

# “Present, Infinitesimal, Infinite”

*The Political Vision and “Femin” Poetics of Marilyn Hacker*

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The revolutionary poet loves people, rivers, other creatures, stones, trees inseparably from art, is not ashamed of any of these loves, and for them conjures a language that is public, intimate, inviting, terrifying, and beloved.

Adrienne Rich, *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*<sup>1</sup>

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All I can know is the expanding moment,  
present, infinitesimal, infinite,  
in which the late sun enters without comment  
eight different sets of windows opposite.

Marilyn Hacker, “August Journal”<sup>2</sup>

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## FEMINIST AND “FEMIN” POETICS

Poetry was “feminist,” Marilyn Hacker wrote in 1989, if its “largest concern appeared to be the re-vision of history through the perspective of the historically powerless and silenced.”<sup>3</sup> Implicitly and, I think, intentionally, this raised the possibility that poetry not obviously having anything to do with women could still be feminist in spirit and definition. Eleven years later, Hacker would add that feminist poetry is one “in which the subjectivity and the agency of women are foregrounded.”<sup>4</sup> Conjoined, these definitions limn the poetics that she had been developing and exploring, more and more deeply, book by book, since at least 1980—and it is a poetics that needs a name.

But “feminist” feels like the wrong one, although she has been associated with feminism for decades through her writings, editing, and self-assertion as a leftist and lesbian. Her vision is broader in some respects, narrower in others, than the term has connoted over time when applied to literature: an accessible, purposeful articulation of a vision of women’s equality, strength, and value. Such literature seldom calls for specific reforms (though it may),

but it usually has didactic intent and seeks to raise women's consciousness of their commonalities as either a primary goal or a desirable by-product. Very few of Hacker's poems, and of those mostly early ones, obviously conform to this definition, which is my own. Her dominant vision is not symmetrical with any "agenda" or theory, and her exploration and expression of that vision is profoundly personal. However, she is sensitive to the distribution and uses of power, and her work depends upon an informed awareness of history and contemporary society writ broad. Hence, it is both "political" and "academic" in those words' most general meanings. "Femin" is surely the right root concept, as the most immediately striking aspects of Hacker's brilliant verse are its sex and gender: vibrantly female physicality, pervasively feminine sensibility. Yet "feminine," too, is inadequate: its denotations are too narrow and in any case have been corrupted by centuries of limiting, often degrading, connotations.

I propose a literally radical coinage, a return to the linguistic root. Let us say that Marilyn Hacker's work exemplifies a "femin" poetics, and let us pronounce the second syllable of "femin" as the French would. This will simultaneously evoke the country where Hacker has come to feel most at home; pay tribute to the rightly controversial but brilliant and pathbreaking French essentialist feminists; and join "fem" with a sound that to American ears resembles "man," thus implying the comprehensive vision underlying this poetic.

Femin poetics is sexed, gendered, and political, yet also individualized, and fully free and unpredictable in almost all of its aspects. Interpretable through feminist epistemology, it understands, absorbs, and implicitly critiques the masculinist perspective. Its knowing is uncontained. Its insistence upon autonomy is absolute. Though centered in every aspect of women's traditional lives and concerns, it transcends all traditions, societal and academic, and ascribes high value to what may seem unremarkably routine, finds universal significance in what may seem reductively personal, and emanates from a place deep within self, where nothing—no experience of subjugation, no expectation or demand, not even any conscious belief—can reach to distort the lyric sensibility and voice.

By the light of the definition I have cobbled from two of Hacker's utterances, one would certainly term her poetry "feminist," but the formal feminist theories that best illuminate it are those that shade into near-essentialism at their margins. In her classic theoretical work, *Stealing the Language*, poet Alicia Suskin Ostriker insists that women describe experiences and express values and ideas that are different from men's, and say them differently.<sup>5</sup> Nancy Hartsock adds that women and men see and know from different standpoints. For women, she says, both nature and the wide adult human arena are continuous with home, and the tendency of women's thought is "toward oppositions to

dualisms of any sort [and] valuation of concrete, everyday life.”<sup>6</sup> Their “view from below” shows them that “the vision available to the ruling groups will be partial and will reverse the real order of things.”<sup>7</sup> This recognition, combined with their sense of relation to other individuals, peoples, systems, and nature, allows women to see reflections of a unified real world in the practical daily activities that men usually dismiss as trivial (when they notice them at all). More obviously, it provides a closer approach to understanding and empathizing with other victims of subjugation (though direct analogy that doesn’t take account of variations in privilege and circumstance must be avoided, contemporary feminists warn).

Conspicuously, though not consciously, I believe, and certainly not deliberately, those essentialist-derived theoretical constructs pervade Hacker’s poetry, which quietly subverts the misogynist convention that links “femin” with weakness (feminine, feminize, effeminate). Here, the activities and values most associated with women are portrayed as strong and strengthening, as superior. That these may have developed, at least in part, from assigned roles that women didn’t choose and many resist is inarguable but beside the point. They have lived the roles, exemplified and sustained the values, and this poetry, based in them but not limited by them, reveals their essential beauty and humanity.

That said, Hacker’s present consciousness and her readers’, her poetry and her readers’ responses to it, are subtly shaped and indelibly colored by second-wave feminism, which was in significant part, as poet and editor Jan Clausen once claimed, “a movement of poets.”<sup>8</sup> Hacker was both among them and separable from them as one of the very few who emerged in the sixties or early seventies and enjoyed mainstream acclaim almost from the start. Distinguishing her, first of all, was the quite spectacular reception that traditional critics of both sexes gave her first book, *Presentation Piece*. The manuscript was the Academy of American Poets’ Lamont Selection in 1974, which ensured its publication by Viking; it went on to win the enormously prestigious National Book Award.<sup>9</sup> Her later volumes, too, were published by commercial American presses—first Knopf, then Arbor House, Random House, and Norton—excepting only a “selected” volume issued by London’s Onlywomen and two volumes of translations from the French, published respectively by a small literary press and Oberlin College.<sup>10</sup> Though her poems did appear in avowedly feminist periodicals, one of which, *13th Moon: A Feminist Literary Journal*, she edited for awhile in the eighties, she was not fully integrated into that community, and her reputation never depended upon it. She lived abroad for long periods. She wrote frequently and brilliantly in received forms—notably sestina and sonnet, but others as well—at a time when they were viewed by many women as relics of literary patriarchy, by most young poets of both

sexes as counterproductively constraining, and *vers libre* reigned. Moreover, until her third collection was published in 1980, her lusciously sensuous, often erotic verse was exclusively and passionately heterosexual.<sup>11</sup> Taken together, these facts placed her in a certainly exotic and seemingly oxymoronic category of one. No one, however, writes entirely alone or without influences, and it is necessary to consider the poet's cultural context and ideological genesis.

