

LESBIANISM AS A LIBERATING FORCE

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Is lesbianism liberating for the artist? My own experience suggests that it is. When at an early age I recognized the need to voice the poetry seething in me I observed my mother and all the women I knew of, living and dead, and saw that their lives were both destructive of women's independence and dignity and inimical to the pursuit of an art. Along with this realization I was not attracted to men (though as yet not fully aware of their collective roles as oppressors). I knew nothing of a lesbian way of life but my own needs and observations were guiding me in that direction.

When at the age of eighteen I learned of the Greek poet, Sappho, and her way of life I discovered what is now (inadequately) called "a role model." Seeking out all I could of her way of life and her times I found information of alternatives for women of talent and spirit not hinted at for those born where I was growing up. Not that my life could in any way resemble hers. She had every social and economic advantage. I had none. Penniless and with no formal education, no schooling after fourteen nor preparation for any sort of career, I had to accept long hours of wage-slave menial office labor while trying to salvage space and time for creative work.

Nevertheless, the sense of inner freedom, of broadened emotional horizons, was revelation. I could be, was in my heart, though a wage-slave, an independent woman responsible to and for myself. I am aware that young women today, sixty years later, may not see it that way, some hoping for more freedom in marriage, others compromising with or feeling compelled to lean on welfare. But I think that any job is preferable to either spirit-cramping indignity. I wrote a poem bidding farewell to the socially prescribed roles and in it was the line, "The wide world is to know." Security (how false is usually that promise) was scorned; the sense of adventure predominant. However brash it may seem, I feel that this sense of adventure is necessary to the artist.

Adventure always has been assumed to be the prerogative of men. On the other hand the life of housewife-mother is totally mapped. You can see to the end of it in middle age, menopause, loneliness. The role of non-heterosexual artist (in my case, poet) in the early twenties was unexplored territory. You launched yourself into the unknown. Who can say that is not exhilarating? It did not occur to me that there could be any greater difficulties attached to my preference for women as lovers than I already faced. The economic and educational lack of advantages aside, I was already at a disadvantage as a woman daring what was (still is) regarded as a male world. Being an aspiring poet compounded it:

even male poets were expected to starve in garrets. Already critical of the whole course of bourgeois society and its inequities, I did not fit in on that level either—nor do I wish to. Being lesbian could not make me more of an outsider. As the saying goes, "You may as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb." Whatever the hazards, the attendant liberation from conformity was stimulating, compelling one to think for oneself.

If I was little inclined to consider the aloneness ahead, the heartache and hardship, that soon became plain. There was no supporting feminist movement. I hoped to find comrades on the way, what I called "my people"; but it was taking a long time. I have had other women today say, "You had your gift, your art." Yes. That was what I lived for, in the face of every setback. But having talent is not unique. I believe that creativity is inherent in all humans as is the impulse in plants and trees to produce blossoms and fruit according to their kind and that it is a necessary concomitant of growth.

Generally, the domestic way is not compatible with the way of the artist. Nor, as a rule, with other spiritual and intellectual dedications. Can it be coincidental that most priesthoods, East and West, have called for celibacy? Sappho wrote: "I am forever virgin." And let us never forget that "virgin" in the original definition meant, not absence of erotic experience, but independence. For women, independence from men and marriage, hence domesticity. (A virgin forest is an unexploited one.) Even the Virgin Mary in the Catholic church is not depicted as domestic. She has a priestly role. As does every artist.

Does it become plain why lesbianism is liberating for the woman, for the artist in her? Or for those women born with or who cultivate what I call a lesbian personality? As I see it, that personality manifests itself in independence of spirit, in willingness to take responsibility for oneself, to think for oneself, not to take "authorities" and their dictum on trust. It usually includes erotic attraction to women, although we know there have been many women of lesbian personality who never had sexual relations with one another. Even where an erotic relationship exists the sensually sexual may be far from predominant. What is strongly a part of the lesbian personality is loyalty to and love of other women. And every lesbian personality I have knowledge of is in some way creative. To my mind this is because she is freed or has freed herself from the external and internal dominance of the male and so ignored or rejected (usually male prescribed) social assumptions that the constellation of domestic functions are peculiarly hers. The important point is that the lesbian has sought wholeness

Women 1915. N.Y. State Historical Society.
N.Y. Public Library Picture Collection.



within herself, not requiring, in the old romantic sense, to be "completed" by an opposite.

