Mana's Special feature

CAESURAE: POETICS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION VOL3: 1 (ISSN 2454 -9495)
DECEMBER 2018
(UGC APPROVED E-JOURNAL, SL NO 118; JOURNAL NO 41668)

Marilyn Hacker in conversation with Cécile Oumhani

"… poetry translation is also – writing a poem. A way of writing a poem one would not have written oneself, with one's own history, aesthetics, emotions and ego put to the side, but working nonetheless with the same "clay" of language."

Marilyn Hacker, a major American poet and translator, has been living between New York and Paris for many years. Born in New York City in 1942, Marilyn Hacker attended the Bronx High School of Science. She enrolled at New York University at the age of fifteen, and received a BA in Romance Languages in 1964.
She moved to London in 1970, where she worked as a book dealer, and settled in Paris in 2008. She has received many awards for her poetry. She is also a translator. She has always taken a great interest in literary journals, whether in the USA or in France. She was on the board of The Kenyon Review for many years and is currently working with Siècle 21 in France. She is always eager to enable the public to read new voices.

Her first book of poems, Presentation Piece, was published in 1974, followed by Separations

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(1976), Taking notice (1980), Assumptions (1985), Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons (1986), Going Back to the River (1990), Winter Numbers (1994),
Since, Marilyn Hacker has published several other collections, First Cities: Collected Early Poems 1960-1979 (2003), Squares and Courtyards (2000), Desesperanto: Poems 1999-2002 (2003), Names (2010), A Stranger's Mirror: New and Selected Poems 1994-2013 (2015).
She has agreed to answer our questions on poetry, its current trends, women poets, translation and literary journals. (see preceding Caesurae issue to read her poems)

Cecile: Marilyn Hacker, you are a poet, a translator and an essayist. How did these different aspects of your work develop over the years?

Marilyn: ***Poetry came first, out of a desire to imitate poems I read, admired, loved or was troubled by: Auden, Byron, Donne, Frost, Millay, Eliot – and I confess, as a young adolescent, Dylan Thomas and e.e cummings.***

Writing about poetry, essays or reviews, something I wish I did more of, seems both a pleasure and a necessity, to call attention to writing I'd like to be read.

Translation began as an accident – when I was "drafted" some 25 years ago by the poet (and great translator) Claire Malroux at an international conference in France to translate a sequence of hers for a reading -- having met her there as a poet participant, and not yet knowing what a consummate and esteemed translator she was herself. I became involved with the enterprise, and have been doing it ever since: a different kind of engagement with poetry, at once a homage to other writers and a way to write poems I would never write myself.

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Cecile: You have a special interest for old forms, which you excel at renewing and using in a very personal way. At the same time, you always remain attentive to the world you live in. Why are you so attracted to the pantoum, the sonnet or the renga, among many others?

Marilyn: Probably "old" isn't the adjective I'd choose: metrical forms, and other audible qualities that aid memory, have been and continue to be not only a characteristic of poetry, but one of language, and the way language defines what makes us human.

Yet open form -- "free" verse has a connotation of liberty versus confinement that I find inaccurate -- has become almost hegemonic in French poetry. Even someone like Jacques Roubaud, who has written some of the finest and most "modern" sonnets in French since Baudelaire, is stubbornly attached to what's defined as postmodern or experimental in poetry in other languages, not in contemporary masters of the sonnet in English like Hayden Carruth or Tony Harrison (or so it seemed).

Open form has become the standard in English as well. And what's disturbing (at least to me) is that it's increasingly practiced by writers who have no experience with metrics, either as writers or as readers.

A form like the sonnet is at least as well suited for narrative as for lyric, or for a conjunction of the two, which may be one reason that variants of it are currently popular with many African American poets, young and less young – Terrance Hayes, Marilyn Nelson, Patricia Smith-- and with British poets of color and/or with immigrant backgrounds: Indian, Pakistani, Iranian, Eastern European, African and West Indian: Mimi Khalvati, George Szirtes, Patience Agbabe. One of the most brilliant writers of metrical and otherwise "formal" poetry in contemporary English was the Kashmiri-American Agha Shahid Ali. The younger

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Indian poet Karthika Naïr makes use of a variety of received and invented forms in her spectacular book of dramatic monologues of "marginal" voices from the Mahabharata, Until the Lions.

Cecile: What sort of language are poets in search of? Do you think using a specific form can be a way of finding it?

Marilyn: I can't generalize about "poets". I know that for me, the requirements of a metrical or syllabic form can open the door for the subconscious in the writing process, make connections of ideas or images that would not have come to me thinking in a more linear or didactic way: one is conscious of the music and dissonance of words and phrases, how vocabulary is a shaping force.

