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The Trojan Horse of Universalism: Language as a “War Machine” in the Writings of Monique Wittig

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One must understand that men are not born with a faculty for the universal and that women are not reduced at birth to the particular. The universal has been, and is continually, at every moment, appropriated by men. It does not happen by magic, it must be done. It is an act, a criminal act, perpetrated by one class against another. It is an act carried out at the level of concepts, philosophy, politics.¹

Monique Wittig

Monique Wittig is a unique and often lone voice in French feminist theory. Despite all the scholarly attention that has been lavished upon Continental poststructuralist thinkers, her works, which elaborate an ungendered, universal theory of the subject, have been largely neglected in contemporary debates about feminism, antifoundationalism, and the political public sphere.² This neglect, as we shall see, is more than an academic oversight: it is symptomatic of the presumed ontological categories of heterosexuality which organize, legitimate, and give meaning to the political relations of society and which are all too often inadequately interrogated by their postmodern critics; it is indicative of the blind spot in many French feminist theories of postmodernism — theories which purport to critique but in subtle ways reproduce gender as the central category of albeit fractured identities and of the subject in process; and it is expressive of the general silence that surrounds any serious discussion about universalism in contemporary feminist theory.

In a recent article on the postmodern feminist bugaboo called essentialism, Naomi Schor put the last point succinctly when she wrote that the “universal and universalism may well be one of the most divisive and least discussed issues in feminism today.”³ In certain respects, of course, universalism has been on the broader feminist critical agenda for quite some time. Early feminist critiques of traditional political theory, for example, contended that women were not and could not be included in Enlightenment notions of the citizen. The universalist, i.e., generic theory of citizen man, they argued, was a political chimera which concealed reductive because functionalist (Okin), privatized (Elshtain), and sexualized (Pateman) images of citizen woman.⁴ Focusing on the silenced and
repressed aspects of a political theory, these critics sought to delimit the
cultural authority of an academically sanctioned tradition which claimed
to speak a universal political language. They called for new theories of
politics which would reflect historical and contemporary modes of
women’s civic activism; they demanded a more inclusive understanding
of the public sphere that would incorporate the voices of women.

Students of postmodernism, however, approach the problem of universal-
salism and gender from a slightly different angle. Focusing on the col-
lapse of metadiscourses, they take up Lyotard’s claim that the “grand
narratives of legitimation” are no longer credible. That narratives which
tell stories about the march of progress and reason, about the dialectical
development of Spirit (Hegel), and about the triumph of the working class
(Marx), have lost (more or less) their cultural authority is a familiar
statement on the postmodern condition. For feminists who reject humanist
theories of the subject, extending the critique of universalism as
metanarrative to reveal its structural androcentrism has been especially
important; and the elaboration of “feminine difference” as subversive of
the masculine claim to universality has been absolutely central to that
critique. As we shall see, in the poststructuralist context of feminist
theory, to pursue a critical strategy that would seek fuller or equal represen-
tation for women in dialogical structures of language and politics must
founder on the very phallogo-centrism of representation itself. For the
“feminine” is not the position from which women might claim the uni-
sal status of the subject. Instead, to quote Luce Irigaray, the “feminine”
is the “hole in men’s signifying economy,” the “lack” that “might cause
the ultimate destruction, the splintering, the break in their systems of
‘presence,’ of ’re-presentation’ and ‘representation.’”

The result of these critiques of representation, however, has been to
strike universalism from the feminist theoretical agenda, to assume that
the very idea of the universal can no longer be entertained by those
feminists who are sympathetic to or who advance the critical project of
postmodern theory. The debunked political narrative of universalism, in
short, has become the accepted critical position from which feminists articulate
decentralized notions of community and radical pluralized con-
cepts of citizenship. Whatever the theoretical fruit of these arguments —
and some of them will be discussed below — the feminist critique of
universalism has become a prisoner of its own judgement. For if universal-
salism and the universal, as Schor noted, has not been discussed much in
feminist poststructuralist circles recently, this results from the uncritical
assumption that to utter these words with any degree of seriousness is to
rearticulate the metapolitical narratives of the Enlightenment. Stated
somewhat differently, to speak the word universal, to paraphrase Virginia
Woolf, is to reflect citizen man back to himself at twice his original size.
Indeed universalism and the universal, as Schor writes of essentialism,
“has been endowed within the context of feminism with the power to reduce to silence, to excommunicate, to consign to oblivion.”

Within the conceptual, academic, and, to some extent, artificial split that has emerged between “humanist” and “poststructuralist” feminists, those who are either reluctant to abandon or who would critically deploy the language of universalism in an attempt to articulate feminist politics and theories of the subject are too often dismissed as theoretically anti-quarian or politically naive. Thus it is not uncommon in the feminist literature to find that so-called humanist feminist theorists, such as Simone De Beauvoir, stand accused of allowing themselves to be seduced by the Hegelian Spirit, the Absolute Subject. Apart from the injustice that such readings do to as challenging a theorist as Beauvoir, the assumption that universalism has been rightfully and thoroughly disgraced as a political category for feminist theory has led to a different kind of seduction: a willingness to embrace French theories of difference for fear of remaining trapped in that looking-glass of androcentrism. More specifically, as I contend below, gender as “the enforcement of sex in language,” an enforcement that, Wittig writes, deprives women of the “authority of speech,” has been reconstituted in the works of some French feminists under the radical guise of écriture féminine (Cixous), parler femme (Irigaray), and the maternal semiotic (Kristeva).

The most widely read texts of French feminism in this country (those of Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, and Julia Kristeva) have been addressed critically, extensively, and from virtually every conceivable angle by feminist scholars. Some of these critiques, especially those that bring the charge of essentialism against French theorists of difference, are misdirected because they confuse the French concern with theorizing the “feminine feminine” (difference) with the “phallic feminine” (sameness). The result is a reductive account of the challenge that such theories pose to dominant modes of representation and of subjectivity. For example, to conflate French and American notions of difference, to identify say Luce Irigaray’s attempt to theorize feminine difference with that of Carol Gilligan, is to confuse the overarching French understanding of the “feminine,” which concerns the heretofore unsaid and unrepresented of patriarchal discourse, with the American attempt to revalue the represented but derided voices of women. However, whatever problems may be involved in the trans-Atlantic translation of their conceptual categories, French feminist theories of difference pose difficult questions for feminist theory as political theory, as a theory of citizenship, and as a theory of counterpublics organized around collective speaking subjects.

In this essay I address the twin problems of difference and universalism in feminist theory focusing largely but not exclusively on the theoretical and fictional writings of Monique Wittig. On Wittig’s account, notions of gender as sexual difference, however one conceptualizes the latter, re-
main tied to oppressive discourses of heterosexuality, to what Wittig identifies as political and cultural emanations of the "straight mind."12 Heterosexuality, she contends, be it naturally, socially, or discursively theorized, gives the lie to universalism; but so too does universalism give the lie to gender as sexual difference. Whereas French theorists of difference use the feminine to deconstruct the universal, Wittig will employ the universal to deconstruct the "feminine." Working within a poststructuralist context and with a materialist theory of language, however, Wittig’s writings negotiate critically the related problems raised by those who would critique androcentrism by reconstituting the “female” subject as a whole, positive, and unified identity as well as those raised by the liberal feminist search for an androgynous citizen self. Moreover, as we shall see, it is her radical and unflinching critique of a heterosexual episteme that allows Wittig to deploy the universal in ways that suggest challenging directions for feminist political theory.

