

## Sample Research Essay

Laughter as Lacunae: An Exploration of Sound and Language in Monique Wittig's *Les Guérillères*

In Monique Wittig's revolutionary novel *Les Guérillères*, a society of warrior women fight to overthrow male-dominated institutions through a bloody war and disregard for the strict confines of womanhood. Besides its provocative plot, *Les Guérillères* overthrows many other notions of what a book should look like and how one should operate; indeed, in reading it, critics like Erika Ostrovsky argue for its subversion of male-centered literary traditions and simultaneous refusal to offer an alternative literary style. However, the discussion on language and written word in this novel rarely ventures beyond this rebellion against literary custom, ignoring the call by the women of this book to not just overthrow custom but to overthrow language itself. In this novel, an emphasis on sound, the oral nature of the book, and the words of the women themselves advocate for not just a new form of writing but an overthrow of language altogether in order to purge itself of the oppression embedded within it. While the women of this novel fall short of this goal, this novel accomplishes it by advocating for the obliteration of both language and ultimately the book itself.

From the start, this novel outlines how written word poisons the women, tying them down to an oppressive past. In the society of this novel, the women keep these books called feminaries containing descriptions of female genitalia and other stories that the women read from and add to. As Ostrovsky writes, "the 'feminaries' define women in traditional fashion, and their authors, judging from the contents, are obviously male. Most of the definitions there center on women's bodies as objects and concentrate on their genital organs, thus reducing women to their genitalia" (56). I agree with Ostrovsky's interpretation as the reduction of women that she describes is precisely what the women of this society are hoping to defy and break from and these

books, the feminaries, are holding them back. By reducing women to their genitalia, the feminaries act as an example of the poison of written word as it places women only in relation to men and a male gaze. Luckily, the women of this novel rebel against the feminaries, violently destroying them: “They say that... these seem to them outdated. All they can do to avoid being encumbered with useless knowledge is to heap them up in the squares and set fire to them” (Wittig 49). The women, although seeing the feminaries as a source of occasional comedy, find it necessary to burn them, to destroy all the books they have. This literal destruction of written word is precisely what this novel and the women advocate for as a way to escape the oppression ingrained within written language.

In an attempt to combat the oppression within written word, the women of this novel offer an alternative to written word in the form of oral tradition as a means of passing down knowledge and history, an attempt to create a new beginning. Throughout the novel, stories of famous women in history and myths are recounted, as seen in a tale where a medusa-like woman wanders through a garden much like Eve and in eating a piece of fruit grows taller and stronger (52). Many readers are quick to point out how these stories with a focus on a female protagonist, bring an empowering female perspective to the novel, like Nancy Gray in *Language Unbound: On Experimental Writing by Women* writes: “[Wittig] aligns language and reality in such a way that women’s fictions and the fiction of Woman must collide” (162). The stories the women tell portray women in a new light, trying to deconstruct what *woman* is defined as. However beyond this, it is the medium of these stories that holds great importance: instead of individually reading from a book, these stories are told aloud from memory, echoing back to a time before written word—or rather, doing away with the need for it. In this way, these oral stories are replacing the male-created feminaries that the women have destroyed.

However, this shift from written word to oral tradition is not enough, as the women themselves admit, because spoken language is still flawed. The original intent in destroying written word was to erase history so as to save future generations from the baggage of the past: “Let there be erased from human memory the longest most murderous war it has ever known” (127). The women want this war against man to be forgotten and see destroying books as enough but as we see with the stories they tell, even oral language carries the past along with it. Many of the stories the women tell are rooted in well-known myths, like the tale of Snow White as originally told by the Grimm brothers. Echoing back to Gray’s highlighting of the collision between the stories women tell and the idea of women in patriarchal society, we can see how women can attempt to tell these stories with female leads and empowerment, while still operating within a male-created language and a male-dominated history, one that then limits how women can be described and seen. While the women say “that they are starting from zero. They say that a new world is beginning,” the language they speak was developed and used by men for millennia to oppress women and still carries that weight with it (85). Even the women themselves admit that a society cannot simply transition from written to oral language because even our spoken words are tainted: “The women say, the language you speak poisons your glottis tongue palate lips. They say, the language you speak is made up of words that are killing you” (114). Not only is the use of spoken language harmful to the women but it “poisons” their tongues, meaning it embeds oppression into their own use of language. So despite their efforts to escape the oppression within written word, the women fall short by simply resorting to oral tradition: they still are operating within a historically male-dominated language that carries the same oppression that written word does.