Cecile: What do you think of the trends of poetry today? You live in France. Do you notice differences in the way American and French poets write and in their conceptions of poetry?

Marilyn: The famous French refusal of "communautarisme" and "multiculturalism" which is viewed (to my eyes rather wrongly) as the encouragement of ethnic self-segregation, has extended to poetry – though not to fiction – in France. In the United States and in England, Ireland, Scotland, it is not at all unusual for a poet to identify as African American, West Indian or South Asian British, Arab American, Irish or Jewish American; as an immigrant, to identify as a lesbian or gay poet, an urban or working-class poet, an ecological or political poet, and very often to claim several of those "identities" at once. There is a proliferation of

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anthologies edited around these themes. I think that many readers "discover" contemporary poetry for external reasons: they are (for example) Arab American and read an anthology (or an issue of a journal) of poems by writers who share that heritage, or they are NOT Arab American, and want to know what writers of that identification have to say. And in the "themed" anthology, the reader may discover one or two writers whose work appeals, or a kind of poem that incites her interest, and go on to read a book by those poets, or find a collection of dramatic monologues/ sonnets/ "spoken word" poetry, to read more widely in that form or genre. In France, there are many collections of Algerian or Tunisian poetry, that is, by poets from those countries, but an anthology of French poets of North African origin, with all their differences (or French Jewish poets, or French immigrant poets) would go against the current. The Canadian poet Nicole Brossard presented in a Paris bookshop an anthology she had edited of Québecois francophone lesbian and gay writers – poetry and prose. I asked her if she thought it would be possible to publish such a book in France, of French writers. She said no, and that in fact two of the writers she had contacted, Québecois writers living in France, one woman and one man, had refused to include their work in the anthology because it would damage their (literary) reputations.

It seems obvious to me, because it has been my own case, that a single poet's work can fit in many of these categories: she can be in the ecological anthology, the feminist anthology, the urban anthology, the Asian-American anthology, the erotic anthology, the experimental anthology, without either pigeonholing herself or doing a disservice to readers.

There is also – "the elephant in the room" – the proliferation of creative writing programs in American, Canadian and now British universities. I don't know if Indian universities have adopted such programs; it is a cursus unknown in France. Such writing workshops were once either extracurricular (not only for university students), or rare elective courses. They have

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become omnipresent: almost every U.S. university English department has a writing program. Sometimes it's a separate department, outside English/American/ comparative literature. An astounding percentage of American poets now earn their livings teaching "creative writing" to graduate and undergraduate students. A great number of their students look forward to working, in their turn, as teachers of creative writing, with more or less no other qualifications, or body of knowledge, academic or otherwise. University education in the United States is hideously expensive, and young people go into these programs more or less the way they would into law school or nurses' training: a kind of vocational education. One argument for the existence of so many creative writing programs and degrees is that they have, in fact, kept English departments alive, at a time when interest in the humanities has plunged (no well-remunerated careers there). But the "writing" students don't always study literature in English, – or history, or economics, or philosophy -- or read outside their own generation and the one before, much less literature in other languages or in translation. In lieu of a doctoral thesis, they produce a collection of poems or short stories, or a novel, which they are encouraged to submit for publication. Such publication is the key to their future employment -- teaching "creative writing". Publishers have been swamped with submissions, to the point where they charge reading fees, or only publish books that were "prizewinners" in yearly contests with entry fees, and will not read any others. Oddly (?) enough, the sales of collections of contemporary, or any other, poetry have not been much boosted by the reading habits of these "professionalized" apprentice poets.

It goes without saying that a good writer of poetry or fiction does not have to be a literary scholar or critic. As a reader, I might be more interested in a collection of poems by someone who was trained as a physician or a nurse, who traveled widely as a journalist, who worked as a truck driver – or who grew up speaking or studied a Semitic or South Asian language –

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than someone who spent his /her twenties tweaking revisions of poems by contemporaries in a classroom.

It's fairly well documented that the American government sponsored the teaching of a kind of literary "quietism" in the mothership of creative writing schools, at the University of Iowa in the 1950s and 60s: a deliberate encouragement of focus on the self and quotidian minutiae rather than on world events, politics, macro-economics, and how those impacted on individual (and collective) lives.