I do not wish to imply that a woman who is drawn to men, or who feels she loves a man, may not work to achieve these freedoms. But the men who will tolerate real autonomy in a woman partner, in whatever capacity, are so rare that I for one am skeptical of the possibility. It is a hard realization that a woman's need to love and be loved, to cherish and be cherished, may become her most painful hurdle—a bar to self-realization.

This pertains politically as well as personally. Despite the insights of some of our currently espoused ideologies and the (mainly expedient or token) gains for women as a result of their application, I know of no ideology that convinces me of the likelihood of women being rendered justice through a change of state master. The energies, skills and intelligence of women have been recognized and utilized within the several socialist countries more equitably on the whole than in the capitalist vocational arenas. But if unemployment looms, will women be rationalized back into "the home"? And what of our lesbian personalities, even today, in the socialist states?

I should like to be convinced to the contrary, but can anyone tell me of an existing male-birthed political system that would grant to a woman of lesbian temperament the uncontested right to freely live and love as required by her needs and nature? To create her art, write her poetry or voice her views in accordance with her vision of a society compatible with women's growth and flowering as *women*? I find it hard to give allegiance to the hope that this will happen in any society that requires acquiescence as a cog in a state machine, one whose practical daily politics is exerted to attain the predominance of that state over other states—the traditional, seemingly ineradicable male competitive stance. The means always determine the ends. No state power ever has acquiesced in its own withering away nor does any today show signs of being likely to.

Throughout my life I have defended the right to revolt against injustice. I have specifically defended the right of the Soviet peoples, the Cuban people, the people of China—all greatly to be admired despite reservations—to have the kind of society suitable to their needs and development. In the fifties I was called before the California Un-American Activities Committee, known as the Tenney Committee, and put on "trial" in the town where I lived for my views and political activities. I was accused of being "communist," which I was not. But one cannot expect tunnel vision bigots to differentiate between, say, Marxism and something resembling philosophical anarchism. Since I earned my living as a

free-lance writer and journalist I could not be deprived of a job by the publicity; but I did lose magazines that had been regularly accepting my work.

I am not blind to the dilemma my sort of radicalism poses. I have thought about it lifelong and have no answers, only increasing numbers of questions. Perhaps the artist, the lesbian artist in particular, always will have to survive within the interstices of the chicaneries and despotism of any power structure. But being more hopeful than that, as I am, can we as women, as lesbians, as artists, clearly delineate in our own minds what sort of a society we would like to live in? Any number of questions and tentative formulations should be advanced before we become arbitrary in our politics or suggest a course for women and the women's movement. In the meantime, can we at least agree not to give our energies or allegiance, to any ideology, movement, or existing society that is not demonstrating unequivocally its rejection of residues of discrimination against women?

I should like to end by proposing for meditation a brief comment by Mary Wollstonecraft made in an appendix to a collection of her letters written in the summer of 1796 during her travels in Sweden, Norway and Denmark. She had personally witnessed in Paris some of the excesses and horrors of the French Revolution, which nevertheless she espoused. The time in which she lived and wrote was no less disruptive of settled ways and views than ours today; and she had fearlessly exposed herself to their full tide. Burning radical where the eradication of human, especially women's, miseries and oppression were concerned, she wrote these considered words two years before her death:

"An ardent affection for the human race makes enthusiastic characters eager to produce alteration in laws and governments prematurely. To render them useful and permanent, they must be the growth of each particular soil, and the gradual fruit of the ripening understanding of the nation, matured by time, not forced by an unnatural fermentation."

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