I

The preceding discussion introduces large and difficult claims about politics, language, and feminist theory — claims which this essay can only begin to address. For to talk about French feminist and postmodern theories of the subject is to enter a series of complex and critical debates in which the meanings of such terms as the subject are themselves continuously contested. To introduce the problems of difference and universalism for feminists, then, I would like to begin with a concrete and, in my view, telling example of how the question of universalism has been formulated in the feminist literature: with the provocative article in Differences by Naomi Schor, noted above. Although her argument addresses the problem of essentialism in contemporary feminist criticism through a close reading of Irigaray, Schor’s piece tackles as well the theoretical quagmire of “saming” and “othering” which structures what she sees as the scholarly silence concerning universalism in feminist theory. Introducing the voice of Monique Wittig into this debate, I hope to show, allows us to move beyond the restrictive and politically problematic idea of feminine difference as an alternative to androcentric conceptions of universalism and of the speaking subject.

Schor set up the debate over “saming” and “othering” in feminist theory by contrasting the work of Luce Irigaray with that of Simone de Beauvoir. What unites these theorists, Schor correctly notes, is their critical concern with “the appropriation of subjectivity by men.” Thus Beauvoir’s famous statement in The Second Sex, namely, that “He is the Subject, he is the Absolute,” is expressed as well by Irigaray’s claim that “any theory of the 'subject' has always been appropriated by the masculine.”13 What distinguishes these two theorists, however, is their very different notions of the subject. Beauvoir’s “Subject,” with its “impressive capitalized S, reinforced by the capitalization of Absolute, its homologue,” writes Schor, is not comparable with “Irigaray’s subject, with its
lower case s and the relativizing quotation marks that enclose both subject and masculine” (p. 43). Whereas “Beauvoir’s subject is the familiar Hegelian subject . . . , a heroic figure locked in a life and death struggle with the not-self, chiefly the environment and the Other,” Irigaray’s “is a diminished subject that bears little resemblance to the sovereign and purposeful subject of existentialist philosophy” (pp. 43-44). Because she rejects as illusory any notion of the universal, Irigaray cannot share in Beauvoir’s project to include women “fully in the privileges of the transcendent subject” (p. 45). Indeed for Irigaray, Schor writes, “the goal is for women to achieve subjectivity without merging tracelessly into the putative indifference of the shifter” (p. 45).

If Beauvoir was concerned to reveal the mechanisms of “othering,” the processes by which patriarchy relegates all women to the fixed place of the “absolute Other,” Irigaray is keen to demonstrate the related but significantly more troubling process of “saming,” a process which “denies the objectified other the right to her difference, submitting the other to the phallic laws of specularity” (p. 45). On Schor’s reading, moreover, the twin problems of othering and saming reflect the very different categories of “homo faber” and “homo parl"'""""""n" which, she argues, organize, respectively, the feminist critiques of Beauvoir and Irigaray: “For Irigaray — and this displacement is crucial — the main attribute of the subject is not activity but language,” Schor writes (p. 44). Thus the speaking subject of Irigaray’s feminist discourse is a subject who speaks “a sexually marked language, a parler femme” (p. 45). For to speak woman, in Irigaray’s view, “is above all not to speak 'universal'; 'I have no desire to take their speech as they have taken ours, nor to speak 'universal'”(p. 45).

On Schor’s account of the debate between Beauvoir and Irigaray, “each position has its own inescapable logic:” “If all difference is attributed to othering then one risks saming, and conversely: if all denial of difference is viewed as resulting in saming then one risks othering” (p. 46). However, readings of Beauvoir but especially of Irigaray, she contends, which lament the inability of each to avoid the problems raised by the critique of the other theorist are themselves misreadings. For Irigaray, in particular, is involved in a theoretical undertaking that defies any attempt to define woman by speaking her difference. That is a task better left to men, as Irigaray herself notes. Instead the question of woman’s difference becomes the “question of the difference within difference” (p. 47). And it is Irigaray’s “wager,” writes Schor, “that difference itself can be reinvented, that the bogus difference of misogyny can be reclaimed to become a radical new difference that would present the first serious historical threat to the hegemony of the male sex” (p. 47).

Schor’s sympathetic and intelligent reading of Irigaray points to the problems involved in assuming that to speak of women’s difference is
necessarily to speak in an essentialist tongue. This is the same problem of conflating the “feminine feminine” (difference) with the “phallic feminine” (sameness) noted above. But if Schor would rightfully “de-hysteri-ize” the debate over essentialism that rages in contemporary feminist theory, pointing instead to the complexity with which Irigaray enacts what Mary Ann Doane calls a “defamiliarized version of femininity” (p. 47), she has done so by enacting a familiarized reading of Beauvoir, one which aligns this unreconstructed “existentialist feminist” unambiguously with that other source of hysteria in postmodern critical thinking, that of universalism. Thus it comes as no surprise to the reader of Schor’s article that Beauvoir is left behind in the first pages as the author moves on to presumably more radical theories of subjectivity as they are articu-lated in the works of Irigaray.

My quarrel with Schor, then, concerns, first, what is to be gained by setting up Beauvoir as the straw-woman of postmodern feminism, and second, whether Beauvoir does in fact “give herself away” when she writes that women can achieve greatness (i.e. subjectivity) in the world only at the expense of their so-called difference (p. 47). As I have argued elsewhere, the radical teaching of the Second Sex is not simply that woman is Other; nor is it that woman ought to share in the properties of the Hegelian Subject, capitalized or otherwise. Beauvoir’s brilliant insight was to see that gender effects a division in the speaking subject, male and female, a division which fractures the masculine claim to universalism and which denies women their subjectivity. For Beauvoir, however, the solution is not parler femme quite simply because there can be no unambiguous voicing of the “female self,” or of the heretofore unrep-rented “feminine feminine,” because there can be no gendered self that does not split, once again, the “female” subject into self and Other.

Beauvoir’s difficult task, I contended, was to take up this “ambiguous situation” assigned to woman and to locate herself not simply as homo faber but also as homo parlanus squarely yet indefinitely within the discursive space she discovered between the historical speaking subjects called women and the patriarchal monolith called Woman. For Beauvoir, the ambiguity that inheres in being and not being a woman is the troubling but productive tension that makes the feminist critique of universalism both possible and necessary. In Beauvoir’s hands, however, it is a critique that does not simply reinscribe women into a circle of specularity but enables them to reformulate what universalism must mean if it is to be what it claims to be, universal.