In the United States, young/emerging African American poets, men and women, are among those with the liveliest interest in their (plural) heritages. Two decades ago two African American poets, Cornelius Eady and Toi Derricotte, began a series of writing workshops for African American poets, outside of any university setting, with many notable black writers participating as mentors. They were reacting to a perceived situation where emerging black poets were isolated, either erased or racialized in their specific experiences – and aesthetic choices – in the ubiquitous academic workshop programs. Someone not black or "racialized" in his/her identity might think what they will of this idea – but the practical result is that numerous black poets have served as mentors/teachers in this experiment, and dozens of its "graduates" have, not only published books, but garnered a plethora of American literary prizes – and their literary styles and choices could not be more diverse. Asian and South Asian, Latina /o and Arab American poets have been organising conferences and workshops on this model – in the community, outside universities, for the most part. I think a great part of the success of these poets– and by that I mean the interest engendered by their work, not the awards – is the implication of history (and economic reality) in this poetry, beyond individual experiences or epiphanies, beyond formal or experimental virtuosity. This would and could be true of any poet: Akhmatova, Darwish, Adrienne Rich, are obvious examples, but also Eavan

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Boland, Tony Harrison, Alice Oswald, George Szirtes among living poets in English. And, among French poets, Franck Venaille, Marie Etienne, Emmanuel Moses, Jacques Roubaud, Habib Tengour, Liliane Giraudon.

Cecile: You have always taken an interest in the situation of women. Do you think it is still difficult for women to become poets?

Marilyn: At the moment, I think it's rather more important for women to become senators, deputies, ambassadors, prime ministers and presidents. Or directors of medical research projects... Though there are some women (Marine LePen, Grace Mugabe) that I would rather not see in political posts.

In the Anglophone world, at least the parts of it I know, almost as many women poets as men are published today, though the number of women poets written about critically and / or studied is not as high. This is a change that's happened in the last forty years, more or less, and can at least partially be attributed to the insistence of eloquent American feminist critics like Alicia Ostriker, bell hooks, Maureen Honey, Sandra Gilbert and of course Adrienne Rich. There is important feminist literary criticism in Italian, German, other European languages – as well as South American and Canadian, that I wish I knew better.

There is at least one prestigious French book editor who still insists that women are not capable of writing memorable poetry. The irony is, France is a country where, it seems to me, the readership for contemporary poetry has fallen even more drastically than it has in the Anglophone world, along with the critical attention paid to it. Nonetheless, books by women

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poets are more present in France than they were even ten or fifteen years ago. The centrality of women poets to contemporary Francophone Canadian poetry is unquestioned in Canada.

Cecile: Your poetry is very concerned about the crises in the world and the sufferings of human beings. Do you think poets have a duty to commit themselves in their writing?

Marilyn: Absolutely not! I don't think poets, any more than novelists, painters, filmmakers, playwrights, need or ought to have their subjects dictated to them any more than their aesthetic choices. Writers have been silenced (critically, not legally) for being apolitical, or not political in the right style or vocabulary – as well as, much more commonly, having been silenced for political engagement in their work.

It's historically interesting to note that there are poets whose names and work are identified with the Civil Rights movement, the women's liberation movement, the anti-war (pick your war!) movement, the gay/lesbian movement in the United States. And poets writing in French identified with the women's movement in Canada, with the Algerian liberation struggle… There was and still is an active and contentious French feminism, French ecology movement, vociferous action for social change: but do French poets participate as poets, as well as concerned citizens? Not being French, I admire Louis Aragon…. for his poetry, nor do I think his poetry of the Resistance is compromised by his having remained a Stalinist in later years. Though the work of Aragon's I most admire is Le Fou d'Elsa, a marvelous amalgam of verse and prose, of adaptations of Arabic and Spanish verseforms in French poems, and a subversive narrative about a multicultural Andalusia and European colonialism.

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Cecile: Your work as a translator is also very impressive. Some say poetry cannot be translated. What do you think of this statement?

Marilyn: Where would the literature of the western world be if the Iliad and the Odyssey were only accessible to readers of classical Greek, and the poetry of Horace and Catullus to Latinists? And how would Europeans or Americans, even those with more than one language, know the Mahabharata, how would we know Rumi or Hafez, Li Po and Tu Fu, how would we read Neruda, Darwish, Adonis or Ahkmatova without translations? The absence of translation of certain poets into certain languages is itself a statement – no edition of Adrienne Rich's poetry in French translation, for example.

There are two ways to read that statement about "poetry": one, a kind of pseudo- sacralization of a literary genre – that was less prevalent when that genre had a larger interested readership (and translation was regarded as a necessity).

The other is a reflection on the problem, I don't think insoluble, of the passage of metrical forms from language to language. Do you translate alexandrines into English as iambic pentameter? What would be the French equivalent of Arabic monorhymed hemistiches? There are quantitative meters like Sapphics and Alcaics – which can be approximated in English; barely so in French: but is it a better choice to use a less unfamiliar meter, or simply the equivalent syllabics? Once, translation of Ghalib's or Hafez's ghazals into English seemed to require a transformation or abandonment of the form: now the ghazal with qafia and radif has had a kind of renaissance in non-translated English language poetry.

