

Blazons  
New and Selected Poems, 2000-2018  
by Marilyn Hacker 2019  
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George Szirtes has described Marilyn Hacker as “American, lesbian, feminist, Jewish, and voluntarily displaced to France,” to which I add, political activist and Arabist. Thirteen previous collections of poetry, *Blazons* the 14th, and sixteen more translating French, Francophone and Arab poets. And (*inshallah*) not done yet.

I reviewed an earlier collection of Hacker’s poetry, ‘A Stranger’s Mirror: New and Selected Poems 1994-2014’ for London Grip in 2015 (<https://londongrip.co.uk/2015/02/london-grip-poetry-review-hacker>), and it is again a pleasure and privilege to read, catch up on, and comment on her newest ‘New and Selected’. (Disclosure: Marilyn is a friend and mentor.) In the earlier review I celebrated her skill in the art of formal poetry:

...we find all the major forms and variations on those forms, from crowns of sonnets to ghazals, quatrains to alcaics, glose and terza rima, haiku and renga, sestinas and canzones (the latter sestinas on steroids), blank verse and free, sapphics and rondeaus.

Except for the limerick, the use of these forms in English poetry all derive from other languages, but who writes in them these days? Modern poetry, wrote the late Tony Hoagland, is one of indeterminacy of language leading to irony and circumlocution — a broken connection between language and things. “Form today,” he said, “is about exploring representation itself, not that which is represented.” Our new Poet Laureate Simon Armitage, in his Oxford Professor of Poetry lecture, rejected that self-referential freeform: “[T]he effects of structure, no matter how covert, are always involving and engaging at both the aural and visual levels...” (The link to the podcast is here: [Listen to the recording of this lecture here](#). And the University of Oxford announcement here: <https://www.english.ox.ac.uk/event/professor-of-poetry-lecture-undisfigured-by-false-or-vicious-ornaments-clarity-and-obscure-i> )

Poems needn’t be in a classic form, but their *shape* on the page must reveal something about, and be congruent with, the content. Sound is also critical to form: internal echoes, alliteration, repetition. Metaphor and judicious use of white space also achieve what Armitage calls ‘ritual and ceremony’. Let us call the deliberate use of shape and sound ‘formality.’ You recognize ‘Informality’ in poems by the absence of rhyme and meter, with arbitrary line breaks and stanzas shaped oddly for no obvious structural reason; what my teacher Frank Bidart calls, “chopped up prose.” They may still please by what they say, of course, narratives ‘about’ as in “this poem’s about” — a kind of poetic selfie.

Sometimes a skilled poet will write a poem in a slyly disguised or nonce form. Look up Jehanne Dubrow's wonderful 'The Long Deployment', which she calls an 'exploded villanelle', to see what I mean: <https://poets.org/poem/long-deployment>. The sestina can be presented in tercets, and consider the many ways the sonnet can be presented and not always in fourteen lines. (As Carol Ann Duffy put it, "The sonnet will always be the little black dress of poetry.") White space on the page, used strategically, is itself a form of form.

Formal poetry's apparent demise was mourned by Clive James, "By now the game has irreversibly lost its net: you have to pretend the net is still there", glossing on Robert Frost's comment that free verse was like playing tennis without a net. Is it possible that Marilyn is one of the last of her kind, a poet in the tradition of poets whose work we revere (among others, Duffy, Auden, Frost, Bishop, Larkin, Donaghy) but fail to honour?

Marilyn's poems are unselfconsciously 'about' poems. About what she encounters in her walks about Paris. About friends she meets, or elegizes; about meals and memories. These poems employ varied formal structures, but so subtly one almost forgets they are in classic forms, the art disguising the art, where one is barely conscious of an underlying beat, strains of music that carry the narratives along like petals floating down a quiet stream. Her accounts are invariably generous, inviting the reader in as a participant, which, I maintain, is *because* of the formality, which entrains our emotions like a melody.

Among the new poems in this collection are ten Roman-numbered 'Calligraphies' interspersed between other new poems so that each new poem comes as a dear surprise. They are in the Japanese renga form, sets of stanzas, each set arranged in two pairs: the first stanza in each pair is a call in three lines of 5/7/5 syllables (the origin of the haiku), the second stanza a response in two lines, 7/7 syllables. The last line of the second pair is chained by a word or image to the following set. The renga was a sociable enterprise: a group of poets sitting on tatami mats, drinking sake, improvising the calls and responses, and enjoying themselves hugely. In Calligraphies, Marilyn is her own cluster of poets!

There are nine to thirteen chains in the ten Calligraphies. An example is the set VII dedicated to Fadwa Suleiman, a Syrian activist who escaped the carnage in her country only to die of cancer in Paris. Here is the opening:

While the same rain fell  
On suburbs of exile and  
motherless children,

whose courage was certainty  
whose impatience turned to doubt,

she came in the door  
like a comrade, lover, friend,  
and took off her shoes –

older than my daughter but  
too young to be my sister.

\*

Sister of someone  
who was forced to denounce her  
on television;

pacifist in keffiyah,  
but they got guns anyway –

She rolled impatient  
exilic cigarettes, wrote  
fables of mourning:

the mother tucked the child in  
her bed, and slit the dove's throat.

\*

Slit-throat, cutthroat sun  
Slashed wrists of early spring rain.  
Wolves at a distance

give up verse panegyrics  
and howl like politicians.

Is hope a fatal  
disease, or was that despair?  
The old woman sheared

Her grey hair short as a boy's,  
kneaded wine in dough like clay.

\*

Words were clay and wine,... (etc.)

When Marilyn tells her stories and experiences, they are always generous, with substance and feeling that we are invited in to share. W.H. Auden once explained the way he approached a poem: “[T]he questions which interest me most when reading a poem are two. The first is technical: ‘Here is a verbal contraption. How does it work?’” The second, according to Auden, is, in the broadest sense, moral: “What kind of [poet] inhabits this poem?” Marilyn offers up her version of Auden’s judgment in a perfectly-formed (what else?) ghazal:

## Ghazal: Style

Unmistakable, that consummate style  
pierces the incoherence of her late style.

One of them liked to tease out a game for hours;  
the other had an eight-minute-check-and-mate style.

Count stresses; number feet: you've got the meter,  
but there's no metronome to calibrate style.

Words from a dictionary, form-schemes from a textbook  
provide a trot; they don't translate style.

The urban innocent, one more gay man  
whose fantasy and flesh respond to straight style.

And here's another student shy of reading  
the classics, for fear they'll contaminate style.

Always clumsy performing virtue, he  
Accomplished wickedness with great style.

Bombast and pieties in primary colours:  
'Hallmark's' the hall mark of the state style.

Events exceed what verse can render,  
or even prose: you start to hate style.

If there isn't a damned thing left to say  
that's not been said, mark time and cultivate style.

Marilyn Hacker has style.

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