

## “TO KNOW YOUR STORY IS TO UNDERSTAND” MARGARET WILMOT INTERVIEWS MIMI KHALVATI



photo © Caroline Forbes

Born in Tehran of Iranian parents, Mimi Khalvati came to boarding school on the Isle of Wight aged six. Her poetry, all written in English, has been published in nine collections from Carcanet, three from Smith|Doorstop and widely in translation (in nine languages). Carcanet: *In White Ink* (1991); *Mirror Work* (1995); *Entries on Light* (1997); *Selected Poems* (2000); *The Chine* (2002); *The Meanest Flower* (2007); *Child, New and Selected Poems, 1991-2011* (2011); *The Weather Wheel* (2014); *Afterwardness* (2019). Smith|Doorstop: *Persian Miniatures* (1990); *Earthshine* (2013); *Very Selected Poems* (2017). She is the founder of The Poetry School and has tutored extensively in the UK and abroad.

**MW** You once said of the English language ‘it’s my only linguistic home’. It’s also clear from so many poems that you are a Londoner with a hinterland that includes the UK countryside and in particular the Isle of Wight. You were born in Tehran of Iranian parents. You read widely in different literatures. Some poems of yours show great empathy for other cultures, places, the sounds of language. Do you have any sense of to what extent your foreign birth and heritage has influenced your poetry and any dilemmas it may have posed? May it imply a kind of double/second vision? Or an element of detachment?

**MK** I think that, having been born Iranian and then having left my home country, my family, my mother tongue and culture behind when I came to England as a child, is certainly the wellspring of my writing. And that wellspring feels to me like a very deep and empty well, hollow and echoing. Out of it I have drawn poems in place of water and searched for meanings in the echoes. I have almost no memories of my early years in Iran, very little biographical information about my background or family history and consequently little feel for narrative of any kind, my own or others’. But the lyric offers me a home where, lacking roots or empirical knowledge, my lived experience is nevertheless legitimised and can even be celebrated.

But yes, it has also presented dilemmas. Because I have written poems about my Iranian family, used Iranian motifs, words and allusions and, in particular, produced all those ghazals! – readers quite naturally have assumed that my heritage occupies a much larger space in my life and writing than it actually does, or ever did. Having never gone to school in Iran, I never learned to read or write Farsi and only relearned to speak it, rather badly, as an adult during a three-year stay in Tehran. The glories of Persian poetry are available to me only in translation and, apart from a few wonderful exceptions – Fitzgerald, Dick Davis – in rather inadequate translations at that. And yet, by emphasizing my unfamiliarity with Persian culture and language, I run the risk of seeming disloyal, of denying my Iranianness and my country. What should have been ‘a kind of double/second vision’, as you so beautifully put it, is alas only a single one, monolingual and lacking. The upside, however, is that, lacking roots or a fixed sense of identity, I am left open to take on any colourings I choose, chameleon-like, to borrow any nest, cuckoo-like, to make my home where I please. I love your suggestion that this might imply a sense of detachment. This is absolutely true and is I think one of the less visible consequences of my upbringing – almost a sense of unreality: a feeling that what is beyond and elsewhere has as much weight as what is in the foreground and under our noses.

**MW** I don’t know when you began your tutoring, but did you have a sense then that people who aim to write poetry needed more tools? Having done classes with you, I’m aware of the interest you

take in grammar, syntax and diction, and your warnings against sloppiness. Was this a factor in setting up The Poetry School and do you find there is a greater awareness today among aspiring poets of the need for skill and discipline?