There's also the problem of the transmission of cultural references and implications – but that's equally relevant to the translation of fiction and other prose genres.

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Any literary translation – yes, poetry in particular – ought to be able to stand on its own as a poem -or a short story or a novel -- while transmitting, recreating an equivalence, of the linguistic qualities of the original text. Of course, some translations succeed better than others. The presence of translated work is often, too, an impetus for readers, perhaps especially young readers, to learn the other language…

Cecile: You have translated French poets like Guy Goffette and Claire Malroux as well as many Francophone poets from the Maghreb, like Amina Saïd and Habib Tengour or Lebanon, like Venus Khoury-Ghata? Do you find there is a cultural dimension in translating?

Marilyn: I know I bring my own culture, my own reading and my own intellectual lacunae with me when I translate; I try to learn what I can. "Echoes" are important—is the poem I'm reading responding to, reshaping another text in the same, or another, language? Very often, the knowledge of a specific historical event or a custom attached to a certain time and place, be that Anvers or Kairouan, is crucial. At the same time, poetry translation is also – writing a poem. A way of writing a poem one would not have written oneself, with one's own history, aesthetics, emotions and ego put to the side, but working nonetheless with the same "clay" of language.

Cecile: You have always been very active in journals, in the USA with the Kenyon Review, as well as Ploughshares, and earlier, the feminist journal 13th Moon, and in France, with Siècle 21. What is the role and importance of literary journals?

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Marilyn: As I think is typical of many writers in the Anglosphere, my own first publications were in literary magazines, and they were in magazines I read frequently: bought them in bookshops or found them in the library, because they published writers I wanted to read, or writers whose work I'd want to discover. Literary magazines seemed like a kind of ongoing conversation: about the writer's craft and its different possibilities, but also about the state of the world. The developing political and social consciousness of people of color, women of all races (for example) was reflected in the increasing presence of their work in literary magazines. A "sample" of work by a poet, essayist, fiction writer I hadn't known of before in a magazine triggered the desire to find /read a book by that writer, whom I might not have discovered otherwise.

A young writer (there and then) felt it was possible that one day her/his work would appear in one of the journals s/he was eagerly reading: it would be idealistic to say that wasn't one reason young writers read magazines! Possible publication didn't require an introduction, or membership in any clique: only work typed neatly, mailed out accompanied by a stamped self-addressed envelope – that might likely be read by the journal's editor, whether or not that editor accepted it. This was as true in England – many of my own early publications were in British magazines – as in the United States. Because of the proliferation of creative writing programs, and possibly because of the internet, a magazine – like the Kenyon Review, of which I was editor in the early 1990s—that then might have received 800 submitted manuscripts (all genres) in a month, now receives 8000… a new writer's being read by the editor her/himself is much less likely.

I don't have the impression that most French literary magazines have that same opening to newcomers – whether or not the newcomers are neophytes. In the late 1970s, there was a

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short-lived French lesbian feminist literary magazine, Vlasta. I knew the editor, and said to her, after reading the latest issue, "It's wonderful that the magazine exists – but everything here is translated already-published work by American lesbian writers! Surely there are French lesbian writers who'd be eager to submit work!" And she – a trade unionist and a communist as well as a feminist—looked at me slightly shocked, and said "Read unsolicited manuscripts? Never!"

There are some French editors who'll read work they haven't solicited… but I suspect that the unlikelihood of the metaphorical door opening means there are fewer assiduous readers.

But most French magazines are either completely independent or partially supported by a publishing house (rare); in the case of the excellent Europe, till recently by the Communist party. Editors must do something else for a living, or have a retirement pension or an independent income. Whereas many American literary journals are sponsored by and partially financed by universities, which don't tend to meddle in the content, and sometimes also provide technical equipment and personnel – student interns, even a secretary…. The editor is salaried by the institution, with that work taking the place of all or part of his/her teaching load. That gives more leeway for an open mind.

Cecile: What advice would you give to young poets?

Marilyn: W.H. Auden's advice to would-be poets was: to learn at least one modern language besides their own, and at least one classical language, or language with a classical literature (Sanskrit, Farsi, Arabic, Hebrew, Greek, Mandarin, Latin…), and one manual skill: gardening, auto mechanics, cooking. I'd go along with that, and add: read. Be able to write

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about writers who are not your contemporaries, who don't resemble you – criticism, book reviews, essays.