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 tradi-
tional form is chal
lenge and play, yes, but also the nec-
essary container and shaper of her impulses to excess—
escess desire, pleasure, fear, anger, grief, excess att-
tendment to infinite abundances and shatterings of
our world. Food and lovemaking. Streets and friend-
ships. 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 unmanned, and com-
monly 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
blind poet and activist June Jordan, in whose memory
"Elegy for a Soldier" opens Desesperanto, Hacker has
always "savored labels" and is "at once an optimist, a
Cassandra/ Lilith/… citizen soldier." Like Muriel
Rukeyser, she likes to combine "intense and unfash-
ionable 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 rampancy 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 ex? 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, Desespero, in French, means “de-
spair.” 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 denomina-
tor 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 cit-
ties are always lived in, like very good
clothing you wear for decades. Her Paris
is a place of widows and prostitutes, Af-
rican kids skating, old men drinking cof-
fee, walkup apartments, debates over
whether or not to let a clinic for drug us-
ers 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 to the poet who wants to
avoid the predictable punch-line
effect of the Shakespearean sonnet?) lo-
cated 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 doggs bundling under their
purchases in light rain, fine as an unspoken wish
while merchants scoared 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, surfacing and smifing
syllables in your mouth to get the full pleasure of
them. Again, after heavy March rains, in "Almost
Equinocial," the poem’s music is as vivid as its
images:

The banks of the river are covered in water. It’s raining
that much: plane trees up to their waists, the
stairs going down from the quais step onto water, not foot
paths….

…The riverbank amphitheaters are under
mud-colored water, no dog-romps, no kids
playing drums
with their Arab or Gallic or Jewish hair
twisted in dread.

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 “kasher 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,
potlocks, ad hoc/ debates, demos, parades and pic-

nics,” although, in time present, its dominant note is
loss and betrayal. Two of the strongest and bravest
poems in the book are about the heartbeat of trying
to teach young people who are unprepared to learn
or to care about learning. In one, an “Embittered El-
ey” for Matthew Shepherd and Dr. Barnet Slepian,
two victims of America’s hatred of otherness: “The
weak the boy froze on the barbed-wire fence/a snap-
ping senior toasted ‘men in drag.’” In another, where
students in a twentieth-century American women
poets seminar are equally ignorant of “Meter, Mod-
erism, metaphor” and Emmett Till, the teacher vainly
awaits “someone’s eyes/ widening, a smile, complic-
ity…” 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 resis-
tance, “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 desipals.

I am reminded of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s son-
net 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 sextina but with eight seven-line stanzas
(a septina?) scrapulously 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 implica-
tion 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
Art from Excess has been extended due to popular demand! In addition to the hours this wkend, the exhibit will be open 2 days next wkend: Fri April 10 6-9 and Sat April 11 3-9. Art from Excess. April 1, 2015 ·. Art from Excess had a great first wkend: great turn-out, a thought provoking artist panel, an engaged audience, and fun food and drink treats. Exhibit hrs this week: Thurs 6-9, Fri, 6-9, Sat 3-9, Sun 1-4 (yes, we will have hours on Easter Sunday). Come out for the exhibit or come back to spend more time! “The art of excess ultimately demonstrates that what the reader initially perceives as excess is actually functional in several ways, essential if the novel is to participate in the new systems paradigm and if it is to represent the excesses of the mastering systems in which the text exists.” LeClair assumes (but doesn't reveal how) literature can translate into political action or efficacy. The Art of Excess aims to prove three masteries that exist in system novels, â€œwhale-likeâ€ tales that are â€œprofoundly informed, inventively crafted, and cunningly theoreticalâ€ (2): a mastery of the world, of narrative means, and of the reader (2-3). The first mastery aims to represent a totality of knowledge, which is not limited to a small part of the world. Jillian Hernandez. Heavy makeup, gaudy jewelry, dramatic hairstyles, and clothes that are considered cheap, fake, too short, too tight, or too masculine: working-class Black and Latina girls and women are often framed as embodying “excessive” styles that are presumed to indicate sexual deviance. In Aesthetics of Excess Jillian Hernandez examines how middle-class discourses of aesthetic value racialize the bodies of women and girls of color. At the same time, their style can be a source of cultural capital when appropriated by the contemporary art scene. The Art of Excess. Last Updated on May 10, 2015, by eNotes Editorial. Word Count: 1571. Tom LeClairâ€™s The Art of Excess is an important contribution to American literary criticism. In an age of minimalist art and, consequently, of minimalist criticism, LeClair tackles seven of the longest works that have been produced in American fiction in the 1970â€™s and 1980â€™s: Thomas Pynchonâ€™s Gravityâ€™s Rainbow (1973), Joseph Hellerâ€™s Something Happened (1974), William Gaddisâ€™ J R (1975), Robert Cooverâ€™s The Public Burning (1977).