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Monique Wittig

The masculine no longer takes precedence

Twenty years ago, the lesbian and feminist theorist and writer who criticized heterosexuality and denaturalized the categories of sex in the 1970s died. A pioneer who paved the way for the queer thought of the 90s, and whose thought intersects today with the demands of trans and non-binary people.

By Cécile Daumas

She was called "Théo" by her friends in the Women's Liberation Movement (MLF), sometimes wore a man's cap, called herself an "écrivain" rather than an "écrivaine", in order to reappropriate for herself the masculine, supposedly "universal" gender, and had a remarkable sense of humor. "There's someone even more unknown than the soldier: his wife"; "One man out of two is a woman": these anonymous slogans, political signatures of the feminism of the 1970s, were written by her. Twenty years ago, on January 3rd 2003, Monique Wittig, one of the major theorists of feminism and lesbianism, died in the United States. She died prematurely at 67 years old, far from France, a country that she had left in pain in 1976 after a fundamental theoretical dissension within the pioneer movement that she had cofounded: the MLF.

"Lesbians are not women"

If she died in relative indifference on the French side, she was recognized, read and commented on in the United States, where she was a professor at the University of Arizona, in Tucson, in the Department of Gender and Women's Studies. Too radical for France, her thinking on gender categories and sexuality was appreciated and discussed in the American intellectual and feminist milieu. It was precisely in New York, in 1978, that she first pronounced one of her most famous sentences: "Lesbians are not women." In the

room, stupefaction and silence followed the theoretical protrusion, recalls feminist Louise Turcotte. Enigmatic, this affirmation might resemble the Beauvoirian "one is not born a woman, one becomes one", one step further in the deconstruction of the "woman" subject.

For Monique Wittig, heterosexuality was not just a simple sexual orientation but a political regime that ensures the domination of men. It is an ideological organization with two unnatural categories, men and women, "labels" of oppression. Because they have left this authoritarian regime, she argues, lesbians are not women. "She was the first to have theorized heterosexuality as a political regime," analyzes Ilana Eloit, assistant professor in gender and sexuality studies at the University of Geneva and a Monique Wittig specialist. "We can hear this theoretical and critical discourse on heterosexuality as a constraint again today, whereas at the time this was criticized and misunderstood in France."

By deconstructing gender and criticizing the heterosexual injunction from the late 70s, Monique Wittig was ahead of her time. She came before the gay and lesbian political movement, from PACS to "mariage pour tous", and today, twenty years after her death, comes into contact with the #MeToo feminist revival and trans and non-binary demands. "By questioning the feminine as a category, she offered new perspectives," analyzes Théo Mantion, a doctoral student at Harvard University and a specialist in Monique Wittig. "She wanted to destroy gender as a category, that is to say as a tool of differentiation and hierarchization. As a result, she reinvested the question of the universal with a charge of new radicality."

In the United States, her founding text *The Straight Mind* was published in 1992, and was rejected by French publishers. This collection of texts was only translated in 2001 thanks to the mobilization of gay and lesbian intellectuals. At that time, the writer Virginie Despentes and the philosopher Paul B. Preciado already read her – an initial fan club joined by the new feminist and LGBT public. Her literary works are now being reissued, such as *Le Corps Lesbien*, which will be published on Thursday (see opposite), fifty years after its initial release, with a previously unpublished afterword by the author. Last year, it was the *Voyage sans fin*, ("l'Imaginaire", Gallimard) a poetic and lesbian reinterpretation of Don Quixote. The actresses Adèle Haenel and Nadège Beausson-Diagne gave a reading at the Maison de la poésie in Paris. For Monique Wittig, language is also a battlefield – and one on which she set off very early in her life.

"I will escape the dependence of women".

In 1964, she is a tidy young girl, wearing a coat with her knees tucked in, hair cut into a bob, sitting on a velvet *chamarré* sofa, having been awarded the Prix Médicis for her first novel, *The Opoponax*. She was only 28 years old, the second woman to receive such an

award, acclaimed by the critics and supported by the New Novel movement. Marguerite Duras and Nathalie Sarraute praised her, and they became friends. Already, this novel, beyond its literary ambition, is a formal investigation into getting rid of the imprint of gender on language. A novel about childhood, *The Opoponax* follows the young Catherine Legrand through the use of the pronoun "on", consciously leaving aside the "elle" ["she"], which is too feminine and essentializing.

In *Les Guérillères* her second novel, published in 1969, the pronoun "elles" triumphs: a troop of women fighters revolting against the yoke of male oppression. Long before the arrival of inclusive writing, Monique Wittig's ambition was to "change the subaltern and othered position of the feminine in language and in society", analyses the researcher Stéphanie Kunert (3).