The difference that Beauvoir located between femininity as patriarchal ideology and femininity as a complex and contradictory component of women’s psychic social existence, then, is crucial to a feminist critique of universalism and it is necessary for a feminist rethinking of the universal. French theorists who follow more closely in the tradition of Beauvoir, for
example those who write in the French feminist journal *Questions féministes*, have pointed to the néoféminité which, they argue, shapes the discourse of those who write in journals such as *Psychoanalyse et politique*. While these debates are too complex to discuss in detail here, we might note that the central concern of (in this country) neglected French feminists such as Colette Guilhaumon, Monique Plaza, Christine Delphy and, as we shall see shortly, Monique Wittig, is to point out how political questions of social and economic inequality are eclipsed in French feminist discourse by the overriding obsession with writing the feminine. My purpose here, however, is not to summarize or to adjudicate, as if either were possible, between what can only be construed as another artificial dichotomy in French feminist theory. Instead, I want to address the related political questions of universalism and of speech by turning to the critique of heterosexuality and language elaborated in the writings of Monique Wittig.

II

In a 1981 article on French feminist theory, Helene Vivienne Wenzel writes perceptively that “Wittig’s works take the reader on a journey through time and space, self and other, language and culture, to arrive ultimately at a genesis of a new language, and its redefinition of woman.” In Wenzel’s view, Wittig disrupts the phallogocentrism of dominant theories of the subject by displacing man himself, by exiling him to the outlands of her fictional universe. All “female worlds,” she argues, allow Wittig to radically reconceptualize women as speaking subjects; for it is on narrative landscapes where man has no existence that women can begin to “constitute themselves as speaking/naming subjects of their own discourse.”

Similarly, in a more recent article on Wittig’s novel *Le corps lesbien*, Namascar Shaktini has written that Wittig displaces the “absolute central metaphor” of the phallus with that of the lesbian body. Shaktini, however, who locates the “token ‘presence’” of the phallus in the center of Wittig’s book, suggests that the novel exposes “the essentially metaphorical nature of the phallus, and the political nature of metaphor.” Like Wenzel, Shaktini reads such novels as *Le corps lesbien* as political interventions into patriarchal discourse, an intervention in which the phallic subject is displaced by being replaced with the lesbian subject.

The importance of these readings for feminist theorists lie in their fundamental appreciation for the radical implications of Wittig’s critique of heterosexuality. If Wittig herself has been banished to the outlands of contemporary feminist theory, this results, at least in part, from the assumption that her writings can be slotted neatly into a phantom school of feminist thought called “lesbian theory” or “lesbian fiction.” The violence done to Wittig’s work is similar to that done to the writings of Beauvoir. For “taxonomies” of feminism, as Donna Haraway has argued, such as “lesbian feminism” or “existentialist feminism,” or, for that mat-
ter, “postmodern feminism,” can create artificial dichotomies between feminist discourses which seriously impede constructive political debates about subjectivity for women.21

However, to suggest, as Wenzel does, that “gender difference is not at all an issue” in Wittig’s fiction risks overlooking both important conceptual issues which link her novels to her political essays22 as well as the relationship of the reader, who exists in a larger matrix of heterosexual social relations, to the text. Focusing first on the political essays and later on her novels, I will argue that Wittig does not create the possibility of universalism for women by getting rid of men with a stroke of the feminist pen; instead she deconstructs the terms of heterosexual discourse, male and female, men and women, by deploying the universal to reveal the lie that gender speaks in the name of universalism and the lie that the universal speaks in the name of gender.

“Language as a whole gives everybody the same power of becoming an absolute subject through its exercise,” writes Wittig.23 There is, perhaps, no statement in all of Wittig’s writings which distinguishes her position on language from that of Irigaray quite so boldly as this one. Implicitly refuting the critique of Irigaray, Wittig’s theory of language is one which refuses to identify the category of the subject with the masculine. As Judith Butler has argued of Wittig, “the very plasticity of language, for her, resists the fixing of the subject position as masculine.”24 But gender, writes Wittig, “works upon this ontological fact (of equal access to subjectivity through language) to annul it as far as women are concerned and corresponds to a constant attempt to strip them of . . . (their) subjectivity” (“Mark,” p. 6). In contrast to Irigaray, then, Wittig asserts that gender, as a “mark” of women’s difference only, is both a “linguistic index of the political opposition of the sexes”25 and a powerful device deployed through the practices of speaking and writing which sustains the fiction not so much of the universal or of the subject but of woman as a sexed being, of the category of sex as definitive of those individuals called women.

In “The Mark of Gender,” Wittig elaborates the division that gender effects in those individuals called “women” as speaking subjects. “Gender,” she argues, “takes place in a category of language that is totally unlike any other and which is called the personal pronoun” (“Mark,” p. 4). We tend to think that such pronouns are neutral, for “I” or “you” — setting aside the third person singular “he” or “she” for a moment — seem to be unmarked positions in language which allow each speaker to enter language in the same way and which designate its locutors. But in reality, she points out, “as soon as gender manifests itself in discourse, there is a kind of suspension of the grammatical form. A direct interpellation of the locutor occurs” (“Mark,” p. 5). In French this gendered marking of the subject/speaker occurs because the locutor is required to proclaim its
gender in the correct use of past participles and adjectives. But even in English, where such marking does not occur, a woman is still put upon to “make her sex public” (“Mark,” p. 5).

Gender, as we shall, see, is not only a grammatical but a sociological, political, and material category of language according to Wittig. Beauvoir — to whose critique of gender and language Wittig is herself indebted — spoke to the latter point when she wrote that because the social context of a conversation in patriarchal society positions the “female” speaking subject as a “woman,” that subject is denied what Wittig calls “the abstract form, the general, the universal,” a form which the class of men have appropriated for themselves. Thus, Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex*, whatever she, the author, says, she is certain to be reminded that she thinks the way she does because she is a woman. For Beauvoir, the only defense was to reply,

“I think thus and so because it is true,” thereby removing my subjective self from the argument. It would be out of the question to reply: “And you think the contrary because you are a man,” for it is understood that the fact of being a man is no peculiarity.

The removal of her “subjective self,” of course, refers to the problem of being and not being a woman noted above. For Beauvoir, in other words, the problem of speaking for women is the problem of speaking “I” when this “I,” (which on her as on Wittig’s view constitutes the speaker as an absolute subject), is referred back by the interlocutor as a marked “I,” a position in language that, in theory, allows the locutor to make a claim to the universal but that, in conversation, reinscribes the “female” speaking subject in the particular. But, for Beauvoir, to deny that one is a woman, to say “I think thus and such because it is true,” is to deny one’s own self-conception, to negate not one’s natural but one’s social and psychic existence as a “woman.”

Rejecting strictly “nominalist” theories of “woman” as self-delusions, Beauvoir argues that to say “I am a woman” is the “truth” on which all further dialogue about language, gender, and subjectivity “must be based.” Negotiating the universal and the particular, Beauvoir both retains the idea that “woman is, like man, a human being” and insists that “such a declaration is abstract. The fact is that every concrete human being is always a singular, separate individual.” Thus to decline to accept the albeit ambiguous and mythic but nevertheless psychic power of that patriarchal monolith called Woman, she contends, “does not represent a liberation for those concerned, but rather a flight from reality.” For a woman, then, to counter particularism by denying her “subjective self” and asserting Truth is to claim the abstract form on the terms of an androcentric universalism.