#### BACKDROP: FEMINIST POETRY

I have implied that although feminist poetry was occasionally expressly political in the public-policy sense, its practical aims were usually more subtle: reaching other women to share and embolden; celebrating womanhood and thus oneself; relieving the pressures exerted by lifelong repression and powerless anger. Stories were told and feelings exposed that had been simultaneously "unknown" (to the controlling world that supposedly "mattered") and, to more than half the population, very well known but so hidden that they might as well have been unique to each person. Through the means of lyric voice, which is unparalleled in its directness and productive force, an astonishing number of women were identifying, and raging about, not only overt sex discrimination, but social atomization; imposed "invisibility" and "silencing"; dismissal or trivializing of their experiences, concerns, and interests; societal revulsion at the unobjectified female body; and disadvantageous or flatly degrading relationships with men in childhood and adulthood, at work and at home, and especially in bed and after arising. At last they had penetrated to the "... moment of proof, the straight look, poem," to quote Muriel Rukeyser, a politically passionate poet who was one generation older than Hacker and is greatly admired by her: "The climax when the brain acknowledges the world, / all values extended into the blood awake. / Moment of proof." Rukeyser warned that "after that there is no peace."<sup>12</sup>

But women's "peace" had been largely numbed acquiescence, and they rushed to shatter it. Examples abound. Clausen herself was among them, of course, and the already-renowned Rich. Judy Grahn, voice of the working-class lesbian, and Audre Lorde, speaking for the African-American/Africanist lesbian and mother, were very nearly venerated.<sup>13</sup> And then there were Jody Aliesan, Paula Gunn Allen, Dorothy Allison, alta, Ellen Bass, Robin Becker, Ellen Marie Bissert, Karen Brodine, Olga Broumas, Rita Mae Brown, Chrystos, Cheryl Clarke, Martha Courtot, Alexis de Veaux, Miriam Dyak, Susan Griffin, Eloise Klein Healy, Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz, Irena Klepfisz, Joan Larkin, Karen Lindsey, Honor Moore, Robin Morgan, Barbara Noda, Pat Parker, Marge Piercy, Martha Shelley, Lynn Strongin, Alice Walker, Chocolate Wa-

ters, Fran Winant, Nellie Wong, Mitsuye Yamada, and many more. Most were involved in editing or publishing their own work and one another's. A very great proportion were lesbians. Some were mothers. All were consciously pioneers.<sup>14</sup> At the turn of this century, the Jewish feminist Enid Dame, who had devoted two poetry collections to the myth of Adam's first (disobedient) wife Lilith,<sup>15</sup> paid those poets tribute. While riding on a bus traveling toward New York City "at the narrowing edge of the century," she peruses an anthology of poems "from all those brave early [New York] readings" and acknowledges what they have meant to her: "I, who call myself feminist / poet (sometimes) activist // I who do what I do / because they did what they did."<sup>16</sup>

As the feminist "second wave" crested in America, spread, and calmed, most of its independent publishing enterprises, like its bookshops and issues and activists, either vanished or were selectively absorbed—some would say co-opted—by the mainstream, and few new ones were established.<sup>17</sup> Those poets who were not picked up by commercial, university, or more broadly based and usually male-run small presses disappeared from view. Some probably stopped writing or switched to other genres, their lyric energy exhausted or their lyric purpose met, or perhaps just because they were discouraged by the increased difficulty of getting published and distributed, and reaching a focused, receptive audience.

But Marilyn Hacker did not struggle to publish, though she did not always achieve her preferred venues, and never stopped writing, barely slackening her pace even during serious illness. She continually developed and deepened her art, gaining rather than losing intellectual and innovative energy despite the aging of her generation and its ideas. This is not to say that she hadn't been touched by those ideas or that all of her work has aged well. Hacker's earliest collections included a number of overtly political public poems,<sup>18</sup> but few that specifically addressed women's issues, and several of these are heavy-handed, their feeling forced rather than ignited and not effectively condensed into seed for art. For example, in the "Coda" to a cycle of "Regent's Park Sonnets," we are told that "Women have been betrayed / by history, which ignores us, which we made / like anyone, with work and words, slaughter / and silver."<sup>19</sup> In another poem from the same book, she assures her baby daughter that although men ride the "Big Motorcycles," drive the buses, and make the "loud big holes in the street," Iva "can be / anyone, but it won't be / easy."<sup>20</sup> And in "Why We Are Going Back to Paradise Island," the male "hurt / idealist, poet," who, we are told, is far from the worst of men and whom "We wanted . . . to love us," is represented by a nightmarish caricature who brutalizes, or fantasizes the brutalization of, animals, his little daughter, and most repulsively, his wife.<sup>21</sup>

Hacker's occasional tumbles into flattening didacticism reached their ex-

treme, and their end, with two poems in *Assumptions*, her fourth collection. Significantly placed as the final work is “Ballad of Ladies Lost and Found,” an overlong catalog of women in history, each stanza ending with the refrain, “and plain old Margaret Fuller died as well.”<sup>22</sup> The other poem, also historical, is in the form of a letter to Amelia Bloomer, requesting one of the gathered trouser-like garments that she famously (at the time, notoriously) invented; the poem finds much of its poignancy and most of its interest at the end of its 3-plus pages, when its signatory turns out to be Harriet Tubman, who actually ordered one of the outfits.<sup>23</sup> Dedicated to Hacker’s mother-in-law, and included (as was the “Ballad”) in *Selected Poems*,<sup>24</sup> it is clearly important to the poet, who has featured it in public readings, but its significance must lie apart from its artistry. These, however, are exceptional, and early, works in her *oeuvre*.