While the women fail to escape oppressive language, the book itself offers the reader a more dramatic alternative to oppressive language in the form of sound, separate from spoken

word. Wittig's writing and scene descriptions play to the senses, specifically sound, throughout the novel, overthrowing literary custom but also drawing the reader's focus to the aural over the visual. Describing the glenuri, an imagined creature, the passage focuses on the sound they create: "Each of its movements producing a different sound. The harmony of the glenuri may be compared to fifes drums the croaking of toads the miaowing of rutting cats the sharp sound of a flute" (22). By spending most of the glenuri's description on these sounds, the audience is reminded that we experience the world not simply through our eyes but our ears as well. This event is not solely confined to this passage however, but can be seen throughout the text in descriptions of the echoes of a lake (14), the howls of wolves (35), and the singing and music of women (42, 54). This emphasis on sound goes beyond what many critics believe—traversing boundaries—to placing sound higher up on the hierarchy of senses. This plays out in the power sound holds in the novel as seen in women's attack from the ridge: "The cries they utter are so terrifying that many of their adversaries drop their weapons, running straight before them stopping their ears" (102). The blatant fear the women's cries strike in the hearts of men illustrates how the power of sound can be wielded as a weapon by not only men but women as well. Because unlike language, which has historically been dominated by men, sound in this novel is free for women to use as they please.

The book, in its focus on sound and dismissal of written and spoken word, harkens back to a time before language and recorded history in order to escape the oppression within it. When looking at how this book begins and ends, with pages large capital text, the reader will find that the only phrase repeated on the first and last capitalized pages is "LACUNAE" (5,143), which refers to spaces, emptiness, gaps. It actually connects to sound as we can see later in the text: "This is apparent precisely in the intervals that your masters have not been able to fill with their words of proprietors and possessors, this can be found in the gaps, in all that which is not a

continuation of their discourse, in the zero, the O, the perfect circle that you invent to imprison them and to overthrow them” (69). Lacunae is this gap without language, the emptiness without words, which as we’ve seen throughout the novel is filled instead with the sounds of nature and the women that inhabit it. Sound offers a better alternative to both written and spoken word:

“The women say that, to complete a cycle, a series of brilliant deeds or extraordinary and baleful events is required... Then they laugh and fall backward from force of laughing. All are infected. A noise rises like the rolling of drums under a vault” (55). Laughter is both the completion of the cycle mentioned above the destruction of it as the sounds of these laughs go on to dismantle the building they are sitting in. Sound, with its power, is both destructive and cleansing, a space cleared of language and full of potential. Pulling from *Les Guérillères*, Ostrovsky writes, “Language must undergo a kind of death, or submit to an ‘execution,’ before it can be reborn. It must descend to a state of fragmentation, anarchy, and silence” (59). However as Ostrovsky goes on to speak of the immediate rebuilding of written language, the focus of this book is not on a new language but on this space absent of language, before language, filled instead by the sounds of the women: their cries, their echoes, and their laughs.