Thus far from seeking to occupy unambiguously the masculine position in language, as some critics would have it, Beauvoir showed the impos-
sible position in which women stand in relation to discourse; discourse, however, conceptualized not in terms of inherently phallogocentric structures of Language but as context: the social, political, and economic context of gender relations in which a conversation takes place — a context that marks and inscribes both sex (female) and gender (woman) on the speaking subject; a context, moreover, in which the locutor, if she is "a woman," must inscribe as well sex and gender on herself (must say, "I am a woman") if she is to make a claim to subjectivity without merging into the "Man" that lurks behind the universal. Wittig, as we shall see, refuses to say "I am a woman" while advancing Beauvoir's critical project of rethinking the relationship of the particular to the universal.

Beauvoir's understanding of the body as a "situation," as Butler points out, suggests that the relation of sex to gender is an arbitrary one which is discursively constructed and legitimated as natural.31 Wittig extends and, to some extent, radically transforms Beauvoir's critique by focusing on the ways in which the bodies of "women," defined as "female" bodies, are ascribed social meaning through a heterosexual imperative, through what Adrienne Rich called "compulsory heterosexuality."32 According to Wittig, heterosexuality assumes the status of an ontological category in language, which obscures the socially constructed category of sex itself.

For Wittig, gender, as an element of language, does not simply reflect but constitutes, in crucial ways, heterosexuality as ontology; and it does so through a series of repeated acts over time, acts which produce the category of sex as a reality-effect. Sex, in short, is a "fetish," an "imaginary formation,"33 constructed in daily linguistic practices as if sex were the foundation of those practices. Language produces and re-produces sex and gender as part of the "immediate given, the sensible given."34 "Language casts sheaves upon the social body, stamping it and violently shaping it," writes Wittig ("Mark," p. 4). To destroy the category not only of gender but of sex in language, as we shall see, is a political task of the utmost importance. Indeed, Wittig is critical of the sex/gender dichotomy in much feminist theory because such a dichotomy leaves unquestioned the belief that there is a "core of nature which resists examination, a relationship excluded from the social in the analysis — a relationship whose characteristic is ineluctability in culture, as well as in nature, and which is the heterosexual relationship."35

Putting sex in nature, gender in society, Wittig suggests, enabled feminists to interrogate the cultural construction of femininity; but this strategy also allowed dominant discourses to acknowledge the distinction without rethinking the foundations of their diverse theoretical enterprises and their concepts of subjectivity. On Wittig's view, then, heterosexuality remained the "universal" category of such varied discourses as psychoanalysis, anthropology, sociology, and linguistics. "Thus one speaks of the exchange of women, the difference between sexes, the symbolic order,
the unconscious, desire, jouissance, culture, history. . .” (“Straight,” p. 107). What these discourses share, she suggests, is an ontological assumption: the “obligatory social relationship between ”man” and “woman” (“Straight,” 107). Stated more precisely, heterosexuality is the metanarrative of modern discourse; a patriarchal story of origins and of social transition which insures that even radical (although inadequate) ideas of bisexuality, such as those of Freud, and of the social construction of sexuality must eventually give way to the immanent tale of “men” and “women.”

As suggested above, although the ontology of heterosexuality proclaims the difference between men and women, it turns out, as Beauvoir understood, that only women are “different,” for “being a man is no peculiarity.” But the “concept of difference,” argues Wittig, “has nothing ontological about it” (“Straight,” 108). “Man and woman are political concepts of opposition, and the copula which dialectically unites them is, at the same time, the one which abolishes them” (“Straight,” p. 108). To invoke “difference” when speaking of “women” — whether one speaks of women’s difference as voiced but socially derided, in the American context, or of the “feminine” as the unrepresentable, in the French — is to recreate a “mythic formation.” Indeed Wittig insists that to speak of women’s “difference” is to “throw dust in the eyes of people” by imputing to what is a historical and political category an archaic, mythological status.

By posing the problem of speaking for women as a material and political question, Wittig, following the insights of Beauvoir, is able to interrogate language, and the structuralist and poststructuralist discourses that analyze it, as political issues which concern not only the material oppression of women but also the individual responsibility of those who proclaim and reinscribe heterosexuality as ontology. Discourses of heterosexuality, she argues, “speak about us (lesbians, women and homosexual men) and claim to say the truth in an apolitical field, as if anything of that which signifies could escape the political in this moment in history” (“Straight,” p. 105). Such discourses “oppress us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms”: “you-will-be-straight-or-you-will-not-be” (“Straight,” p. 105, p. 107).

Wittig insists that individuals take responsibility for the meanings they produce, specifically for the oppressive meanings they ascribe to those persons denied their subjectivity by being defined as women. Like Beauvoir, as we shall see, Wittig is critical of those theories of language which shift the question of responsibility from politics to the phallogocentric structures of Language itself. But because Wittig works from a notion of the subject as universal and of language as offering the possibility of universality, and because she suggests that volition is central to understanding the re-production of heterosexual discourses, her
critique of heterosexuality as ontology opens itself up to charges of humanism, to postmodern critiques of the subject, such as those suggested by Irigaray.

In what follows, I want to address the difficulties raised by poststructuralist accounts of the subject and to inquire as to whether Wittig does in fact, as Judith Butler has persuasively argued, fall back into the same metanarratives of the Subject that some feminist critics have located in the work of Beauvoir. For if Wittig assumes that there is a pre-social core called the “person,” which only subsequently comes to be marked as “female” or “woman,” then her materialist theory of language and her critical deployment of the universal, which seek to reveal the lie of universality as a politically contingent rather than inherently structural component of language, must reinscribe the category of the natural — a category which Wittig herself disclaims as illusory and oppressive.

III

The political question of language and responsibility, as we know, is a thorny one for feminists who work within the field of post-Sausserian linguistics. For the concept of the subject as the origin of meaning, it has been argued, is itself an ideological construction. As Louis Althusser put it, “the category of the subject is only constitutive of all ideology in so far as all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects.”

Ideology, according to Althusser, “interpellates” individuals, addresses itself to them directly, allows them to imagine a set of relationships to the real material relations in which they live, allows them to imagine that they are subjects, the source of all meaning. Althusser’s insight, of course, was to examine ideology as more than a set of illusions; for ideology is both real and imaginary — real in that it speaks to the ways in which individuals live their relationships to the actual material conditions that govern their lives, and imaginary in that ideology prevents them from understanding the social relations of power that constitute those relations.

Now developments in linguistic theory have complicated and extended the critique of Althusser to account for illusory notions of the subject as the origin of meaning. Advancing the work of Sausssure, theorists such as Emile Benveniste have argued that it is language which allows for subjectivity; language enables the subject to posit itself as an I, as the subject of a sentence. But that consciousness of self, of “I,” is only possible through processes of contrast and differentiation, through distinctions such as “not I” or “you.” “And so it is literally true,” writes Benveniste, “that the basis of subjectivity is in the exercise of language. If one really thinks about it, one will see that there is no other objective testimony to the identity of the subject except that which he himself gives about himself.”