Her later poems, even those that throb with a detectably feminist pulse—“The Hang-Glider’s Daughter” and “Ordinary Women,” for example, which are discussed below—are more subtle and complex, more richly imagined, much more densely textured, and feel fresh: they exert a timeless power. They are not fired by *apparent* didactic “purpose,” a word which is key to my definition of feminist poetry: purpose to exonerate or extol womanhood, or to develop gendered consciousness or expand its scope from the individual to the collective, or to rouse to action. Poetry attempting to fulfill this kind of purpose can be effective; I argue only that Marilyn Hacker’s effective poetry does not and, thus, demands a new name.

Her indispensable contribution to poetry’s collective female voice derives from who she is—the unmistakably unique self her lyric asserts, the daily life it depicts, and the values it implies—rather than from what she has ever said directly about the situation of women. After her first two books, the work is not fueled principally by gendered fury or even gendered self-consciousness, though for more than two decades, her personal energy has flowed mainly to women. It soars above the politics of her time and the time itself, though she is intent on both and is firmly, explicitly grounded in the larger world and the histories that created it. Because of this poetry’s very solidity, complexity, and scope—its simultaneous self-centeredness and self-transcendence—it has enduring power to effect re-examination, re-valuation, and re-formation of female existence. This is the kind of analysis that revolutionizes, woman by woman, but it is stimulated by *femin*, not *feminist*, suggestion.

“EIGHT DIFFERENT SETS OF WINDOWS . . .”

The *femin* manner of thought begins to emerge with 1980’s *Taking Notice*, which, not coincidentally, was Hacker’s first book published after the birth of

her daughter and also her coming-out book as a lesbian. Six of its poems are written to the “little fat baby”<sup>25</sup> or the “baby on the mountain” or “the baby who could fly”<sup>26</sup> (images echoed in her next collection’s tale of “The Hang-Glider’s Daughter”<sup>27</sup>), and Iva is quietly present in others.

Sexually, Hacker struggles with confused thoughts of men in her past and her present, circling backward repeatedly to her ex-husband, who had been her best friend from their early teens.<sup>28</sup> “I wish I were a Lesbian,” she confesses, and: “. . . I want to love a woman / with my radical skin, reactionary im- / agination.”<sup>29</sup> This distanced yearning yields to the nervous, erotic, elided *pas de deux* of “Living in the Moment,”

You are probably  
right, leaving. We’ve been here  
thousands of miles away, hundreds of times before.

I try to be a woman I could love.  
I am probably wrong, asking  
you to stay. . . .

and explodes at last into the fully realized, though sometimes painful and unreliably requited, woman-loving of “Up from D.C.,” “Moon Animation,” and especially the title poem:

Woman I love, as old, as new to me  
as any moment of delight risked in  
my lumpy heretofore unbeautiful  
skin, if I lost myself in you I’d be  
no better lost than any other woman.<sup>30</sup>

*Taking Notice* is vibrant and, in a sense, joyous, with Hacker’s conscious woman-identification. As the book proceeds, the reader is drawn into a world populated essentially by women, its natural chill warmed by their sympathy for one another. The poet’s political consciousness subtly suffuses her perspective rather than intruding sporadically to yank her voice out of tone. Whereas politics once tended to be either absent from, or else the point of, her poetry, it now becomes the inescapably integrated, fully imagined context.

Although Adrienne Rich has long defended an artistic “tradition in which political struggle and spiritual continuity are meshed,” this is predicated on her proviso that “politics *is* imagination or it is a treadmill—disintegrative, stifling, finally brutalizing—or ineffectual.”<sup>31</sup> By the mid-eighties and *As-*

*sumptions*, the creak of that treadmill, occasionally audible in Hacker's earlier work, had been completely stilled, as the distance between feeling and belief, self and other, private and public, vanished. The great majority of her middle and later poems are inescapably political in their every, thoroughly feminized, natural stride. For instance, in the two-poem "Ordinary Women" sequence, she asserts kinship with all women who survive outside of privilege, absorbed in bargain shopping, "our consuming / career," and honors a Hispanic mother who is struggling to go to school, an old Jew "who still wears a marriage wig," an enterprising French laundress, and a Thorazine-sick mental patient.<sup>32</sup> In "La Fontaine de Vaucluse," she draws on her affection for her daughter and her close friend, the poet Marie Ponsot, in grieving the pain of women who, unlike Ponsot and herself, are beaten or deserted, dependent, poor, "obsessed with an absent or present man," and unable to feed their children through their labor.<sup>33</sup> Her "Prayer for My Daughter" imagines a sixteen-year-old Iva journeying home at one in the morning on the New York subway through a world peopled wholly by women of various ages, races, ethnicities, and styles; significantly, it is a world in which war has suddenly ended.<sup>34</sup>

Hacker seldom approaches a poem through a storyteller persona with an invented voice, but in "The Hang-Glider's Daughter," the result is so appealing that one wonders why she doesn't do it more often. Narrating this visionary, ecstatic poem is a young French-American girl who dreams of following her father into flight rather than her mother into baby-rearing and soul-saving, and who believes—while the reader only hopes—that this will be possible. "A missed boy," her disapproving mother calls her in French.<sup>35</sup>

#### " . . . THE EXPANDING MOMENT "

With each book, Hacker's political concerns have become broader, deeper, and more entangled. Most striking has been her growing sense of identification with her Jewishness, marked by her horror at both the cruelties imposed historically on her forebears and the cruelties visited today on Palestinians by Israelis.

