

Tribute

Monique Wittig in four quotes explained

Octave Larmagnac-Matheron published on January 03,

Twenty years ago Monique Wittig passed away. Emblematic figure of the Women's Liberation Movement and pioneer of gender studies, she raised lesbianism to the level of a political choice. We look back at the major contributions of her thinking in four quotations from her major work, *La Pensée straight* (Balland, 2001).

"What makes a woman is a particular social relation to a man "

This is the starting point and neuralgic center of Monique Wittig's materialist feminism:

"man" and "woman" are not natural categories, but sociohistorical constructions indissociable the one of the other, articulated the one to the other by a relation of "*domination*" comparable to the "*serfdom*": the regime of "*the obligatory heterosexuality*", "*social system based on the oppression and the appropriation of the women by the men*". This is demonstrated by numerous cultural expressions that reveal the truth of the sexual relationship: "*If we judge by the expressions of "desire" that men use with women (rape, pornography, murder, violence and systematic humiliation), it is not desire that is at stake here, but rather an exercise in domination.*"

"**The essentialization of this sexual relationship**, whose other name is "heterosexuality", is a way of establishing the oppression of one class by the other by making it an eternal, unquestioned and unquestionable reality - a way of nipping in the bud any movement of revolt by making an "opposition" a simple "difference". "*Masculine/feminine, male/female are categories that serve to conceal the fact that social differences always belong to an economic, political and ideological order. [...] Woman is not each one of us but a political and ideological construction that denies "women" (the product of a relation of exploitation). Woman is only there to make things confusing and to hide the reality of "women".* This essentialization of the sexual relation is rooted in a naturalization of "the" woman where the question of maternity becomes primordial: "*A woman is a body considered exclusively [...] according to a finality of engendering proper to a heterosexual regime.*"

"The class of the men appropriated the universal "

Women and men belong thus to two unequal classes, of which only one can claim to the universal, according to Monique Wittig: *"Historically, one can note that the class of the men appropriated the universal and the possibility of manipulating it to its account without that it seems even to have abuse of power, in sum "naturally". If the man is as at home in the universal, it is however that the universal such as it was expressed historically is not really, that it is especially to the measure of the man. "It is necessary to understand that men are not born with a capacity for the universal which would be lacking to the women at birth, reduced that they would be by constitution to the specific and the particular."* This deviation is most evident in the way we spontaneously conceive of the human being: *"What has been considered human until now in our Western philosophy concerns only a minority of people: white men, the owners of the means of production as well as the philosophers who have always theorized their point of view as being absolutely the only one possible."*

"Monique Wittig does not call for an abandonment of the universal in favor of particularism, but on the contrary for a reinvestment of the universal in order to steal its ownership from man. *"Women should never formulate this obligation to be different (relegated to the category of the Other) as a "right to difference", should never surrender to the "pride of being different". [...] Neither the Thought of the Other nor the thought of Difference should be possible for us, because nothing that is human is foreign".* The universal - the real one, the one that encompasses all human singularities rather than caricatured and generic gendered differences - is the horizon that we must seek to reach, according to the philosopher. And it can be reached. *"That the universal has been historically appropriated, so be it. But a fact of such importance with regard to humanity is not done once and for all. It is remade, made over and over again, at every moment, it needs the active contribution, hic et nunc, of all the speakers to take effect without respite."*

"The category of gender permeates the entire body of language."

The term "speaker" is important here. For the appropriation of the universal by men is particularly powerful in language. *"The category of sex is a totalitarian category which, to prove its existence, has its inquisitions, its courts of justice, its tribunals, its set of laws, its terrors, its tortures, its mutilations, its executions, its police. It forms the mind as well as the body, since it controls all mental production. It possesses our minds in such a way that we cannot think outside of it".* It is primarily through language and its ideological information that "straight thinking" takes root. Indeed, *"the category of sex [...] forces each speaker if he is one to proclaim his physical (sociological) sex, that is, appears in the language represented in a concrete form and not in the abstract form [that] generalization requires, the one that every male speaker has the unquestionable right to use. The abstract form, the general, the universal, is indeed what the so-called grammatical masculine gender means."*

The feminine is always marked, signaled, indicated in relation to a supposedly universal referent, but which is in fact constructed in such a way that it coincides with the masculine. A novelist as much as a thinker, inseparably, Wittig, who emphasized how much *"each of us is the sum of the transformations carried out by words"*, has never ceased to make language work against its underlying logics, to disarticulate it, to destabilize it. Writing can become a *"space of*

freedom" and a "Trojan horse" against the ideology of sex. In her first novel, *L'Opoponax* (Minuit, 1964), Wittig recurrently uses the epicene pronoun "on" rather than "he" or "she": "With this pronoun, which has neither gender nor number, I was able to situate the characters of the novel outside the social division of the sexes and to cancel it out for the duration of the book." In *Les Guérillères* (Minuit, 1969), the repetition of "elles" leads to a decentering of language that makes the final "ils" appear for what it is: not a "neutral that would escape the sexual", but a marked term.

« Lesbians are not women »

It is perhaps the most known quotation - and discussed today - of Monique Wittig, who assumed its radicality. It is related to the following question: how to universalize the universal? The final objective is clearly stated by Wittig: "*This can only be accomplished by the destruction of heterosexuality. [...] We must destroy it and begin to think beyond it if we are to begin to think truly, just as we must destroy the sexes as sociological realities if we are to begin to exist.*"

But how do we go about it? For Wittig, we must secede - through lesbianism. "*Lesbianism for the moment provides us with the only social form in which we can live free. For centuries of history, "heterosexuality was so self-evident that it had no name. It was the social norm. It is a social contract. It is a political regime. An institution that has no legal existence.*" The political choice of homosexuality, its claim, forces the regime of heteronormative domination to say its name. Named, the heterosexuality can be put in question, contested. This politicization is decisive "*to become a class, to have a consciousness of class*" in struggle against another which oppresses it. The lesbianism is not only an operator of awareness: it constitutes already, in the facts, an exit out of the regime of the heterosexuality.

« "Lesbianism" is the only concept I know of that is beyond the categories of sex (female and male) because the designated subject (lesbian) IS NOT a woman, neither economically, politically, nor ideologically. Indeed, what makes a woman is a particular social relationship to a man, a relationship we once called serfdom, a relationship that involves personal and physical obligations as well as economic ones ("house arrest," domestic drudgery, marital duty, unlimited child production, etc.), a relationship that lesbians escape by refusing to become or remain heterosexual." »

The lesbian opens an essential horizon for the "destruction" of the deviated universal. "*To be lesbian, to stand in the forefront of the human or of the humanity represents historically and paradoxically the most human point of view*", because it is liberated from the sex. For Monique Wittig, to refuse the heterosexuality as sociopolitical regime does not necessarily mean to refuse all the relations between what the heteronormed system considers as man and woman. Lesbianism is first of all an operator of struggle, not a project of society. The horizon is a society where the question of the homosexual or heterosexual nature of the relation has no relevance, where the relations are questions of individual to individual. The lesbian is above all a singular subject, a "j/e" (*Le Corps lesbien*, Minuit, 1973) elusive, resistant to the assignments, whose desire can free itself from the standards.

(Translated from the French with DeepL therefore the text may not be consistent with the published English translation.)