**MK** I fell into writing poetry by accident, relatively late at the age of 42, and was horribly aware how little I knew about poetry in general, never mind about writing it. I'd been to drama school, a three-year training in the Stanislavsky method, in improvisation, movement psychology, voice production, diction, movement, singing, dance, etc. It was a comprehensive and inspiring training. But trying to learn about poetry in an ad hoc fashion, from handbooks, workshops, short courses and of course from reading the poets themselves, was confusing, frustrating, and somehow scary. At the time of setting up the Poetry School, there were few, if any, creative writing MAs focussing on poetry. So the idea of the School really grew out of my own need for instruction, which was happily echoed by many others. In particular, people wanted to learn more about formal poetry so I set up my Versification course, where I was learning myself as I went along, and there was a wonderful appetite for reading the classics in particular, and Graham Fawcett's reading courses proved very popular. In addition, we had our Lecture Series and Special Events and Masterclasses with visiting poets such as Jorie Graham, Sharon Olds, C. K. Williams, Mark Doty, etc. So the whole idea was to provide a structured and comprehensive apprenticeship, outside the academy, for aspiring poets, regardless of experience or qualifications. (Happily, I am still working with and mentoring many of these poets who have since published collections, are working as editors and teachers themselves, and have achieved notable success.)

I don't believe there is a greater awareness today among aspiring poets of the need for skill and discipline. I think perhaps that notions of skill and discipline have themselves been redefined. There seems to be a pressure on today's poets to produce *more*, a poem a day even, to work more quickly, publish sooner and more widely, as well as to publicise their work all the time. This, to my mind, requires enormous and exhausting discipline! Many of today's poets are, I think, more ambitious regarding subject matter, which is given considerably more weight nowadays than before; they are fearless in tackling political and public themes, more prone to topicality and anxious to tell their 'stories', particularly if those stories have wider cultural and social relevance; and happily, more multicultural and diverse in their identities.

On the other hand, in some quarters, the word 'craft' has acquired a rather derogatory resonance, as though it were a kind of add-on to the 'real' act of writing poetry. Craft, skills, tools – to my mind they are all part of the medium through which one seeks to discover the nature of poetry, or of an individual poem, or of a collection; through which to find ever-evolving answers to the questions 'what kind of poet could I be?', 'what tiny piece of the vast jigsaw that is our poetic landscape might I discover?'

**MW** Alongside the US poet Marilyn Hacker and some other contemporaries, you've engaged with several formal forms, notably the sonnet, sonnet sequences and the ghazal, and, indeed, often given us a 'new take' on them. A book such as *The Weather Wheel* conforms to the discipline of writing only in couplets, eight per poem. What drew you – a poet who also writes free verse with great sophistication – to this interest in form which somewhat 'bucks the trend'?

**MK** When I started writing poetry, in the late eighties, knowing nothing and wanting to learn, I unthinkingly assumed that learning would entail learning about metre, rhyme, syntax, given and fixed forms, and free verse. Many of my books were the result of this learning, trying out, practising. My first collection was a hotch-potch of this and that; my second an attempt to find out what I was doing in free verse; my third – *Entries on Light* – arose out of a desire to achieve more speed and lightness, hence the theme; in my fourth – *The Chine* – I tried to *think* in metre; having identified my first love in poetry as the short, song-like lyric, I developed the theme for *The Meanest Flower*; in *The Weather Wheel*, I tried to extend my vocabulary; and in my new

collection, *Afterwardness*, I hoped to write about my life experience as I felt it really was, rather than colluding with other people's assumptions about it. So each book has proceeded from a dissatisfaction or shortcoming.

Sorry – I have strayed from your question. I think what I am trying to say is that my interest in form – be it in free verse or metrical – always comes from the conviction that it is a divining tool. A magical and powerful, truth-divining tool. And I hope to tell the truth, whether it bucks or conforms to trends. Being able to write both in free and metrical verse gives one the freedom to discover very different truths, in different realms of the imagination, and to express, with the widest possible use of the voice and language, as many of the tones, colours, emotions and thoughts that our one self can carry. I do particularly admire contemporary poets who write such accomplished formal poetry: as well as the inimitable Marilyn Hacker, poets such as Gjertrud Schnackenberg, Patricia Smith, George Szirtes, Patience Agbabi, Hannah Lowe. It is so much more difficult and difficulty, virtuosity, is sadly neither sufficiently recognised nor prized today.