Jews and the qualities of Jewishness become fully present, as theme and echo, in her 1994 collection, *Winter Numbers*, which is centered in the winter of her cancer surgery and feels dominated by two powerful long pieces, "Against Elegies" and "Cancer Winter."<sup>36</sup> The poems in this book throb with personal pain, but even more with the pain of the wide world: of warfare and historical and current atrocities, and of the vast, omnipresent human misery caused by poverty and innumerable categories of injustice. The social politics of compassion are profoundly present in *Winter Numbers*, in Hacker's following books, *Squares and Courtyards* and *Desesperanto*, and in her choices of



French-language works to translate: Claire Malroux's *A Long-Gone Sun*, about the German occupation of France and the arrest and death of her father, a Resistance hero; and *Here There Was Once a Country*, a collection of Vénus Khoury-Ghata's fantastical myth-creating poems about the Lebanese village of her childhood and the death of her husband. It is as if Hacker's own physical suffering and confrontation with death<sup>37</sup>—and perhaps her emotional sufferings following her abandonment by lovers—had sensitized her at the most fundamental level, the level of bone, to the undeserved agonies of others. No purely *imagined* suffering penetrates so deeply, permeates so completely, or informs so accurately; despite the undoubtedly great cost of Hacker's cancer and human losses to her as a person, as an artist she was enriched.

Opening *Squares and Courtyards* is "The Boy," one of Hacker's most delicate, empathetic, and accomplished shorter poems, in which the middle-aged Jewish lesbian writer enters imaginatively—though necessarily incompletely—the consciousness of a boy, also writing, who has been taunted as "*Faggot*" and "*Jew*." Simultaneously, the boy tries to enter imaginatively the experiences of a girl and of the World War II partisans he has read about, and to balance the several mysterious components of his identity: Jew, boy-who-will-be-man, and genderless or androgynous being. "He writes a line. He crosses out a line." As the two writers' minds nearly meet, elliptically, the boy's power of imagining fails him again, and again "He writes down something that he crosses out." Although the poet acknowledges that "I'll never be a man," she recognizes and accepts "the boy in me." Her poem seems to envision the possibility of collapsing all the barriers human difference erects: not only those of sex, age, religion, culture, and sexuality, but of existence in widely separated historical periods.

Hacker's recent elegy for June Jordan, an African American poet, human rights advocate, and friend who was only six years her senior and died of breast cancer, is feminist in its conception, but also illustrates the thorough, seamless integration of multiple public issues in Hacker's recent work. Moving from a section of stanzas comprising sixteen lines of irregular length to a second section written entirely in Sapphics,<sup>38</sup> she recalls the racism, antiwar activism, and rhetoric of revolution in the 1960s and '70s, then weaves the multiple strands of *fin de twentieth siècle malaise*—conservative Republican ascendancy in American government, terrorism, war crimes, the interminable Middle Eastern conflict, social oppression, cancer—into a proportionally patterned tapestry.<sup>39</sup> It represents her fullest development as an explicitly political poet.

Implicitly, however, Hacker's entire post-seventies *oeuvre*, beginning with *Taking Notice*, is born of a sensibility not only "foregrounded" (and backgrounded) by feminine gender, but absorbed into it and recreated by it. This body of poetry creates a landscape wholly defined by women's experience and women's values: women's understanding of what life *is* and *should be*. If this

were ideologically intended, it might be judged supremacist or even separatist. Because it is not, it is at once pervasively femin and anti-polemical, for the polemicist assumes contention, while Hacker's world stands quietly before the reader, then enwraps her, assuming only its own lovely normality.

“PRESENT, INFINITESIMAL, INFINITE”

It is, first of all, a world populated essentially by women. Men are sometimes important here: for example, in a sardonic, stinging epistolary poem to novelist Tom Disch, who had criticized poets for accepting grants; in loving Sapphic stanzas, or variations on them, to the poet James Wright, who also used Sapphics; and in pleas for his survival to the ailing poet Hayden Carruth.<sup>40</sup> One of her most moving and beautiful sestinas memorializes the invented figure of “Jean-Michel Galibert, Épiciier à Saint-Jean-de-Fos.”<sup>41</sup>

Men are predictably present in poems that recall her childhood or her heterosexual past: for example, from *Going Back to the River*, “Nights of 1962: The River Merchant's Wife” and “Nights of 1964–1966: The Old Reliable”; from *Squares and Courtyards*, parts of “Paragraphs from a Daybook”; and from *Desesperanto*, “Days of 1967.”<sup>42</sup> The names of two otherwise undescribed male acquaintances—James, who has cancer, and Melvin, with AIDS—begin and conclude the distinguished (and elegiac) long poem, “Against Elegies.”<sup>43</sup> The later “Embittered Elegy” explores the relationship between the fates of two murdered martyrs: gay college student Matthew Shepard and abortionist Dr. Barnett Slepian.<sup>44</sup> So men are here, but at a distance. She spars with Disch, who was originally her husband's friend. Wright she admired and found an inspiration, but she never met him and he is dead.<sup>45</sup> Carruth is “Not lover, barely friend,” though she dedicated *Squares and Courtyards* to him.<sup>46</sup> Male lovers and friends from the sixties remain entombed in the sixties. The deceased, and imaginary, French grocer and his son are barely seen, James and Melvin are not seen at all, and Shepard and Slepian, though real in many newspaper readers' memories, are symbolic in the poem.

Familiarly, then—intimately—Hacker's literary world for more than two decades has been one of women. Her mother and former mother-in-law have become known to her readers, as has her daughter almost from birth (now grown, however, and absent from her mother's latest book except briefly, in nostalgia),<sup>47</sup> her lovers Rachel and K.J., and dozens of acquaintances and friends, but especially the poets Ponsot (dedicatee of *Winter Numbers*) and Julie Fay (to whom, along with Rachel and another poet, Jacqueline Lapidus, her fifth book, *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons*, is dedicated). How they look and dress, what they eat and drink, how they talk, where they

live, and what they do with their days have become nearly as familiar, at least superficially, to the reader of each new collection as the same characteristics of people in her own life. But most specifically, most completely, the poet draws readers in to experience her own joys, pleasures, guilts, fears, occupations, preoccupations, successes, failures, physical and emotional ills. We know her body as we know the bodies of many women poets<sup>48</sup>—Rich’s, Anne Sexton’s, Piercy’s, Morgan’s, Sharon Olds’s, and, for that matter, Emily Dickinson’s (it’s a very long list). We also know much of her wardrobe; the contents of her pantry; the exact names of the streets, bars, restaurants, parks, and markets she frequents; the views from her various windows; the color of her university office walls (green); and what her worktable is made of (wood). “I always / gossip in poems,” she confessed in her first book, “mostly about myself, / hinting at inadmissible longings.”<sup>49</sup> With each volume, the “longings” have become more coherent and more fully described and admitted.