Sound in this novel though is not solely uttered by the characters, but ingrained in the fabric, formatting, and language of the novel itself. In *Les Guérillères*, both formatting and language create what Ostrovsky describes as an “incantatory effect”, highlighting the intrinsic, spoken nature of this novel (39). One instance of this spoken nature is seen in the all uppercase text, mostly listing women’s names. When we read capitalized words, we automatically see them as words to be spoken, exclaimed, yelled. Through their capitalization, these words are brought off the page, away from our eyes and into our ears, forcing us to hear the words in our heads. This is built upon by the lack of commas, as Ostrovsky goes on to note: “The incantation that appears here could be variously interpreted as a song, a litany, a dirge, a hymn... the list’s

incantatory quality produces the feeling of an oral delivery” (39). However as Ostrovsky connects this quality with a struggle between unity and individuality in the book, this incantatory interpretation also hints at the very nature of the book, as one to be read and one where sound is stands above writing. This auditory nature is further connected to the rest of the text, as seen in describing the trees: “In the baskets there are leaves of chestnut hornbeam maple clove guaiac copal oak mandarine willow copper-beech” (58). By omitting commas within the non-capitalized, standard text as well, a connection is formed between the capitalized and non-capitalized sections, transplanting the incantatory nature of the names into the other text as well and elevating the entire work into this realm of words that are meant to be heard not seen. This incantatory nature of the text calls to the importance of sound in revolution and upholds the idea that the closer you move toward sound, the farther you move from the oppression language contains.

While the quality of this book, to be better read aloud, highlights the power of sound, it also calls to the feminaries which are read aloud by the women and which resemble this book in many other ways as well. In format, this book literally resembles a feminary: “Essentially, it consists of pages with words printed in a varying number of capital letters. There may be only one or the pages may be full of them. Usually they are isolated a the center of the page, well spaced black on a white background” (15). This description of the feminaries appears as if its describing the book itself which also has pages consisting only of capital letters in black font centered on a white page. But the book resembles a feminary in more than just format as Wittig, like the women of the novel, writes in a male language and in a world already inhabited by male words. According to the novel, the feminaries contain pages “in which [the women] write from time to time” (15), yet these women are writing in a male-created language and on and within books first made by men. This limits them in style and scope just as Wittig is. While some may

wonder then why Wittig didn't write in her own, new language, James Davis cleverly writes on the practicality of this in *Beautiful War: Uncommon Violence, Praxis, and Aesthetics in the Novels of Monique Wittig*, "Since the development of an entirely new language would be antithetical to her feminist project (such a tongue would be initially incomprehensible to all except her and thus an inefficient means of delivering her feminist message), she therefore resigns herself to the difficulty posed by this inconsistency and works from within male language to undo it" (77). This inability to escape male discourse is precisely the challenge of this book as it works to overthrow an oppressive system while still operating within it.

But as Wittig's own feminary, this book, like the others, is meant to be burned in order for a new era to emerge. In analyzing the last poem of the book, Ostrovsky writes: "These lines can be best interpreted as meaning that the writer (this writer), and what she has written, can disappear after they have fulfilled their function—a function far greater than the writing of a particular book... affirm[ing] that the destruction of the work of art—the text before us—prepares the transformative phase that leads to a new and even greater creation" (69). While Wittig needs the medium of written word to spread her ideas in today's society, this book was not written with the intent of lasting forever but instead with the intent of fulfilling a purpose, to put forth an alternative to oppressive written and spoken word, to advocate for the overthrow of language as we know it. However in doing this, Wittig writes in the hopes that her writing will in fact be burned, just as the feminaries are, because no matter how revolutionary her novel is, she is forced to operate within a male language and a male discourse that is inescapable through written or spoken word alone.

## Works Cited

- Davis, James D. "Belle-icosity." *Beautiful War: Uncommon Violence, Praxis, and Aesthetics in the Novels of Monique Wittig*, edited by Tamara Alvarez-Detrell and Michael G. Paulson, vol. 178. New York, Peter Lang Publishing, 2010, pp. 55–95.
- Gray, Nancy. "Communities of Diversity: Ntozake Shange, E. M. Broner, Monique Wittig." *Language Unbound: On Experimental Writing by Women*. U of Illinois P, 1992, pp. 133–74.
- Ostrovsky, Erika. "From O to O." *A Constant Journey: The Fiction of Monique Wittig*, edited by Jerome Klinkowitz. Southern Illinois UP, 1991, pp. 32–69
- Wittig, Monique. *Les Guérillères*, translated from the French by David LeVay. U of Illinois P, 2007.