

Left-Bank Lullabies

Marilyn Hacker, *Desesperanto: Poems 1999-2002*, W.W. Norton,
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Marilyn Hacker, as her biographical note states, lives in Paris and New York. She is, in other words, one of a number of expatriate writers for whom Paris is a contemplative workspace for half the year and who teach a semester across the Atlantic to cover their costs. Mainly, though not exclusively, these are American. Their lives are a variation or refinement of a pattern established in the late nineteenth century with Henry James and Edith Wharton, carried through into the 1920s with Hemingway and Gertrude Stein, and latterly, after the Second World War, with everyone from Saul Bellow and Robert Lowell to Allen Ginsberg and Frank O'Hara. Current incumbents include Carolyn Kizer, C.K. Williams, Ellen Hinsey and (in Normandy) Jorie Graham. A focal point, where all read at least once a year, is Odile Hellier's Village Voice bookshop on the Left Bank.

It need hardly be said that these poets, thrown together as they are in the same expatriate space, are not all equally enamoured of each others' work. Cliquishness and territoriality abound. Elaborate avoidance strategies, punctuated by oriental politeness, are the order of the day. In Hacker's case, the territory would seem to lie north of the Seine, between Les Halles and the Marais, with the rue Rambuteau, busy with food shops, bookshops and gay talking-spaces, as its spiritual and sexual *omphalos*.

Artery of the workaday Marais,
The rue de Bretagne leads past the Square
Du Temple. The sun burned off the clouds, the air
Is brisk and chilly for the end of May.
Released like springs, school's out, the children play
On grass, in sand, on pavements, everywhere

Dashing and dodging, charging the atmosphere
With light...

Old buildings, squares and courtyards—as in her previous book—bad plumbing, narrow wooden stairs. Inside, the smell of cooking, old neighbours moving around upstairs, the sound of classical music. Outside, street life, park life, the occasional demonstration. It feels like an area chosen for intensity rather than comfort, and hearkening back, perhaps subconsciously, to the values and intensities of those parts of New York city invoked in her remembrances of an activist past there in the 1960s.

Leaf-mulch, wood-smoke odor of Lapsang Souchong:
Afternoons with Bill, unemployed, the Fillmore
Full of run-down flats you could rent for nothing.
Unfinished paintings

Covered peeling wallpaper, crumbling plaster.
He mapped out interior decoration:
It would be a gallery, our salon rival
Mme de Staël's.

Of all cities, Paris most tempts the writer into stereotype. American writers, being wealthier on the whole than other expatriate groups and residing therefore in the better though deader districts, are prone to a relentless Left Bankery, a retailing of streets and cafes famous once but long since martyred to fashionability and self-consciousness that are asked to stand for the whole life of the city. By living at a slight angle to all that, Hacker keeps alive the particulars, if at times itemising them a little too deliberately. In addition the women, often of a shared sexual orientation, who form her inner circle of addressees—her clique, as it were—reinforce the sense of belonging to a subculture not a museum culture.

The night's first women come in out of the rain
Two couples who arrived, enlaced, astride
Two motorcycles, pulled up just outside
The door, doff helmets and leather, order gin/
Tonic, beer, beer, a kir.

The dangers of writing in and for a subculture are well-known:

critical self-complacency, the assumption of shared values, contempt for the uninitiated beyond the pale. A defence mechanism—be it women succouring other women, poets as Jews, black victimhood—can quickly harden into its own worst enemy. Here the human element, tempered with humour and self-deprecation, prevents ideological shrillness. The women are friends, lovers, bearers of remembered years, rather than political ciphers.

The city where I knew you was rich
In bookshops, potlucks, ad hoc
Debates, demos, parades and picnics.
There were walks I liked to take.
I was on good terms with two rivers.
You turned, burned, flame-wheel of words
Lighting the page, good neighbour on your
Homely street in Park Slope, whose
Russian zaydes, Jamaican grocers,
Dyke vegetarians, young
Gifted everyone, claimed some changes
 at least a new food co-op
In the laundromat, ordinary
Women talked revolution.
We knew we wouldn't live forever
But it seemed as if we could.

That immersion in the local, the particular, the interhuman is the saving grace of these poems, which are at once a memorialising of a lost, more alive New York (the towerless Manhattan of the cover photograph is a reminder of what has intervened) and an exploration of middle-aged solitude in Paris. New York is—or was—all about involvement. Paris is all about solitary looking on. Park benches, bridges, riverside seats and nooks in cafés are sites of reverie, watchfulness of the *comédie humaine*, the self half-melancholy, half-glad to be trapped like a fly in the amber of immemorial ancientness, daily Parisian ritual. Local place names, street names, ward off the deeper alienation that rises like a dreamscape in the placeless, stateless labyrinth of transient hotel rooms and customs control that is “Desesperanto”. This poem is an evocation of the writer Joseph Roth as the eternal wandering Jew, a figure of displacement and political fear, and by implication the poet's alter ego in her darker, more insecure hours.

You are a student and a citizen
Of whatever state is transient.
You are no more or less the resident
Of a hotel than you were of that town
Whose borders were disputed and redrawn.

By a strange inversion New York, that eternally contemporary city, has become the past, and Paris a static unchanging Present against which the author ages, fights depression, remembers lost love.

If the end results are not as intense as they might be, that, I suggest, is because too much technique gets in the way. Sonnets, canzoni, ghazals and fat stanzas can, at times, become ends in themselves, formal exercises that occlude rather than condense what is to be said. At their best, as in "Road Work" or "Explication du Texte", simple stanzas reminiscent of Elizabeth Bishop's "Moose" bring the material into focus, help the dailiness just to be itself. Elsewhere, heavy ruminations in iambic pentameter get bogged down and overlong, swallowed in abstraction. A chattier less formal quatrain, borrowed from Auden in his middle phase, is nearer to this book's low-key, mildly depressive self-presentations, with the major events in the background.

No one's waiting for me across an ocean.
What I can't understand or change is distant.
War is a debate, or at worst, a headlined
Nightmare. But waking

It will be there still, and one morning closer
To my implication in what I never
Chose, elected, as my natal sky rains down
Civilian ashes.

New York, like the topless towers of Ilium, has entered history. But Paris? It can be the perfect metaphor for being nowhere, or at an ideal distance from everywhere. But as the Rilkes and Hemingways, the Bishops and Tates who came and went would attest, and as the lessened intensity of this generous and human book implies, with its air of ground already gone over, one has to know when to leave.