It is through this very completeness and specificity, this very attention to the “infinitesimal” detail, that the poet establishes her perspective—what Hartsock would term her “standpoint”—and builds a consistent, absorbing world founded firmly on feminized “assumptions” (which is the title of her first pervasively lesbian, and first post-1980, collection—and is her only abstracted, inclusive book title with no corresponding eponymous poem).<sup>50</sup> These assumptions invisibly, inevitably, shape everything that she writes. Of course, all effective lyric poets observe and record details, and most evoke strong sense responses. What distinguishes Marilyn Hacker from other poets is her almost madly daring confidence in the type and depth of detail worthy of poetry. Rivers and flowers and trees and flights merit close description, of course, as do poignant homeless people glimpsed on the street, and the dying, both old and young. But so does a morning spent waxing her furniture: the type of cloth used; the color, odor, and texture of the wax; how the wood looked before and afterward.<sup>51</sup> So does the fact that on the evening of July 18, 1979, in the South of France, a thunderstorm threatened but didn’t materialize, as July 19 brought sunshine and warmth, and, by the way, the poet was suffering “thrice-daily bouts of runny bowels,” the “norm” for her “on travels south.”<sup>52</sup> So do her and her daughter’s problems with acne, the “adipose deposits in [her] thighs,” and the hours-long migraines that torment her.<sup>53</sup>

So, most emphatically, does her every meal and drink. An early use of this imagery is found, for example, in her fascinating narrative, “The Navigators,” where sexual hunger and satiation are linked with the pungent tastes of sweet and savory and sour and bitter foods: “tart, cold wild apples,” “long pale grapes”; “raw meat, radishes, lemons / and salt.”<sup>54</sup> It has been followed over the years by literally hundreds of descriptions, in dozens of poems, of loaves

of bread, slabs of meat, fillets of fish, cheeses, fruits, vegetables, wines, and innumerable cups of coffee.

The “Five Meals” of a sestina in *Taking Notice* share the sensual appeal of the lover: “You save one tangerine with two long leaves / curling the globe,” and “I stroke your peach-furred cheek.” Consuming the meals, then, entwines essentially with performing acts of love: “Between sour cream and butter: // I lick fingers of cream,” and “Tongues are smoothed by rough young red wine.”<sup>55</sup> In *Squares and Courtyards*, the poet serves up sizzling sausage, spit-roasting fowl, olives and oil and cauliflower, yellow-fleshed peaches, ripe black figs, seven-grain bread. And in *Desesperanto*, she instructs us in the preparation of a perfect “Omelette” and itemizes the treasures yielded by a good French garden: “Turnips, onions, parsnips, cabbage, beets; / down south, tomatoes, aubergines, courgettes.”<sup>56</sup> Even writing in prose about the aftermath of her mastectomy, she specifies the tea treats brought to her by a friend (“small orange-walnut loaf and miniature chocolate cupcakes”); the “crunchy vegetables” she prefers (“broccoli, collard greens, cabbage”); and what she and Ponsot shared for lunch (“duck liver mousse and eggplant terrine”).<sup>57</sup>

While an individual Hacker poem may seem self-obsessive in its sharing of personal minutiae, it takes on a completely different coloration when seen in the rich context of her *oeuvre*. Now its innate generosity of spirit is evident. Her woman/lesbian/Jew’s “view from below” merges at horizon-line with an autonomous intellectual’s ironic vision of history, love, and power under patriarchy. Thus she constructs a self-contained universe with its own clear values. In this universe, human appetites, human effort, human struggle, human pleasure, every human breath, *matter* and have innate nobility. The apparent non-events that make up by far the largest part of everyone’s everyday life are, as she would say, “foregrounded,” fully observed and painstakingly described, as critical elements in the weave that forms the integrated background for the great experiences—including the greatest (and the only one that is universal): preparing for death, and dying.

But—and this is crucial—the seemingly small matters are important *in themselves*. They are bricks and straw of the structure in which people live, love, think, seek and find meaning and truth. Polishing the furniture, washing the dishes, shopping for bread are not mindless tasks to be hurried through or, better, delegated to someone else (normally a wife or subordinate partner, in the case of male writers) so that the poet can get down to the unrelated business of art. The chores—and the minor body ailments and small joys and passing miseries and quiet friendships and painstaking hospitality—are instead *part* of the process and content of art. It is a profoundly female understanding and a thoroughly feminized poetic vision; however eager we may be to train a spotlight into any shadow of biological or cultural essentialism and

make it disappear, we must acknowledge the poet's femin fullness. This is not to say, of course, that women are to the dishpan born, or that furniture-polishing stimulates them as it cannot their wiser brothers. But Hacker's poetry does argue, perhaps without conscious intent, that women can take, have taken, the limitations and demands and tasks that have almost always structured our lot in life and transformed them into chosen affirmations of life and love, means of expressing individuality, and frameworks for art. To deplore autocratically imposed prescriptions for "women's work," "women's place," "women's concerns" is crucial; to deplore the work itself, the place itself, the concerns themselves, and the values that they represent is inhumane—is, in fact, surrender to misogyny. Marilyn Hacker knows everything, positive and negative, that her string shopping bag represents. Then she shops. Cooks. Eats. Shares. With other women. And writes about it.