Early on, she had in mind the seed of what would become her line of conduct and thought. "I remember that I made a conscious decision at the age of 12: I would escape the dependence of women, I would not have the life of a woman who serves a man, who does not have a life of her own." She was secretive, little was known about her, about her character. "My Wild Sister," as her younger sister Gille called her, and the title of a book of photos she dedicated to Monique in 2008 a few years after her death. Monique was born in 1935 in Dannemarie in Alsace, Gille in 1938 in Manspach: life in the country, bike rides, swings, the dog Flocky, the war too, bombings at night.

In 1968, as a well-known writer, awarded the Médicis, she participated in the occupation of the Sorbonne, and that year also translated Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, a worldwide hit in its critique of consumer society. Between Marxist and feminist theory, she co-founded the MLF with Antoinette Fouque, Josiane Chanel and Suzanne Fenn, which was joined by Christine Delphy among others. Her role is predominant in the women's movement. She wrote the founding text of the organization, "Combat pour la libération de la femme", published in May 1970 in the newspaper *l'Idiot international*.

Abolition of gender differences

She participated in the first public demonstration of the MLF on August 26, 1970, which attempted to lay a wreath in honor of the unknown soldier's wife – even more unknown than he. Under the Arc de Triomphe, we see her with her banner "One out of two men is a woman", a critique of the universal masculine. In April 1971, she signed the 'Manifesto of the 343' for the right to abortion. For Monique Wittig, a materialist feminist, the class struggle was reinforced by the gender struggle, but she goes even further than this. She wants lesbians to be recognized within the movement - she will be part of the creation of the Gouines Rouges (Red Dykes) in 1971 - and theorizes the end of the "category of woman". This will set off a clash with the MLF. At that time, the feminist movement was,

for the most part, of a differentialist nature, organized around the "woman subject". Heterosexuality remained insurmountable. "For Wittig, patriarchal domination is inseparable from the the obligatory nature of heterosexuality," analyses Ilana Eloit. "By connecting patriarchy and heterosexuality, she made an important break within the feminist theory of the time."

Refusing to make the category of woman the entry point of feminism, she opened, theoretically and early on, the movement to other sexualities and other gender identities. But she was not followed by others: this violent conflict provoked her departure to the United States in 1976. Long unknown to the public, her role within French feminism has been rehabilitated, notably by Ilana Eloit's thesis published in 2018. The writer-theorist said later, in 1999, in an interview given to Libération: "I knew the guillotine, had my head chopped off. It was horrible."

On the other side of the Atlantic, her ideas, rejected in France, will meet with queer theory at the turn of the 1990s. Developed here in France, then recognized over there in the United States, before coming back here newly mythologized, her thought is typical of this intellectual back and forth between the two countries, specific to "la French Theory."

It was Judith Butler, the goddess of gender studies, who revived Wittig by quoting her in her landmark work *Gender Trouble*, published in 1993 and only translated into French in 2005. "She is a very important reference for Butler because she thinks through the articulation between gender binarism and sexuality, a theoretical gesture at the heart of queer theory," analyses Ilana Eloit. "It is as part of this continuity that Butler will consider the link between what she calls the heterosexual matrix and gender domination." Judith Butler also criticizes her. A feminist materialist, Wittig theorized the abolition of the differences of sex and the roles of gender that Butler, as a philosopher, judges utopian. For her, one cannot escape power structures, but one can subvert gender norms by multiplying identities and roles. In the United States, Monique Wittig also lived her great love, Sande Zeig, who was her companion until her final days.

Twenty years later, she has never been so inspiring. A double colloquium has been organized at the University of Berkeley in March and the University of Geneva in June. Numerous theses are in progress, and the analysis of her work is far from over - her archives are kept at Yale University, in the United States. A major figure in French feminism, a precursor theorist of queer thought, an avant-garde writer who theorized the way language acts on reality, she irrigated various fields of creation, even including contemporary art (Tarek Lakhrissi, Jennifer Caubet, Théo Mercier). To celebrate her throughout the year, a hashtag #Wittig2023 has been created – she is finally of her time. "She combined a modernist practice, the assurance that formal work transforms reality, with a materialist consciousness, thinking through forms of oppression and domination," analyzes Theo Manton. A double alloy to rearm the thought of 2023?

(1) The Association des Ami-es de Monique Wittig, created in 2014, will gather on Tuesday at Père-Lachaise, in Paris, for a tribute. On the Wittigian Studies website, all the events that will take place in 2023.

(2) *La Pensée* straight by Monique Wittig, translation by Sam Bourcier published in 2001 by Balland "le Rayon", the first French LGBT literary collection, created by the writer Guillaume Dustan. In 2001, Suzette Robichon and Sam Bourcier organized a colloquium on his thought.

(3) "The "sexism/racism" analogy: a reading of Wittig," *Comment s'en sortir?* (issue 4, spring 2017).

(4) Denomination given in the United States to designate the French thinkers of post-structuralism, from Derrida to Foucault.