THE LITERARY WORKSHOP

An Excerpt

Monique Wittig

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Introduction: Word by Word

Monique Wittig completed The Literary Workshop (Le chantier littéraire) in Gualala, California, in 1986, as her dissertation for the Diplôme de l’École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris. Gérard Genette was the director, and Louis Marin and Christian Metz were readers. Wittig wrote The Literary Workshop at a time of immense productivity. The previous year she had published her novel Virgile, non (Across the Acheron) and produced a play, The Constant Journey (Le voyage sans fin). She wrote several of her landmark theoretical essays during this period, most notably “The Trojan Horse” (“Le cheval de Troie,” 1984), “The Place of Action” (“Le lieu de l’action,” 1984), and “The Mark of Gender” (“La marque du genre,” 1985). Many of the ideas for the articles were developed during her work on The Literary Workshop. Wittig planned to publish The Literary Workshop with P.O.L. (Paris) in November 1999 immediately after the publication of Paris-la-politique in May of that year. However, the death of Nathalie Sarraute in October 1999 made this impossible.

Wittig met Sarraute in 1964, when Sarraute was on the jury that awarded Wittig the Prix Médicis for her first book, L’opoponax. From that time on, Wittig and Sarraute developed a deep and lasting friendship. The Literary Workshop is Wittig’s “homage à Nathalie Sarraute et au pouvoir du language” (homage to Nathalie Sarraute and to the power of language). Wittig started working on The Literary Workshop again during the last months of her life. She had some concerns about the publication of the manuscript, which she was in the midst of addressing. One concern was that there had been many developments in literary criticism since the date of the original manuscript in the late 1980s. In fact, Wittig was...
working on new theoretical concepts. A handwritten note in the original manuscript indicates where she intended to add a chapter.

The following excerpt of *The Literary Workshop* is from a chapter titled “The Existing Forms: Literature.” Wittig read this excerpt at the first international colloquium on her work held in Paris in June 2001. She dedicated a great deal of time to theoretical essays on language and literature in the 1980s and 1990s. As a professor, Wittig made it a point to bring the workshop into the classroom, teaching her students to write “word by word.”

*The Literary Workshop* is a beautiful reverie on the writer’s task in the fabrication of literature. It expands on what Wittig presents in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* as her main concern: writing. — Sande Zeig

**Notes**

I call “literary workshop” the chaotic space where books are fabricated. It is the painter’s studio, a space at once concrete and abstract. Yet, however vast it may be, the only space particular to the literary workshop is the blank page. The first thing that I would like to discuss about the literary workshop is the notion of heterogeneity.

One learns very early on that it is no more possible to add up cabbages and turnips than it is to divide, multiply, or subtract them, for the difference between these objects renders the operation invalid. Only objects belonging to the same category can be subjected to this kind of operation. But categories themselves are elastic. For nothing, indeed, prevents one from adding cabbages and turnips if they are regrouped under the same category, “vegetables.” The fact is that cabbages and turnips are not of a different nature (substance). The impossibility of the aforementioned operations concerning different units from the same category is thus relative. One can continue to consider the impossibility as relative, even if instead of associating a cabbage with another vegetable one proceeds to add, subtract, divide, or multiply it with metal bolts by going a degree further in abstraction and by regrouping the series in the category “objects.”

It is the same in literature, and the result leads one to reflect on what is called the sum of the parts (which as has long been known does not exactly correspond to simple addition). In literature, a book can be produced by an addition (a montage) of elements that are heterogeneous in substance and come from different realms. When Lévi-Strauss describes the work of art as “bricolage,” he sheds light not only on the structure of each construction but also on the fact that it is made of collected objects, sometimes accidental elements. But above all, what is striking in this type of bricolage is the difference in nature (in structure?) of the collected elements. Bricolage and its finished product defy the rules of logic.

