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“An Interview with Marilyn Hacker”, by Ruth O’Callaghan



Marilyn Hacker has published eleven collections of poetry including *Essays on Departure* (Carcenet, 2006) and *Desesperanto* (W.W. Norton, 2003). An internationally renowned translator, she was former Editor in Chief of the *Kenyon Review* and now serves on the editorial board of *Siecle 21* in France and co-edits the University of Michigan *Poets on Poetry* series. Her new collection, *Names*, will be published by W.W. Norton in the fall of 2009.

ROC: *Presentation Piece*, your first book, was met with critical acclaim, receiving the National Book Award in 1975. Did early success affect your writing and what were your influences at that time?

MH: I don't know that it affected my writing as such. There was a certain amount of critical attention to the book in the United States that it likely would not have received otherwise as a first collection by a younger poet – although the amount of critical attention given to poetry then was considerably larger than it is today.

My influences were the amalgam of individual and witnessed experience, curiosity, and the engagement with language that comes at least in part from reading. Who was I reading in London in the 1970s? After an apprenticeship with the American 'high Moderns', that is to say Eliot, Pound and Moore, and a heady penchant for Hart Crane, e.e. cummings, Dylan Thomas, I was once again reading the classics, Shakespeare, Donne etc. whilst Auden, Berryman, Hill, Bunting, Walcott, Harrison, Heaney, Derek Mahon were all publishing new books: their work was the day's news. Sylvia Plath had been dead for a decade, but her work still transmitted the bright shock of something new that was nonetheless a mutation of the excellences to be found in Berryman and Lowell (and, indeed, Crane). I discovered HD's World War II trilogy in that decade, still a germinal work for me.

When I returned to the United States in 1976, it was to the ebullience of American 'Second Wave' feminism, which included an efflorescence of women's writing and publishing. It was then that I first read the work of Gwendolyn Brooks and of Muriel Rukeyser in depth, discovered that of Audre Lorde and June Jordan, read Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* for the first time, and learned about that book's unlikely influence on Emily Dickinson. It was, in fact, in the context of feminist 're-vision' that I began reading Dickinson in depth (which I do not state to try to politicise her work in any way.)

All at once, women poets were in the majority, not the minority, in my reading – and there were women's bookshops where a sizeable selection of their work could be found, presses and journals publishing it, publishing literary criticism relative to it. It was more than 'heady' to discover that Marianne Moore had been a friend and mentor to Elizabeth Bishop, that HD's beneficent companion Bryher had financed the publication of Moore's first book of poems, and of Djuna Barnes' *Ladies' Almanack* – to know that women poets had supported and influenced each other's work, had not each been an isolated token – information students and readers now take more for granted.

It is because of the relative success of literary feminism in the United States and, I would say, in the Anglophone world in general, that I now feel free to hesitate at positing a separate 'female' line from which I might descend as a poet, or on which my own work might influence others – to wish to claim Crane and Millay, Auden and Rukeyser, Gwendolyn Brooks and Robert Hayden, Mimi Khalvati and George Szirtes, Lord Rochester and Aphra Behn, Maurice Scève and Louise Labé, not always

thinking about the expression of gender in their work. Just as the contemporary poets to whom I feel closest are both women and men, and of a variety of poetic persuasions.

ROC: How important is it for the poet to occupy the public sphere or is the language of poetry so specialised that poets are simply writing for each other?

MH: Which 'language of poetry'? Fortunately, they are multiple, and I don't only mean in the sense of the world's multiple tongues. It's obvious that a poet like Mahmoud Darwish plays a public role for the Palestinians and as their poet-ambassador in the Arab and European worlds (a role he sometimes chooses, sometime rejects); it seems to me that many contemporary Irish and Eastern European poets have also played such a role. I don't know if a French poet per se has played such a role since the Second World War, whereas Francophone poets like Senghor, Aimé Césaire and Edouard Glissant have never ceased to do so.

The whole thrust of the Black Arts Movement in the United States, and concomitantly of the feminist poetry movement (there was one!), was the importance of the public sphere of a particular community to the poet (and vice versa) and, concomitantly, of the poet as representative of her community in the wider one. That is not a choice every poet would make: today African American (and black British) and British and American feminist poets (of whatever ethnicity) have more of the luxury of being representative/public, idiosyncratic, even hermetic, or none of the above, than poets outside the Anglophone or European community.

ROC: How do you see the relation of the poet to the reader and the critic?

MH: I think the poet should BE both reader and critic: all poets I know and respect are readers, and are critics in their reading; many are also critics and reviewers in (journalistic) practice. In the act of writing (a poem) one is at once necessarily oblivious to the critic and the reader while engrossed in the erotic, combative, ludic engagement with language, and quickly calling the inner critic into the game for the next draft, seeking to please the ideal reader one remains for oneself.

ROC: What advice would you give to the novice poet?

MH: To make herself a better and better reader and critic, as above. Poets, like any other writers, like painters, learn first of all by assimilation and even imitation. And poetry is, among other things, a multiply-voiced conversation on many pages.

ROC: Thank you.



Ruth O'Callaghan, a Hawthornden Fellow, competition adjudicator, interviewer, reviewer and editor, hosts two London poetry venues and comperes/reads at poetry festivals. Translated into Italian, Romanian, German, Mongolian and Hungarian; the Arts Council awarded a grant to collaborate with Mongolian women poets on a book, C.D. and website. Her two collections are *Where Acid Has Etched* (bluechrome, 2007) and *A Lope of*

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