**MW** The 'music' of your poetry and the relative absence (apart from some sequences) of sustained narrative, seems to place you as a lyric poet. This is borne out by your deep interest in feelings', lover to lover, child to parent, parent to children. However, your poems often compass very varied elements including social awareness. Is this extension of the lyric mode towards greater inclusiveness something you've worked on? Do you feel that there is currently pressure to write 'politically' and what is your response?

**MK** Yes, you've hit the nail on the head! The use of pronouns, in particular the lyric 'I', has been politicised to the point of seeming proscriptive. Though I have no intention of being browbeaten by dogmatic theorists and critics, much as I might be in sympathy with their cultural politics, I do feel the need to move away from the strictly autobiographical approach and to be more inclusive, although I feel my work has always been 'political'. Much of my writing has centralised the figure of the woman, the mother, grandmother, daughter, and sought to present positive images of the mother especially, in a culture that I feel is predominantly mother-blaming (strangely, there is no word for 'mother-hating' that I can find). I have also tried to present positive images of Iran, Iranians and even Islam, for obvious reasons. In an age of mass migration and displacement, my collection, *Afterwardness*, although autobiographical, closely identifies with those who have lost their homelands, mother tongues and memories, and consequently have no 'story' to tell, having no knowledge of where they came from, who their families are, who they themselves are if they have no story. But since I am averse to signposting, I think the political thrust in my work is easily overlooked, for which I must take responsibility. I am also torn regarding the use of the lyric 'I'. Perhaps it is a limitation? Solipsistic? Perhaps it runs the risk of quietism? Or perhaps it is an eye through which one looks out on the world and invites it in? Perhaps it is the natural way in which words come into one's mouth, and to disguise that, by changing the pronouns for example, would be disingenuous? But to claim that the mainstream lyric promulgates a sought-for universality, a coded whiteness, is to deny its rightful place in many poetic cultures, not least in the Persian, in the lyric verses of Hafez and Rumi!

**MW** You once mentioned you were 'a good administrator' (I hope I've got that right). Even so, I imagine that there have been tensions in finding a balance between all the poetry associated work you do and isolating time for your own writing. Has that 'other poetry life' contributed to your own work? Or the reverse? Complemented it or got in the way?

**MK** I think it is always a struggle to find a work/writing time balance for most of us. And certainly my teaching and other poetry related activities have eaten into my writing time over the years. But, looking back, I am hugely grateful to have had the opportunity to earn my living through doing things I really love – working with other poets, setting up and running the Poetry School, running workshops and courses, mentoring and tutoring on residencies. In the process, I

have learned so much – about poetry, about life, about other people and myself, and I have made many wonderful friends. It is a joy to feel part of the poetry community, to see how supportive and generous poets are to each other and how our culture is enriched by all our collaborative efforts. And it is a marvellous antidote to the more negative aspects of the poetry scene and the worries about success, validation, and self-worth that beset us all too. It has been so rewarding to work over extended periods of time with many poets who have produced such wonderful poetry – in collections, pamphlets, journals – between them and contributed greatly in their working lives too, as editors, reviewers, publishers, organisers, etc. And poets, most crucially, are also our readers and audiences. My life would have been so much poorer without them.

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Margaret Wilmot was born in California and worked in the Mediterranean and New York before moving to Sussex, UK, in 1978. Her poems have been published in *Acumen*, *Artemis*, *Magma*, *Oxford Poetry*, *Rialto*, *Scintilla*, *Smiths Knoll*, *Staple*, *Temenos*... In 2013 *Smiths Knoll* published her pamphlet *Sweet Coffee*. A full-length collection – *Man Walking on Water with Tie Askew* – was published by *The High Window* in 2019 [ reviewed in this issue, p51].