Although literary forms and literary history weigh heavily on the craft, a practical point of view (and not just an analytical point of view) is what characterizes the situation and the understanding of a writer with respect to literature: what to do and how to do it in relation to what already exists. For instance, in [his study on] “The Raven,” Poe chooses “to show the modus operandi by which some one of my own works was put together. It is my design to render it manifest that no one point in its composition is referable either to accident or intuition — that the work proceeded, step by step, to its completion with the precision and rigid con-
sequence of a mathematical problem.” Hence we have here a laying bare of the process in the best formalist tradition.

It is true that the Russian formalists used Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* to illustrate what they called “a laying bare” of the process. It should be added that the formalists were not among the literary critics who discredited the critical point of view of the writer. They did not think that writers needed to produce in turn a body of criticism to prove their validity as writers. They pointed out the process of “distancing” in the work of Tolstoy, which they clearly did not see as a result of “accident or intuition.” Flaubert, for example, who always postponed his project of writing a literary manifesto, explains his work too clearly in his letters to be accused of lacking a theoretical position.

To return to “The Philosophy of Composition,” as Poe calls it: “Let us dismiss, as irrelevant to the poem, per se, the circumstances—or say the necessity—which, in the first place, gave rise to the intention of composing a poem” (365)—that is to say, the extraliterary circumstances and necessity that made up the substance of literary criticism for a long time and that led to the elimination of the writer and the writer’s point of view from criticism. “I prefer commencing with the consideration of an effect,” writes Poe (364). That consideration—totally foreign to the point of view of after—fills, colors, and determines how the writer perceives already existing works.

The reading of a “fabricator” is turned toward literary techniques, as Sarraute illustrates when speaking of Proust: “It is therefore permissible to dream—without blinding ourselves to all that separates the dream from its reality—of a technique that might succeed in plunging the reader into the stream of these subterranean dramas of which Proust only had time to obtain a rapid aerial view, and concerning which he observed and reproduced nothing but the broad motionless lines.” The effects that derive from such techniques operate on the readers (but first on the writer): “The reader, who has remained intent, on the lookout, as though he were in the shoes of the person to whom the words are directed, mobilizes all his instincts of defense, all his powers of intuition, his memory, his faculties of judgment and reasoning” (115). To put a text in the workshop is first of all to know other texts, being able to reference the forms and choosing among them. Poe, in his “Philosophy of Composition,” wonders about the length his poem will have compared, for example, with Milton’s. Sarraute takes Proust, Ivy Compton-Burnett, and Joyce as starting points for her work on dialogue.

Sarraute envisions the technical problems posed by the contemporary novel, at the moment of its stagnation, in terms of what has already been done. Kafka, Dostoyevsky, Camus’s *The Stranger*, Balzac, Flaubert, Joyce, Proust,
Woolf are examined from the point of view of forms that she questions. In *The Age of Suspicion* (essays published between 1947 and 1956), Sarraute critically examined the following techniques before she implemented them in her craft: characters, plot, “the psychological,” interior monologue, first-person narration, dialogue, and style (that which makes a novel satisfy its “most profound obligation: to discover something new”). This critical reading from a fabricator’s point of view, which ultimately led to the renaissance of the novel in France called the *nouveau roman*, was carried out by Sarraute at the same time as she pursued her fictional investigations. Her critical reading could not have been what it was if she had not been engaged in literary research that called into question already existing forms and that (through reading and research) saved an entire genre: the novel.

I put Poe at one end of the chain and Sarraute at the other in this literary movement that consists of demystifying the writer as inspired, giving explicit importance to the reader, and insisting on the writer’s critical readings. Writers read what others have written, write (in a dynamic movement of close contact) what others have not written (in a wrenching away from reading), and read what they write both as authors and as readers. The ideal reader is a writer, and writers who are considered difficult pay homage to their readers by considering them all as writers (real or potential) on the condition that they have a taste for adventure. Poe/Sarraute. But in the chain, between them, there are other critical minds: Baudelaire, Flaubert, James, Stein, Proust, Woolf, Joyce, and, without a doubt, Russian writers since Tolstoy. Overlapping the chain, after Sarraute, there are others, among whom I would include Robbe-Grillet, though his critical writings have been greatly misused.