“. . . THE LATE SUN ENTERS WITHOUT COMMENT”

Despite her unremitting focus on her own life and the lives of her intimates, Marilyn Hacker cannot be grouped with “confessional” poets. Rather, she represents feminized *anti*-confessionalism because she has no spirit of confession. She is introspective and self-critical, but never apologetic or, ultimately, self-rejecting (though she has fleeting moments of what she calls “self-loathing”). She does not forgive herself or ask forgiveness because she sees nothing *to* forgive in the consequences of well-intentioned, passionate living. She forces herself to confront and her readers to witness the most disturbing scenes, as well as the ecstatic and the mundane, that are played out in her complicated, doomed loves (for example, in “The Navigators,” “Separations,” “Nearly a Valediction,” “Chanson de la mal aimée,” and her verse novel).<sup>58</sup> She frankly acknowledges the ambivalence inherent in raising even a wanted and loved child (note especially the remarkable sequence, “Three Sonnets for Iva”).<sup>59</sup> She describes graphically the physical realities of her breast cancer and the terrors, dreads, and rationalizations that it generates (for example, in “Scars on Paper” and “Cancer Winter,” where we learn even the precise scientific name for her type of tumor, which, excised, is “cold-packed, pickled”).<sup>60</sup> But she never sees her life as sordid and never seems to feel shame or remorse, never allows self-pity or regret. Subject matter that could breed such emotions is present—especially in *Love, Death . . .*, *Winter Numbers*, and *Desesperanto*—but the emotions expressed are not these.

“I was the inventor / of my own life,” she writes in “Two Cities,” echoing a theme explored by other women who, having rejected gender roles, face the need to create themselves anew, metaphorically to give themselves birth.<sup>61</sup> Certainly, Hacker's has fit no pre-imagined conception of the form a life might

take. Despite the ordinariness of “laundry, stockpots, dust balls,”<sup>62</sup> she is always in motion and, deliberately or not, thrusting herself into challenges. Until the quiet sadness of *Desesperanto*, there was a rollicking quality to Hacker’s poems. She lived in three nations and four cities, all closely observed and described, and traveled constantly: to the country, the mountains, the water. Her passion as friend, daughter, wife, lover, mother, mentor, and artist spread itself to embrace dozens of commitments and people. Her surface was picaresque, but the temperament of her work was *inverse*-picaresque. That is, the apparent journey across landscapes and relationships achieved its real importance as a vehicle for the journey *inward*, to the core of Hacker’s mind and heart; and, in her latest collections, for the journey *backward* into her childhood and the communal Jewish past. There is, again, something fundamentally femin in her perspective on activity and event, and in her assumption that life’s primary goal is to understand and love oneself and, through oneself, other women.

The journey toward this end is lifelong, “infinite,” and as Hacker—poet; lesbian; Jew; bilingual, binational willing “exile”—pursues it, she becomes the very personification of the “otherness” that Simone de Beauvoir called the core social reality for females.<sup>63</sup> This theme threads through her every book, from *Presentation Piece* to *Desesperanto*. In this last work, she considers settling in one place (Paris) at last, but only as an emotional default, her New York lover having left her.<sup>64</sup> The previous collection, *Squares and Courtyards*, had included the beautiful “Broceliande,” which in perfect Sapphics integrates the seemingly opposed themes of travel and domesticity, the foreign and the familiar, while setting up a contrast between alienating patriarchal structures and feminized values:

She has found her way through the singing forest.  
She has gotten lost in the maze of cobbled  
streets in ancient towns, where no lovely stranger spoke the right language.

Sometimes she inhabits the spiring cities  
architects project out of science fiction  
dreams, but she illuminates them with different  
voyages, visions:

with tomato plants, with the cat who answers  
when he’s called, with music-hall lyrics, work-scarred hands on a steering  
wheel, the jeweled secret name of a lover.<sup>65</sup>

Voyages, visions: in a plant that provides nourishment, in a thoroughly tamed (male) animal, in hands that are desirable in their proven usefulness, in

common song (perhaps bawdy): the ordinary comfortable and flawed things of life are the things that illuminate, that must be brought to alien spaces and cherished. Women have to know this. Knowing it and doing it are foundations for our lives. And Hacker's homely lyric, far from endorsing limitation, recognizes much of what is valuable and enduring in the way most of us (have had to) live.

“ALL I CAN KNOW . . .”

Finally, the traveler, the exile, the searcher, who can never rest in society's claustrophobic and stultifying prefabricated places, must make a place of her own for her own invented self. The result, in Hacker's work, is an intensely original created world of novelistic appeal, completeness, immediacy, and integrity. It foregrounds women especially, and Jews and gays, but, not limited by identity compassion, it is concerned with *all* the presently and historically powerless. It prizes love and ordinary life. Not even the loves that failed are disowned, not even the lovers who betrayed; they continue to inhabit her spiritual community, and her poetry, for years to come (which must sometimes gall them!). In this complex, nuanced world, which is geographically vast and available to the poet's roamings, the minutest details of daily life merit poetry, and that daily life is a woman's. The senses, in which people are their most elementally alive, are continually gratified and celebrated—most often through the agency of woman as gardener, shopper, cook, protector of children, builder of home fires, and lover. The coming together of tongue with taste, nostrils with fragrance, fingertips with texture, eyes with color and light, and lovers in sweaty orgasmic embrace—whether they number two or three people, one or two genders, and meet in a bedstead or surreptitiously on a staircase—are all events to record and occasions to rejoice.

Whether or not obviously political, and not conventionally feminist, it is nevertheless a thoroughly feminized creation, uncontained by false boundaries and uncompromised. It defines by example a poetics of essence that I have called *femin*. Like Hacker's poetry, it is at once personal and universal, microcosmic and vast, female, feminine, and sex/gender-transcendent. And it is available to all readers and writers who yearn for unconstrained expression in a humanely realized, fully connected, truly livable world.