Similarly, but from a slightly different angle, Jacques Lacan argues that the subject cannot be viewed as the origin of meaning primarily because
speaking, which involves learning a series of different subject positions, requires that the child enter a symbolic order which he or she does not constitute but which constitutes him or her as a subject. Thus the subject does not construct language; language constructs the subject. But if that subject is a decentered subject, argues Lacan, this results from the twin processes of “misrecognition” in the “mirror-stage,” a process in which the child identifies with an image that is illusory because whole and unitary, and from the split occasioned by the child’s entry into the symbolic order, a split between the “I” of discourse, the subject of the utterance and the “I” who speaks, the subject of the enunciation. The self that speaks and the self that is represented, in short, are not the same I.

Wittig both takes up and criticizes the insights of these theories. For her, the problem with theorists like Lacan is that they situate the problem of speaking for women outside conscious structures and institutions of the social domination of women and within unconscious processes generated by the subject’s entry into the symbolic order. By making language into a “fetish,” Lacan, in particular, obscures the material, political, and historically contingent character of language, she contends.

On Wittig’s view, moreover, Lacan’s theory of language allows one to evade critical questions of responsibility for meaning by offering individuals the specious structuralist excuse that might be stated as follows: “Language made ”me” say it” or, what amounts to the same thing, “Language prevented me from representing it,” with “it” being “the feminine.” As we saw in the more deconstructive approach of Irigaray, for women, this amounts to saying that language forces me to deny my own subjectivity because, in order to speak “I,” “I” must reaffirm the status of the phallus as the master signifier. Wittig’s own critique of how accepted critiques of phallocentrism can circumvent the traditional humanist concern with questions of responsibility is one that deserves more attention in the context of feminist poststructuralist debates about the politics of language and subjectivity.

The division of the subject in language, on Wittig’s view, involves specific and political gender issues which cannot be accounted for fully by the initial split occasioned in the mirror stage of “misrecognition” or by the subject’s entry into language. That Lacan, for example, contends that those who do not accept the phallus as the master signifier are doomed to schizophrenia is for Wittig an elision of the central political question of domination. Wittig reads Lacanian categories like the symbolic order as ideological constructs which, on Althusser’s theory of ideology, “interpellate” individuals not only as subjects but as heterosexual subjects, as “men” and “women.” Without the oppositions contained in the terms “male” and “female,” “men” and “women,” it is implied, there is no culture (Levi-Strauss), no language (Lacan), and no meaning (Saussure); and heterosexuality is the “origin” of all three.
Nevertheless, the absence of the unconscious as a meaningful category for thinking through political problems of gender, language, and subjectivity is a disturbing one in Wittig’s writings. She seems to assume that language can in fact fully represent the subject of the enunciation as a whole, unitary being — a position firmly rejected by Lacan. Moreover, at times she seems to underscore voluntarist notions of what it means to break off what she calls the “heterosexual contract,” that is, to imply that the latter can be broken by the individual choices that primarily lesbians but also gay men make to disassociate themselves from it. In this sense, she deploys the terms homosexual and heterosexual as binary, absolute, and oppositional categories. To be a lesbian, to dissociate oneself from the heterosexual contract, is to be both a “not-woman” and a “not-man” according to Wittig. The category of lesbian is not a third gender but a transvaluation of sex/gender as the so-called core of one’s identity. This is an important and radical assertion, and I will return to it below.

In the context of voluntarist understandings of power and identity, however, I would agree with Judith Butler that Wittig underestimates the fundamental incoherence and impossibility of heterosexuality as identity. Because she rejects unequivocally psychoanalytic explanations of the subject, Wittig does not extend her own claim that heterosexuality is a “fetish,” that to be a “man” or a “woman” is a phantasmatic construct. And as identities, “man” and “woman” can never be “secured” but must continually be reproduced through the very mechanisms of language and the social institutions that Wittig herself has identified as oppressive. Thus by positing a disturbingly monolithic view of heterosexuality Wittig neglects its precarious character, its internal instability. This may have the unintended consequence of shoring up heterosexuality as a unified identity which can either be chosen or refused in its entirety.

Whatever its shortcomings, however, Wittig’s theoretical focus on the ways in which discourses, while purporting to explain, actually reproduce gender as sexual difference as heterosexual myth allows feminists to question the mechanisms, social, political, and intellectual, which deny women that moment of the becoming of the subject through language. Agreeing with Benveniste’s understanding of language and subjectivity, Wittig writes that “It is when starting to speak that one becomes I.” However, she qualifies,

This act — the becoming of the subject through the exercise of language and through location — in order to be real, implies that the locutor be an absolute subject. For a relative subject is inconceivable, a relative subject could not speak at all. I mean that, in spite of the harsh law of gender and its enforcement upon women, no woman can say I without being for herself a total subject — that is, ungendered, universal, whole (“Mark,” p. 6).

By invoking the universal category of the subject, argues Judith Butler, Wittig “confirms rather than contests the normative promise of humanist
ideals premised on the metaphysics of substance.” Following the insights of Nietzsche and Foucault, Butler understands the latter as the myth of an essentially pre-social, pre-discursive notion of the subject, called “person,” which only subsequently comes to be marked as a woman. On this view of the subject, its core (person) is distorted, so to speak, in being named as “female” or “woman.” Thus, on Wittig’s account, argues Butler, the destruction of the category of sex, as the destruction of an attribute only, would restore women as universal subjects. Retaining the category of the subject as agent, Butler writes, Wittig’s “humanism” assumes that there is a “doer behind the deed,” that, to paraphrase Nietzsche once again, there is some “Being” behind “doing.”

To assume that there is a pre-social, pre-discursive subject, argues Butler, compromises Wittig’s otherwise radical critique of identity, which can be found, she contends, mostly in her fictional writings. Wittig’s “foundationalist fiction” of the subject allows her to interrogate the limits of universalism but it also places her in the paradoxical situation of reaffirming the oppressive fiction of an “authoritarian” because absolute subject. Whereas novels such as Le corps lesbien and Les Guerilleres strive to decenter the subject and, thus, to suggest that gender and identity cannot be understood in terms of “being” but rather as “performance,” her essays embrace disturbing, if not totalitarian notions of “sovereign speech acts” (Trouble, p. 118).

But even the radical possibilities of her novels, Butler argues, which “follow a narrative strategy of disintegration, suggesting that the binary formulation of sex needs to fragment and proliferate to the point where the binary is itself revealed as contingent” (Trouble, p. 118), are finally contained by Wittig’s self-conscious deployment of the literary text as, what Wittig herself called, “a war machine.” The latter, writes Butler, seeks “to preempt the position of the speaking subject and its invocation of the universal point of view” (Trouble, p. 119). In so doing, however, Wittig, Butler contends, directs her attack on “the splitting of universal and particular in the name of a recovery of a prior and essential unity of those terms.” Hence “destruction is thus always restoration — that is, the destruction of a set of categories that introduce artificial divisions into an otherwise unified ontology” (Trouble, p. 119).

