

## The Art of Excess

Alicia Ostriker

### DESESPERANTO: POEMS 1999–2002

Marilyn Hacker

Norton

<http://www.wwnorton.com>

122 pages; cloth, \$23.95

In a time of loss, Marilyn Hacker is writing at the height of her powers. And I mean human powers, not merely her admirable craftswoman's skills. Hacker has always been the kind of formalist for whom traditional form is challenge and play, yes, but also the necessary container and shaper of her impulses to excess—excess desire, pleasure, fear, anger, grief, excess attention to the minute abundances and shatterings of our world. Food and lovemaking. Streets and friendships. History. The weather, neighbors.

If good form in poetry is often associated with good white manners, Hacker has always broken that mold. Her blank verse, sonnets, sapphics, and sestinas are typically in the service of the unmannerly, and commonly of the insulted and injured. That she writes as a lesbian is a part of that story but only a part. She has many heroes, many links in her human chain. Like the black poet and activist June Jordan, in whose memory "Elegy for a Soldier" opens *Desesperanto*, Hacker has always "scorned labels" and is "at once an optimist, a Cassandra/ Lilith.../ ...citizen soldier." Like Muriel Rukeyser, she likes to combine "intense and unfashionable politics/ with morning coffee, Hudson sunsets, sex." Like the curmudgeonly genius Hayden Carruth, to whom she writes after his quadruple bypass, she too knows "form/ is one rampart of sanity" when the mind is ringing like a fire alarm. And like the Austrian Jewish journalist and novelist Joseph Roth, with whom she identifies in the title poem of *Desesperanto*, Hacker writes as one prepared to flee before the advance of whatever storm troopers may be occupying the space in which she finds herself:

Papers or not, you are a foreigner  
whose name is always difficult to spell.  
You pack your one valise. You ring the bell.  
Might it not be prudent to disappear  
beneath that mauve-blue sky above the square  
fronting your cosmopolitan hotel?  
You know two shortcuts to the train station  
which could get you there, on foot, in time.

Is the "you" here Roth, who fled Germany for Vienna, and Vienna for Paris? Or is it the poet, or is it potentially any exile? A multiple pun, Hacker's title combines the idea of *Esperanto*, proposed in the late-nineteenth century as a universal language that would allow people of every culture to communicate with each other—the word means "hope" in Spanish—with its opposite. *Desespoir*, in French, means "despair." One thinks of Adrienne Rich's "dream of a common language," and how that dream, for many of us, has been both fractured and corrected by our recognition that the business of a pluralistic culture is not to reduce everything to a common denominator but to cherish our particularized differences, if we can, together. So does despair cancel hope in Hacker's poems? Or does hope invade despair? And is communication possible? The questions are on the table, the answers are multiple.

*Desesperanto* is also a tale of two cities, New York and Paris. Hacker's cities are always lived in, like very good clothing you wear for decades. Her Paris is a place of widows and prostitutes, African kids skating, old men drinking coffee, walkup apartments, debates over whether or not to let a clinic for drug users stay open in a neighborhood. A whole wonderful section of the book consists of sonnets (mostly Petrarchan sonnets, not Shakespearean ones, because they're more of a challenge, or because the poet wants to avoid the predictable punch-line effect of the Shakespearean sonnet?) located at particular streets and squares near where the poet lives. There is some sheer joy of description, for example, in "Turenne/ Francs-Bourgeois":

A winter Tuesday morning: people shopped  
with damp dogs bundling under their  
purchases  
in light rain, fine as an unspoken wish  
while merchants scoured and scrubbed their  
premises.  
From behind the jazz-club's curtained door  
held open with a bucket and a mop,  
a Yorkshire terrier surged out and frisked  
and yipped around the tweedy-elegant  
heels of a couple with a Lab, that risked  
a curious butt-sniff....

You have to feel these textured, surging and sniffing syllables in your mouth to get the full pleasure of them. Again, after heavy March rains, in "Almost Equinoctial," the poem's music is as vivid as its images:

The banks of the river are covered in water.  
It's rained  
that much: plane trees up to their waists, the  
stairs going down  
from the quais step onto water, not foot  
paths....  
...  
...The riverbank amphitheatres are under  
mud-colored water, no dog-romps, no kids  
playing drums  
with their Arab or Gallic or Jewish hair  
twisted in dreads.

Still, the poet's mind is never far from the annals of World War II, the infamy of the Vichy regime roundup and deportation of Jews. If she passes a street where today "kosher butchers co-exist with gay/ boutiques, not gaily," she notes it soberly as

a street from which the children went away  
clutching their mothers, looking for their  
friends—  
on city buses, used for other ends  
one not-yet-humid morning in July.

Similarly, Hacker's New York City is a place of remembered exuberance, "rich/ in bookshops, potlucks, ad hoc/ debates, demos, parades and picnics," although, in time present, its dominant note is loss and betrayal. Two of the strongest and bravest poems in the book are about the heartbreak of trying to teach young people who are unprepared to learn



Detail from cover

or to care about learning. In one, an "Embittered Elegy" for Matthew Shepherd and Dr. Barnet Slepian, two victims of America's hatred of otherness: "The week the boy froze on the barbed-wire fence/ a strapping senior roasted 'men in drag.'" In another, where students in a twentieth-century American women poets seminar are equally ignorant of "Meter, Modernism, metaphor" and Emmett Till, the teacher vainly awaits "someone's eyes/ widening, a smile, complicity..." and receives only dull stares and plagiarism. Empathy for what her students may be going through in their lives does not change the fact of their resistance, "as if I didn't know what failure meant."

### *Hacker's cities are always lived in, like very good clothing you wear for decades.*

Always lucid, always tough, often tender, Hacker knows very well what failure means. Many of the poems in this book stem from the loss of a lover. "Grief," she explains in a poem of that title,

...walks miles beside the polluted river,  
grief counts days sucked into the winter  
solstice,  
grief receives exuberant schoolyard voices  
as flung despisals.

I am reminded of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's sonnet explaining that hopeless grief is passionless; some things don't change. The poet wonders if she's lied as often as she's been lied to. "Morning News" is a poem like a sestina but with eight seven-line stanzas (a septina?) scrupulously imagining a bombarded house and town that could be anywhere but might well be on the West Bank. Waking from nightmares of war, she anticipates what has since come to pass, "my implication in what I never/ chose, elected, as my natal sky rains down/ civilian ashes.

If we pay our taxes, Marilyn Hacker's implication in a war she never chose, waged by a leader she never elected, is also ours. Another meaning I hear under "desesperanto" is "desperation." But I read this book for pleasure as well as pain, partly because art in itself is always pleasurable, partly because truth is.

Alicia Ostriker's most recent book of poetry is *The Volcano Sequence* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002). Her most recent prose volume is *Dancing at the Devil's Party: Essays on Poetry, Politics and the Erotic* (University of Michigan Press, 2000).