#### NOTES

1. Adrienne Rich, *What Is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (New York: Norton, 1993), 250.

2. Marilyn Hacker, "August Journal," in *Winter Numbers* (New York: Norton, 1994), 95.
3. Hacker, "Unauthorized Voices: U. A. Fanthorpe and Elma Mitchell," *Grand Street* 8, no. 4 (1989): 147–64.
4. Hacker, letter to author, July 18, 2000.
5. Alicia Suskin Ostriker, *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America* (Boston: Beacon, 1986). On page 9, for example, she writes: "Without a sense of the multiple and complex patterns of thought, feeling, verbal resonance, and even vocabulary shared by women writers, we cannot read any women adequately. . . . For writers necessarily articulate gendered experience just as they necessarily articulate the spirit of a nationality, an age, a language. . . . I therefore make the assumption that 'women's poetry' exists in much the same sense that 'American poetry' exists. It has a history. It has a terrain. Many of its practitioners believe it has something like a language." Challenging this view are, among others, Jan Montefiore, *Feminism and Poetry: Language, Experience, and Identity in Women's Writing* (London: Pandora, 1987); and Alice Templeton, *The Dream and the Dialogue: Adrienne Rich's Feminist Poetics* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1994).
6. Nancy Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," in *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited and Other Essays* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1998), 120–21.
7. Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint Revisited," in *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited and Other Essays*, 240.
8. Jan Clausen, *A Movement of Poets: Thoughts on Poetry and Feminism* (Brooklyn: Long Haul, 1982).
9. Hacker, *Presentation Piece* (New York: Viking, 1974).
10. Hacker, *The Hang-Glider's Daughter: New and Selected Poems* (London: Onlywomen, 1990); Claire Malroux, *A Long-Gone Sun*, trans. Hacker (Riverdale-on-Hudson: Sheep Meadow, 2000); Vénus Khoury-Ghata, *Here There Was Once a Country*, trans. Hacker (Oberlin: Oberlin College Press, 2001).
11. Interestingly, however, Hacker's first obvious (albeit metaphorical) use of lesbian imagery appears in *Presentation Piece*, which is dedicated to her (now former) husband and was published in 1974, but includes poems copyrighted as early as 1969. In "Elegy," an apostrophe to the doomed white American blues singer Janis Joplin, Hacker recalls having sex and laughing with the man who had told her, earlier that evening, of Joplin's death: ". . . it was / your Southern Comfort / grin stretching my / mouth. You were in me / all night." "Stay in my / gut, woman lover I never / touched, tongued, or sang to; stay / in the back of my / throat . . .," she continues, and finally confesses that "I wanted to write your / blues, Janis, and put my / tongue in your mouth that way": "Elegy," in *Presentation*, 93, 95.



12. Muriel Rukeyser, "Reading Time: 1 Minute 26 Seconds," in *The Collected Poems* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978), 161–62.

13. See Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg: Crossing, 1984); Lorde, *The Collected Poems of Audre Lorde* (New York: Norton, 1997); and Judy Grahn, *The Work of a Common Woman: The Collected Poetry of Judy Grahn 1964–1977* (New York: St. Martin's, 1978).

14. Not surprisingly, many memoirs, though few systematic studies, have been written about the feminist literary and publishing movements. The closest we can come to experiencing them today is to go back and read the periodical issues and the books—mostly slim chapbooks—published by the presses. The most significant literary magazines included *Aphra*, *Amazon Quarterly*, *13th Moon*, *Sinister Wisdom*, *Chrysalis*, *Calyx*, and *Conditions* (only *Calyx* survives); the presses included Naiad, Diana, Daughters, Eggplant, Spinsters Ink, Out & Out, Kitchen Table: Women of Color, and the Women's Press Collective. Among the writings and guides that focus on "second wave" literary publishing, in addition to Clausen's *A Movement*, are: Kim Whitehead, *The Feminist Poetry Movement* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), especially pages 3–54, which offer an overview; Paula Bennett, *My Life a Loaded Gun: Female Creativity and Feminist Poetics* (Boston: Beacon, 1986), 242–67; Mary Biggs, "From Harriet Monroe to AQ: Selected Women's Literary Journals, 1912–1972," *13th Moon: A Feminist Literary Journal* 8 (Fall 1984): 183–216; "Women in Print," ed. Biggs, *New Pages: News and Reviews of the Progressive Book Trade* 3 (Fall 1983): 13–31; Biggs, "Women's Literary Journals," *Library Quarterly* 53 (1983): 1–25; Andrea Chesman and Polly Joan, *Guide to Women's Publishing* (Paradise: Dustbooks, 1978). Essential theoretical statements are Rich, "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-vision," in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose, 1966–1978* (New York: Norton, 1979), 9–18; and Lorde, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," in *Sister*, 36–39.

15. Enid Dame wrote *Lilith and Her Demons* (Merrick: Cross-Cultural Communications, 1989). She was the senior editor, with co-editors Lilly Rivlin and Henny Wenkart, of *Which Lilith? Feminist Writers Re-Crete the World's First Woman* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1998).

16. Dame, "Women's Poetry Anthology," in "'Because They Did': A Feminist Poetry Anthology," ed. Biggs, *nycBigCityLit.com* (January 2001), ll. 50, 53, 54–57.

17. The most ambitious of the new presses was Nancy Bereano's Firebrand Books in Ithaca, New York, which she sustained, nearly heroically, from 1984 through 2000.

18. See, for example, Hacker, "Before the War," 57–58, "Landscape for Insurrection," 59–60, "The Sea Coming Indoors," 61–62, "Attack on the Ivory Coast," 63–64, and "Untoward Occurrence at Embassy Poetry Reading," 108–9, in *Presentation*; and Hacker, "After the Revolution," 30–33, and "Separations," section 8, 109, in *Separations* (New York: Knopf, 1976).