On Wittig’s own account, her fictional strategies are informed by her understanding of Marx’s claim that each new class that fights for power must, if only to reach its goal, represent its interests as the common interests of all members of the society. Understood as a political strategy, this claim assumes that there is in fact a group, called women, a “We” whose presumably common interests can be expressed in language because they exist in an empirically, although not naturally, constituted social reality. Likewise, Wittig contends that the universalizing of those interests would ultimately destroy their material basis by dissolving the
category of sex in language. Thus the narrative strategy of “universaliz(ing) the point of view of a group condemned to being particular” (“Mark,” p. 7) is effected through the “neuter” on (one) in The Op- oponax, through the third person pronoun elles in Les Guerilleres, and finally, in the first person written as j/e in Le corps lesbienn. In the latter text, the split j/e, writes Wittig, “is not an I destroyed but an I so powerful that it can attack the order of heterosexuality” by lesbianizing “symbols,” “gods and goddesses,” “men and women” (“Mark,” p. 11). The lesbian subject comes to occupy an absolute position in speech, an “I” that “reorganizes the world” from its point of view, an I that “lays claim to universality” (“Mark,” p. 6).

In Wittig’s writings, then, argues Butler, “there appear to be two orders of reality, two orders of ontology:” “Socially constituted ontology emerges from a more fundamental ontology that appears to be pre-social and pre-discursive” (Trouble, p. 115). Whereas sex is part of the former, its destruction through authoritative speech acts, through the conscious appropriation of the universal by women, assumes that there is a pre-discursive reality to which the j/e of Le corps lesbienn, for example, returns in asserting its claim to speech. If sex “violates a pre-social ontology of unified and equal persons,” then j/e restores the “right” to an “I” to women by inserting itself violently in language, by attacking the category of sex in language. But this assumes that there is in fact some place beyond sex and beyond power to which this j/e might return in asserting its ontological right to language, a language which is itself positioned outside relations of power. Thus does Wittig’s “I” assume what Butler calls “god-like dimensions” (Trouble, p. 117); the sovereign self reappropriates the entire world from its point of view.

Butler’s powerful yet sympathetic critique of Wittig raises important questions about the limits of universalism as a category for feminist theory. These problems include the difficulty of postulating a “We” noted above. Wittig places herself “within the traditional discourse of the philosophical pursuit of presence” and asserts that speaking, if it is to be meaningful, must invoke a “seamless identity of all things,” Butler contends (Trouble, p. 118). This “We” displaces the heterosexual episteme only to replace it with a homosexual episteme, which in turn assumes that homosexuality is “unconditioned by sexual norms” — a view rejected by many gay and lesbian theorists (Trouble, p. 121). Moreover, on Butler’s view, the implicit separatism that such a view advances creates serious problems for feminist politics, a critical position articulated as well in an article by Susan Suleiman.

My own position here is that readings of Wittig which label her a separatist — even intelligent ones such as those of Suleiman and Butler — acknowledge only to circumscribe the radical and deconstructive power of her work within a critique of her “humanism.” In fact, by
reading Wittig as a separatist it becomes far easier to associate her with the kind of humanism that both of these feminist critics would reject. Thus, writes Butler, even more damaging to Wittig’s call for women to assert themselves as absolute speaking subjects in fictional worlds in which men have no existence is the manner in which Wittig affirms the very category of the universal subject that, in Butler’s view, is itself an oppressive fiction. Would it not be wiser to pursue the radical decentering of the subject?, she asks. Instead of replacing the universalist pretensions of the “straight mind” with what might be called those of the homosexual mind, feminists, and especially lesbians would do better to play out the dissonant possibilities that exist in what Beauvoir understood as being and not being a woman, possibilities that are not outside of but that inhere in the fundamental incoherence of gender identity itself.

To address these problems in Wittig’s writings I want to return to the category of the lesbian subject and to her theory of the literary text as a “war machine.” Wittig’s “subject” I will argue is not so much a return to an ontological right of speech or to a pre-discursive fiction before the intrusion of gender in language. Instead her fiction deploys the universal as, what she herself calls, a “Trojan horse,” a simulacrum of Being and of the universal which not only pulverizes “old forms and formal conventions” (“Trojan,” p. 45) but effects as well a radical decentering of the subject as it has been conceptualized by the straight mind.

IV

“When I say that it is quite possible for a work of literature to operate as a war machine upon the context of its epoch,” writes Wittig, “it is not about committed literature that I am talking.”49 Committed literature, for example “écriture féminine” (“Trojan,” p. 46), she argues, is limited in its transformative power for primarily two reasons. The first concerns the question of what happens to the writer if one’s work is “banned by the group” or if the structures of oppression have been overthrown. Would the writer then be dismissed as reactionary or quite simply have nothing left to say?, she asks (“Trojan,” p. 46).

More troubling, however, is the second problem that Wittig associates with committed literature, namely the marginalization of the writer’s works which is effected through their containment in existing forms and conventions. One has only “two choices” in one’s work, contends Wittig: “either reproducing the existing forms or creating new ones” (“Trojan,” p. 46). Although these mutually opposed possibilities apply to both “straight” and to “minority writers,” for the latter the choice becomes far more difficult to negotiate. Disturbed as they are by the social invisibility of their subject, minority writers are concerned to voice “that which calls for a hidden name, that which dares not speak its name.”

Writing a text which has homosexuality among its themes is a gamble. It is taking the risk that at every turn the formal element which is the
theme will overdetermine the meaning, monopolize the whole meaning, against the intention of the author who wants above all to create a literary work. Thus the text which adopts such a theme sees one of its parts taken for the whole, one of the constituent elements of the text taken for the whole text, and the book becomes a symbol, a manifesto.50

When a literary text becomes a manifesto, Wittig argues, it not only “ceases to operate as literature,” it also fails to realize its unique potential to carry out “the only political action that it could: introducing into the textual tissue of the times by way of literature that which it embodies” (“Point,” pp. 65-66). If a committed text attracts attention to a particular “social problem,” so too does it compromise its power as literature. Thus the text that is identified as a gay or lesbian text is categorized as particular, as expressive only of those groups who identify themselves as gay or lesbian. Particularism condemns a text to silence; it insures that the committed text will be dismissed, neglected, fall out of print, or “only be interesting to homosexuals;” it results in the failure of a work “to change the textual reality within which it is inscribed” (“Point,” p. 65).

Wittig’s remarks about committed literature are at first startling. She seems to underscore those definitions of literature that have contained it within canonical notions of the Great Books. Yet her argument turns on an understanding of the universal that can only with great difficulty be identified with that of chivalric defenders of The Literary Tradition. The text that has become a political symbol, she insists, “loses its polysemy, it becomes univocal” (“Point,” p. 65). This loss of multiple meanings and multiple significations occurs because the “minority writer” has failed to make the “minority point of view universal” (“Point,” p. 66). To make a point of view universal, however, involves but certainly cannot be reduced to making a particular group visible. Stated more precisely, to make a group truly visible one must make it universal, otherwise that group recedes into the “already there,” into the “what-goes-without-saying” (“Point,” p. 67), into the matrix of heterosexuality. The committed text, in other words, stands in danger of being appropriated by the straight mind to enforce those very binary categories of male and female, men and women, self and other, which deny “minority writers” their subjectivity.