As far as I am concerned, in my workshop, the contributions of my reading, Sarraute’s writings about characters and plot time, and Robbe-Grillet’s writings about metaphor (though obviously their fiction came first in shedding light on the craft) completely determined my way of writing. Work on the word, word by word, the arrangement of a text, its sequencing as well as, on another level, the breaking up of the plot — what makes a rigorous literary system (James discussed it with regard to point of view and the use of one or more narrators) and what the formalists called a device — all come to me by way of Sarraute. With respect to Robbe-Grillet, what counted was the work on rhetoric, which led, in my case, to the systematic use of litotes and the systematic avoidance of metaphor within a sentence (indeed the extended metaphor, in a paragraph, a section, or an entire book, was never subject to this control) and to the use of preterition and repetition. This is a hasty way of putting it, but for the moment I am trying to outline a
fabricator’s way of reading, the kind of reading that drastically alters one’s understanding of writing.

As far as I am concerned, the group of writers that created the *nouveau roman* (and each of them for different reasons) taught me what writing is. Discovering them coincided with my apprenticeship, and their knowledge of the nature of literary work constituted a view so new, compared with what I had previously heard, that when Todorov introduced the Russian formalists to France everything that they taught me had already left its mark on the critical contributions of Sarraute, Butor, Robbe-Grillet, Pinget, Ollier, and Simon. It was important for me to understand what had happened to the characters in a novel and that any author worthy of the name (innovator, creator) was relieved of the role of puppeteer, that, in short, things were taking place elsewhere.

It was important to know how plot, at all levels of the narration, had been undermined from within. How if time— that philosophically and scientifically arbitrary notion—in the novel were truly to become time in the novel, it could exist only as its own time, without reference to “real” time; hence the broken-up “time” of the narrative sequences and the slowed-down “time” of these same sequences (in Sarraute from the perspective of what she is narrating, not in her writing, which is not slowed down). It was important to know that writing is material work from which one cannot escape into ideas.

I started to write when ungainly socialist realism tried to impose itself by force and as the norm, and when a writer who did not comply could be considered reactionary, bourgeois, and antihumanist. It was important that, through their work, the writers of the *nouveau roman* revealed and exposed the intellectual maneuvers that such a dictate imposed. They proved that while writing is tied to history, the work of the writer depends first and foremost on literary history. Governments, parties, and individuals could be charged with an idealism of their own for maintaining that ideology, ideas, the party line, and the good of the people had to be the primary consideration in literary work and for daring to dictate that painting had to be figurative (banning abstract art in the USSR) and that novels had to have a “likeness,” that is, be fashioned in accordance with what they called “life.”

But such ideas are ideas and are not transposable to the craft of writing or to the literary workshop as long as they have no literary form. As regards reading, apprenticeship through the *nouveau roman* allowed one to break away from a narrow view of literary genres. One can either reject the genres as obsolete or consider them (and criticism favors this view) as never existing in a pure state, or, like Sarraute, one can consider that the novel exists, that it is not dead but in
constant need of renewal. In the modern literary workshop, one can also, like the critics, disassemble the great epic, tragic, comic, and novelistic machines; extract fragments of form from a given genre, sometimes just an index of refraction, and bring it all to bear on another type of ensemble, thus modifying it systematically.

The epic has long been out of fashion, and it could even be said that the genre is extinct. *Les guérillères*, however, is made up of elements taken from the epic genre, and the *chanson de geste* or medieval narrative poem is suggested typographically in the circle: there are elements of the pagan supernatural (the goddesses); there is a heroic hero, a collective hero represented by a grammatical person. At the same time, my apprenticeship with the *nouveau roman* made me work on form with new techniques. There is no “story” of the hero, that is to say, no continuous story, but rather broken stories that multiply the meanings of the narrative and render it polysemic without destroying its unity. The text is based on short sequences, and the chronology of the narrative action is reversed, since the beginning is at the end of the book. The three parts that form *Les guérillères*, though separated by a circle, are not hermetic; there are certain independent sequences that from the point of view of narrative time belong to one or two other parts of the book, as well as to the part in which they are located. Some sequences could be moved to one section or another without modifying the tenor of the collective character, that is, the hero, and would have an impact only on the economy of the narrative.