19. Hacker, "Coda," in *Taking Notice* (New York: Knopf, 1980), 18.
20. Hacker, "To Iva, Two-and-a-Half," in *Taking*, 39.
21. Hacker, "Why We Are Going Back to Paradise Island," in *Taking*, 75–76.
22. Hacker, *Assumptions* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 89–92. Margaret Fuller (1810–50) was a brilliant intellectual, early feminist, and sexual nonconformist, associated with the New England Transcendentalists. Her most important theoretical-political work is *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* (1845). She was rather "plain," though one wonders about "old," as she died soon after turning forty.
23. Hacker, "Part of a True Story," in *Assumptions*, 25–28.
24. Hacker, *Selected Poems 1965–1990* (New York: Norton, 1994).
25. Hacker, "To Iva, Two-and-a-Half," in *Taking*, 37.
26. Hacker, "Iva's Pantoum," in *Taking*, 48, 49.
27. Hacker, "The Hang-Glider's Daughter," in *Assumptions*, 52–54.
28. She described their fascinating, artistically productive relationship more fully in *Separations*, especially in "The Terrible Children," a poem she had self-published as a chapbook in 1967. See also his memoir, Samuel R. Delany, *The Motion of Light in Water: Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village, 1957–1965* (New York: Arbor House/William Morrow, 1988).
29. Hacker, "Little Green-Eyed Suite," 23, and "Peterborough," 88, in *Taking*.
30. Hacker, "Living in the Moment," 28, "Up from D.C.," 42–43, "Moon Animation," 91, and "Taking Notice," 110, in *Taking*.
31. The first quotation in this sentence is from Rich, *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations* (New York: Norton, 2001), 61. In the same volume, see also several later expressions of her beliefs about poetry in relation to politics and social circumstances: for example, "Why I Refused the National Medal for the Arts," 98–105; "Poetry and the Public Sphere," 115–19; "Muriel Rukeyser: Her Vision," 120–27; and especially the title essay, 146–67. The second quotation in this sentence is from Rich, *What Is Found There*, 49.
32. Hacker, "Ordinary Women I," 79, and "Ordinary Women II," 80–82, in *Assumptions*.
33. Hacker, "La Fontaine de Vaucluse," in *Assumptions*, 84–87.
34. Hacker, "Prayer for My Daughter," in *Assumptions*, 38.
35. Hacker, "The Hang-Glider's Daughter."
36. Hacker, "Against Elegies," 11–15, and "Cancer Winter," 77–90, in *Winter*.
37. For a prose exposition of Hacker's experience with breast cancer, see Hacker, "Journal Entries," in *Living on the Margins: Women Writers on Breast Cancer*, ed. Hilda Raz (New York: Persea, 1999), 201–41. Many poems memorialize deceased friends and friends of friends: her ex-lover Link, who died a suicide in his twenties ("The Geographer," in *Separations*, 3–7); her friend Sonny Wainwright and sister/fellow poets James

Wright, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Muriel Rukeyser, and others less clearly identified. See especially Hacker, "Against Elegies," in *Winter Numbers*, 11–15.

38. The Sapphic stanza is, of course, named for Sappho, the great seventh- to sixth-century BC lyric poet who lived on the Greek island of Lesbos and is conventionally credited with inventing the form. She appears to have been, like Hacker, an independent woman, the mother of a cherished daughter, and a lover of other women. By the mid-1980s, Sapphics had become one of Hacker's most characteristic forms. A Sapphic stanza comprises two eleven-syllable (or "hendecasyllabic") lines followed by one sixteen-syllable line, which is normally broken into one eleven- and one five-syllable line. Each of the three eleven-syllable lines has the following meter: unstressed syllable, stressed syllable, unstressed, stressed, unstressed, stressed, unstressed, unstressed, stressed, unstressed, stressed (or three iambs, one anapest, one iamb). The concluding five syllables are either stressed, unstressed, stressed, unstressed, unstressed, or stressed, unstressed, unstressed, stressed, unstressed (or one trochee and one dactyl, in either order).

39. Hacker, "Elegy for a Soldier," in *Desesperanto* (New York: Norton, 2003), 15–19.

40. Hacker, "Riposte," in *Going Back to the River* (New York: Random House, 1990), 20–21; "Letter from the Alpes-Maritimes," in *Assumptions*, 3–8; "Elevens," in *Going*, 44–45; "Paragraph for Hayden," 90, and "Again, for Hayden," 108–9, in *Desesperanto*.

41. Hacker, "Jean-Michel Galibert, Épicier à Saint-Jean-de-Fos," in *Desesperanto*, 106–7.

42. Hacker, "Nights of 1962: The River Merchant's Wife," 11–13, and "Nights of 1964–1966: The Old Reliable," 41–43, in *Going*; "Paragraphs from a Daybook," in *Squares and Courtyards* (New York: Norton, 2000), 80, 85–87; "Days of 1967," in *Desesperanto*, 30–31.

43. Hacker, "Against Elegies."

44. Hacker, "Embittered Elegy," in *Desesperanto*, 26–27.

45. Hacker, "Letter from the Alpes-Maritimes," 8.

46. Hacker, "Paragraph for Hayden," 90.

47. Hacker, "Alto Solo," in *Desesperanto*, 43.

48. Men write much less often, and in much less intimate detail, about their bodies, if one excludes their broad descriptions of pleasure in food, drink, and sex.

49. Hacker, "The Art of the Novel," in *Presentation*, 55–56.

50. Provided that one excepts *Winter Numbers*, which, although it contains no identically titled poem, does include the fourteen-page "Cancer Winter."

51. "Days of 1992," in *Winter*, 70.

52. Hacker, "July 19, 1979," in *Taking*, 66.

53. Hacker, "February 10," 91, and "Migraine Sonnets," 83–84, in *Desesperanto*.
54. Hacker, "The Navigators," in *Presentation*, 18, 26–27.
55. Hacker, "Five Meals," in *Taking*, 96–97.
56. Hacker, "French Food," 40, and "Omelette," 37–38, in *Desesperanto*, 40
57. Hacker, "Journal Entries," 217, 222.
58. Hacker, "The Navigators," in *Presentation*, 17–28; "Separations" in *Separations*, 101–9; "Nearly a Valediction," in *Winter*, 19–20; "Chanson de la mal aimée," in *Desesperanto*, 76–78; *Love, Death, and the Changing of the Seasons* (New York: Arbor House, 1986).
59. Hacker, "Three Sonnets for Iva," in *Taking*, 40–41.
60. Hacker, "Scars on Paper," in *Squares*, 15–18; "Cancer Winter," in *Winter*, 75–95.
61. Hacker, "Two Cities," in *Going Back*, 3–8.
62. Hacker, "Nearly a Valediction," 19.
63. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, ed. H. M. Parshley (New York: Bantam, 1961), xvi.
64. Hacker, "Days of 1999," in *Desesperanto*, 25.
65. Hacker, "Broceliande," in *Squares*, 25.