Understanding Wittig’s literary strategy for universalizing the point of view of those condemned to the particular involves grasping the distinction she draws between “letter and meaning,” terms which she invokes in place of “signifier and signified.” Whereas the latter pair “describe(s) the sign in relation to the terms of the reality being referred to,” letter and meaning “describe the sign solely in relation to language” (“Point,” p. 67). In a work of literary experimentation there can be an “equilibrium” of letter and meaning. The writer may attempt to eliminate meaning in favor of the letter or the letter may be made the meaning, the signifier the signified — despite, as Roland Barthes argues, the efforts of an author at
“pure” literary experimentation (“Point,” p. 67). Minority writers in particular, writes Wittig, “are menaced by meaning, even when they are engaged in formal experimentation.” What may be only a formal element in their work imposes itself as “meaning only for straight readers” (“Point,” p. 67). Thus even experimental practices of writing may be contained and interpreted as committed literature. If, as Wittig contends, “meaning hides language from sight” (“Point,” p. 68), then the task of the writer who would contest existing forms must be to make apparent how language constitutes meaning. Such writers must concern themselves with the letter, with the “concrete” of language. The problem with language, in other words, lies in its abstract character and in the meanings that hide the very processes that generate meaning from us — for example, how a pronoun used to designate a subject position in language becomes instrumental in “activating the notion of gender” (“Mark,” p. 5). Language cannot be seen; one “sees and hears only meaning” (“Point,” p. 68). This is especially true with words like “woman” or “women,” words that Wittig refuses to use in her work.

To make language visible is to engage in a process of defamiliarization, a process, however, which attempts not to make a reader see the “things” of daily life differently but to force the reader to see “words” differently: “as a writer, I would be totally satisfied if every one of my words had on the reader the same effect, the same shock as if they were being read for the first time” (“Trojan,” p. 48). Words, if they are to effect a political displacement of reality, must be deployed by the writer such that they preempt meaning in the mind of the reader. Wittig calls this “dealing a blow with words” (“Trojan,” p. 48), it is the literary text as a war machine.

Marcel Proust and Djuna Barnes, Wittig argues, transformed literature because they deployed words in such a way that homosexual became “the axis of categorization from which to universalize.” But the minority “subject” of their work, she contends — and this is crucial — is not the same as the “straight subject.” The “constituted subject” of Proust’s and Barne’s literary practice “is not self-centered as is the straight subject. Its extension into space could be described as being like Pascal’s circle, whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere” (“Point,” p. 65). This “fracturing” and centering of the subject is necessary if the text is to displace the totalitarian because exclusively male subject of compulsory heterosexuality, if the text is to produce the homosexual subject as the universal subject as a reality effect.

To produce the minority as universal subject, the “writer must first reduce language to be as meaningless as possible in order to turn it into a neutral material — that is, raw material” (“Trojan,” p. 47). Words can act as a “Trojan Horse,” Wittig suggests, because the reader “recognizes” them, takes them into her or his cognitive world, much like the Trojans took the Horse into their city, completely unaware that words, like that
Horse, are a “war machine.” More precisely, because they are familiar words can enter the consciousness of the reader as signs that seem to refer to real objects; they can, in short, be adopted by the reader as “real,” as the already known, but also combined, organized, and deployed by the writer in ways that explode the real, the referent, for which they were thought to stand. While Wittig’s choice of the phallic Trojan Horse as a metaphor for lesbian writing may seem curious, it is actually appropriate. For what changes must take place in the mind of the reader, we might ask, when out of the phallic Horse comes not the male warrior but the lesbian subject?

Wittig employs the Trojan Horse strategy of writing in several ways. Although she uses names and characters, she dissociates the universal subject of on, elles, and jie from any “person” in her novels. In Les Guerilleres, for example, the “I” of discourse, the subject of the utterance cannot be identified with the “I” who speaks, the subject of the enunciation. Indeed the latter, as we shall see, is dissolved into the fabric of the text itself. The novel, which tells a “story” of the war waged by modern Amazonians, breaks with traditional narrative form by constituting itself in descriptive fragments written in the present tense.51 These fragments are themselves interrupted repeatedly by pages on which are printed names which do not correspond to any individual characters in the novel:

METTE KHDIOTA MICHAELA  
PHANO HUGETTE LELIA  
SIDONIA OMAYA MERNEITH  
INIBRINA WUANG QUIANG  
ASPASIA HANNA LETTIA  
NORA BENOITE RADEGONDE52

As Nina Auerbach has noted, “Though these names take on their own incantatory life, the empty resonance of their sound is also the death of the real people we used to read in novels to meet.”53 Actually, according to Toril Moi, Auerbach’s reading of these names as being spoken by someone is a misreading. For “Wittig’s text in fact nowhere indicates that the names are spoken by anyone: the ‘ritualistic chanting’ represents Auerbach’s own attempt to attribute the fragmented text to a unitary human voice.”54 In Wittig’s terms, the text would become “univocal,” it would lose its “poly-seny” and hence its force as literature. Auerbach, Moi contends, longs for an end to the war, for a time when “it would be possible to return to the individuality of Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy,”55 characters in another text examined by Auerbach, namely, Little Women.

“When the text no longer offers an individual grasped as the transcendental origin of language and experience,” writes Moi, humanist feminism must lay down its arms.56 Although her reading is persuasive and counters that of Butler, Moi’s self-proclaimed war against humanism and, in particular, its “Anglo-American” feminist adherents repeats a familiar divide and conquer strategy. Once the paper dragon of the humanist
subject has been reduced to nothing but tattered colored streamers, Moi suggests, feminists can get on with the serious intellectual work that has yet to be done in the name of postmodernism.

My own position on the usefulness of Wittig’s novels for rethinking problems of humanism, of the universal, and of the speaking subject approaches her fiction somewhat differently. The “performative theory of gender” articulated by Butler, I would argue, is not diminished but given an evocative political meaning in Wittig’s texts. The lesbian subject cannot become a man to become a subject because to adopt the consciousness of a man assumes that one adopts “two ‘natural’ slaves:” those constituted as Other in the terms race and gender.\(^57\) In contrast, the lesbian is a thoroughly political subject, a provisional subject, an invented “epic” subject, which is created in Wittig’s writings as a universal subject without a name, without an Other, and with no recourse to a pre-social, pre-discursive identity.