Apprenticeship, in fact, and its relation to already existing works, comes not just from reading; it can also include writing exercises such as Proust’s systematic imitation of Flaubert (see Genette), which is the equivalent of copying as a way to learn how to draw in the field of painting. It would be interesting to know if the case of Proust is atypical or if, on the contrary, copying is part of apprenticeship. But I mention apprenticeship only in passing, for can a writer speak of apprenticeship after having already published a first book? Perhaps not, and yet one is in the workshop, working on each book as though it were the first.

Since I am speaking of Proust, of the reading of other writers, and of the understanding of literary forms, on an entirely different level there are words and groups of words taken from a particular writer that migrate to another and reverberate in the text, enlarging it and becoming the mark of a new practitioner, like a “brush stroke” in painting: when read or heard they are immediately recognizable. Such is the case of Proust’s “du côté de” (translated as “way,” as in “Swann’s Way”), a constellation of words taken from the first version of Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education*, in which the phrase is used in a geographic sense, as in “du côté de Mésèglise,” and which underwent the changes and fortunes that we know. With
“une fois de plus” (translated as “once again”), one is in a Robbe-Grillet novel. However, one has only to open Sarraute’s *Portrait of a Man Unknown* to find, as its opening sentence, “Une fois de plus je . . .” (“Once again I . . .”). This effect is usually linked to a paucity of words; sometimes a single word suffices, as in the case noted by Genette regarding Stendhal: “Cette femme si tendre” (literally, “that woman so tender”). The effect is striking because it goes well beyond what is generally produced by one or two words. One could say that these words function in the text as an active process: they are charged with meaning and charge the text in turn. These words have migrated, coming from another text, in order to multiply better the effects of their migration. They reverberate, modulate, and hold the form together.

Accordingly, what I call the first movement of literary work, the critical attention to already existing forms that includes a pragmatic approach, characterizes (as with critics working in the *after*) the relation to worked-on language, to literature. No writer can do without this work. Without this work, writing is impossible, even when—as is apparently the case traditionally—writers are wrong about themselves. There is an entire body of criticism by writers (including, for instance, Racine’s prefaces to his plays) that, while lacking the systematic spirit of modern criticism or its scientific rigor (because it keeps changing levels and addressing different kinds of phenomena with the same vocabulary without creating categories like the “pure” literary critic), still indicates quite clearly the directions of research, the practice, and the preoccupations of the writers involved. Its goal is not to describe but to allow the act of making.

It would be appropriate to work on this body of criticism by focusing on what it has helped accomplish instead of on the gap (the failure) between the intentions of authors and how their projects have been carried out. I mentioned the names of a few writers who worked before and during the period of the *nouveau roman*, but I have not discussed the borderline cases of writers such as Ricardou and the Tel Quel group, whose entire critical activity seems to me to prevail over their writing work. In all fairness, the idea that writers do not always know what they are doing is one shared by writers themselves with respect to the work of others as well as their own. For, when one wants to innovate, one works blindly, very painfully, like a mole, with known elements that are like points of reference and flashes of light in the darkness. One works blindly because what has to be done is not there yet; at first there is nothing to see, aside from the whiteness of the blank page (which is there for the darkness). One is blind in the white of the page.
Notes


2. Wittig explains what she means by *after* in the longer, unpublished version of the text: critics work in the “après” (after), writers in the “avant” (before). — Trans.


4. Sarraute, Age of Suspicion, 74. Sarraute is here quoting Philip Toynbee on Flaubert.