguous. She certainly represents many aspects of it in *L'Opoponax*, as I have demonstrated in this thesis: Catherine Legrand's relationship with her sister and with Reine Dieu, the rich portrayal of friendship patterns between girls in general, as well as the social and spiritual values which the nuns embody, can all be said to contribute to its celebration. The following words by Rich are particularly relevant to Wittig's first text:

[The lesbian continuum] allows us to connect aspects of woman-identification as diverse as the impudent, intimate girl-friendships of eight- or nine-year-olds and the banding together of those women of the twelfth and fifteenth centuries known as Beguines who "shared houses, rented to one another, bequeathed houses to their room-mates ... in cheap subdivided houses in the artisans' area of town", who "practised Christian virtue on their own, dressing and living simply and not associating with men", who earned their living as spinners, bakers, nurses, or ran schools for young girls, and who managed - until the Church forced them to disperse - to live independent both of marriage and of conventional restrictions. It allows us to connect these women with the more celebrated "Lesbians" of the women's school around Sappho of the seventh century B.C.] (1984: 229)

It is worth remembering the *Opoponax* nuns' extraordinary capabilities in a number of fields, from the teaching of ancient feminist texts to the staging of Greek mythology, from electrical repairs to bookbinding; one potent image is that of the Mother Superior smiling at Véronique Legrand's Artemis. But beyond her first novel, Wittig displays strong suspicion of any appeal to 'the life of each woman' and 'woman-identified experience'. I hope to have shown in these pages, and particularly in my sixth chapter, the extent of her challenge to these concepts - the stripping of the *guérillères*' individual identities, for instance, and the violence of the collective body Wittig represents. We could not be further from a celebration of the continuum than in the pages of 'Paris-La-Politique' or *Le Voyage sans fin*, with its strong condemnation of the collusion and treachery of women. I think it is partly the negative

pole of this ambivalence vis-à-vis the continuum concept which frees Wittig to use occasional imagery of attack, dismemberment, metamorphosis, flight from the body and passage into other species. When she writes in that way, her textual strategies have more in common perhaps with those of Kathy Acker than of Adrienne Rich.

One important way in which Wittig explicitly breaks with the notion of the continuum is in her portrayal of the mothers I discuss in my fifth chapter: the 'grandes mères' of the *Brouillon* (indeed, Rich (1976: 250) is critical of the stark opposition Wittig establishes between Amazons and mothers in this work), the *mère la mort* in *Le Corps lesbien* and Catherine Legrand's rather ineffectual mother. In contrast, it is worth noting that one of Rich's descriptions of the continuum is both ushered in and sustained by the maternal:

If we consider the possibility that all women - from the infant suckling her mother's breast, to the grown woman experiencing orgasmic sensations while suckling her own child, perhaps recalling her mother's milk-smell in her own; to two women, like Virginia Woolf's Chloe and Olivia, who share a laboratory; to the woman dying at ninety, touched and handled by women - exist on a lesbian continuum, we can see ourselves as moving in and out of this continuum, whether we identify ourselves as lesbian or not. (1984: 229)

For Wittig this would come dangerously close to the exaltation of the maternal function which she views as one of the mechanisms of heterosexual oppression. And yet this thesis has revealed a surprising fact: that, despite exercising strict controls over her writing and in particular avoiding any glorification of the mother, in attempting to portray a female body distinct from the mother's, Wittig does not stifle the expression of desire for her. The nature of this desire picks up some of the strands expressed by Rich in the following extract from 'Transcendental Etude':

and the whole chorus throbbing at our ears
like midges, told us nothing, nothing
of origins, nothing we needed
to know, nothing that could re-member us.

Only: that it is unnatural,
the homesickness for a woman, for ourselves,
for that acute joy at the shadow her head and arms
cast on a wall, her heavy or slender
thighs on which we lay, flesh against flesh,
eyes steady on the face of love; smell of her milk, her sweat,
terror of her disappearance, all fused in this hunger
for the element they have called most dangerous ...
(Rich 1978: 75)

I have reviewed in my study of Wittig some of the 'choruses of midges' which she exposes and challenges - psychoanalytic accounts of sexual difference, the Biblical story of the Fall, Sadeian discourse - and revealed early on that despite declared opposition to maternalist theories, Wittig dramatically and repeatedly underlines the terror of the mother's disappearance, which in *Le Corps lesbien* particularly underpins many accounts of distress. I have shown, too, how some of the violence present in the texts finds its source not just in the fight against heteroppression but in our earliest conflicts with the mother. In contrast to Rich, whose lesbian continuum can be seen with the benefit of Kleinian theory as an expression of the depressive position, with its stress on the healing and reparatory, Wittig features a violent, fragmenting and fragmented picture, revealing the wish to attack the withholding mother and the dread of retaliation (paranoid-schizoid position). Which is not to say that either woman's text is 'better' or 'worse', more 'advanced' or 'regressive'. Indeed, both of them are supremely aware both of the violence and of the healing power of lesbian identification. Beyond a doubt however, Wittig's refusal of any writing that might lead to its being 'recuperated' under the heading of *écriture féminine*, where the wish to rediscover the mother features so prominently, has results that she may not always have anticipated. For example, as I have discussed in the last chapter, Wittig engages with the question of lesbian S/M; actually she does more, by suggesting in *Le Corps lesbien* that it has a darkly exciting erotic charge:

Tu m/e laisses t'approcher taillader à pleine bouche ta gorge ta nuque, [...] tu m/e laisses sectionner tes seins dont le sang jaillit parallèlement et m/e gicle dans les yeux, tu m/e laisses pratiquer une ouverture tout autour de ton ventre, [...] ton sexe est intact,

déjà j/e suis couverte de ton sang, m/a figure m/es mains m/on buste m/es cheveux sont tout collés. Toi à peine un peu plus pâle magnifique très royale tu ris, tu m/e dis que j/e n'ai pas le pouvoir de te faire souffrir. (171)

My suggestion that the relationship with the mother is implicated in this passionate consumption and invasion of the lover's body should *not* be read in any way as a wish to lessen and defuse the impact of Wittig's writing - quite the opposite, in fact. Unlike Rich, who accounts for lesbian S/M in heterosexual terms and dismisses it as an aberration, Wittig more or less consciously restores the full power of mother-daughter relationships and sets up a world in which, perhaps, their life may begin again through the lovers' passionate *corps à corps*. The lesbian continuum is problematised, but not destroyed: Wittig widens and energises its boundaries. In that sense her *amante* is not just a figure of speech but is in fact doubly embodied, first by her relationship to the maternal - which, although she stretches it dangerously close to breaking point, nevertheless remains an anchor - and secondly, equally, by her remarkably creative relationship with her peers, within the representational home they share: the islands of the Age of Glory.

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