If Wittig, in contrast to Beauvoir, refuses to say “I am a woman,” it is because she understands that “woman” must always dissolve the “I” that makes a claim to subjectivity into the Other for the masculine subject — that colonizing “I” which has a tendency to lurk everywhere” in language (“Mark, p. 9). Choosing to work instead with pronouns, such as jie and on, unqualified by nouns such as “woman” (“I am” rather than “I am a woman”), Wittig’s novels give form to her theoretical claim that personal pronouns are “the only linguistic instances that, in discourse, designate its locutors and their different and successive situations in relationship to discourse” (“Mark,” p. 4). As “the pathways and the means of entrance into language,” such pronouns may be deployed by the writer to represent persons rather than a “fictive sex,” which is represented by a noun such as “woman.”

Thus on, in The Opoponax, she writes, allowed her to avoid the related problems of gendering and numbering because on is “neuter” and can represent a certain number of people successively or all at once while still remaining singular (“Mark,” p. 6). By bending on to designate both the particular and the universal simultaneously, she uses it as “a delegate of a whole class of people, of everybody, of a few persons, of I (the I of the main character, the I of the narrator, and the I of the reader)” (“Mark, p. 8).

Similarly, the jie of Le corps lesbien like the elles of Les Guerilleres are constituted in and through language but not through an individual speaking subject. This “I,” attached to no person, but clearly detached from those persons called men, gives the lie to the naturalness of sex and to the universality of the universal, that is, whenever the category of sex is present. Wittig’s critical comments about the English translation of elles as “the women” reveals the complexity of her deconstructive project. For “by turning my elles into the women,” she writes, the translator
destroyed the “effect of my attempt” by “destroying the process of universalization” (“Mark,” p. 9).

“Femme and butch,” writes Butler, which disrupt the naturalness of “masculine” and feminine” cannot be construed as chimerical representations of originally heterosexual identities: “Gay is to straight not as copy to original, but, rather, as copy is to copy” (Trouble, p. 31). But if such mimicry in gesture, voice, and speech challenges and disrupts gender identity, as Butler persuasively contends, if the performance of the “butch” or “femme” does not underscore but contests heterosexuality as ontology, so too do Wittig’s on, elles, and j/e contest through parody the Absolute Subject of heterosexual discourse. The parody is possible because the reader, much like Auerbach, awaits the entrance of familiar characters who speak, characters we can come to know, but who, in fact, we already know: “men” and “women.” As part of a war machine, on, elles, and j/e insert themselves in language in the same way that gender has inserted itself in discourse: the reader is caught, so to speak, unaware.

So-called lesbian separatism, moreover, may be essential to this literary strategy. Like the Parisians who read Proust’s La recherche du temps perdu, the modern reader’s search for a known “minority subject” that would diminish the social work of a text — that would console the reader, assure the reader that there is in fact a “woman” because there are recognizable “men” in Wittig’s fictional worlds — is frustrated when the “particular subject” is made universal. But because that particular subject is a lesbian, and not, as it was for Proust, homosexuals, the need to construct worlds in which men have no existence may be more pressing for the writer who understands all too well the workings of the straight mind.

To set up the elles, for example, as the “absolute subject of the world,” required some admittedly “draconian measures” (“Mark,” 9). The first two parts of Les Guerilleres eliminated the il(s) (he, they-he) so as to “shock” the reader, to force her or him to “see” the word elles differently. For in the absence of il(s), elles cannot mean “they-she” and it most certainly cannot mean “the women.” In order to challenge the binary of gender, in other words, the elles, to “become real,” has to assume an “epic form.” Indeed the point of the book, she insists, was not to “feminize the world but to make the categories of sex obsolete in language” (“Mark, p. 9). Similarly, the lesbian ”I” (j/e), of Wittig’s Le corps lesbien, does not assume the same position of the masculine “I,” for the latter always presumes the Other of the (would-be) feminine “I.” Instead, j/e simulates the universal; when spoken in a literary context whose subject is like Pascal’s circle, this “I” flows into spaces yet unimaginable in heterosexual discourse.
When deployed as a war machine, then, Wittig's subversive pronouns appropriate first by inhabiting and then by displacing the fictional category of the universal subject constructed in and through heterosexuality. These pronouns work like the Trojan Horse, that is, as simulacrum of that Absolute Subject which would deny those individuals called women the status of the subject while claiming to speak in their name. Wittig's "I," in short, forces the universal to live up to its promise by turning it upon itself, thus revealing its pretensions. In Wittig's hands, what Butler calls "doing gender" as performance becomes what might be called "doing universal." It is a strategy, literary and political, that ought not be reduced to naive humanist pipe dreams. If the "doer," as Nietzsche wrote, "is merely a fiction added to the deed — the deed is everything," so too is Wittig's lesbian "subject" one which demonstrates how the so-called ontological status of the "doer" is sustained through the ontology of heterosexuality. Thus, I would conclude, Wittig's deployment of the universal as a critique of heterosexuality invites feminists to reconsider the subversive acts that might yet be invented in the name of universality and its Absolute Subject.

Notes


7. For an engaged discussion of universalism and anti-foundationalism see especially the essays by Nancy Fraser collected in Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse and Gender in Contemorary Social Theory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). For critical essays on postmodernism which are largely sympathetic towards but also wary of the antifoundationalist critique for feminism, see Linda Nicholson, ed., Feminism/Postmodernism (New York: Routledge, 1990); Jeffer Allen and Iris Marion Young, eds., The Thinking Muse. For a critique of social and political theories of community based on notions of the universal see, Iris Marion Young, "Impartiality and the Civic Public," in Feminism as Critique, Seyla Benhabib and Duculla Cornell, eds. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 56-76.


13. Quoted in Schor, "This Essentialism Which Is Not One," p. 43. Page numbers in the text refer to this article.


16. Ibid., p. 275.

17. Ibid., p. 276.


20. Ironically, Wittig herself warns about being identified as a lesbian writer. When one's work becomes a political symbol, she argues, it ceases to effect a radical transformation in language and politics. See the discussion of "committed literature" Wittig's essay, "The Trojan Horse," _Feminist Issues_, Vol. 4, No. 2, Fall 1984, pp. 45-49. See as well the discussion in section IV below.


22. For a similar argument about the all female worlds of Wittig's novels, see Susan Rubin Suleiman, (Re)Writing the Body," pp. 20-22.


25. Ibid., p. 20.


28. Ibid., p.xvi.

29. Ibid., pp. xvi-xvii.

30. See my "I am a Woman: Voice and Ambiguity in _The Second Sex_."


39. Emile Benveniste, _Problems in General Linguistics_ (Miami: University of Miami Press, 1971), p. 226. Derrida advances the insights of Saussure and Benveniste to argue that the meanings produced in language are themselves the products of differentiation. Language, argues Derrida, is "not a function of the speaking subject" but rather the speaking subject is a "function of the language." One becomes a speaking subject "only by conforming his speech... to the system of linguistic prescriptions taken as the system of differences," Jacques Derrida, _Speech and Phnomomena_, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), p. 145, p. 146.


42. On Lacan's theory of language, of course, the "it" could stand as well for the I that speaks, the subject of the enunciating, whatever its gender.


51. This point is made as well by Suleiman, “(Re)Writing the Body,” p. 20.
57. Monique Wittig, “One is Not Born a Woman,” p. 49