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Mary Barnard, American Imagist

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► **To cite this version:**

Anne Reynes-Delobel. Mary Barnard, American Imagist . Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies, 2015, 8, pp.132. 10.12681/syn.16219 . hal-01423774

HAL Id: hal-01423774

<https://amu.hal.science/hal-01423774>

Submitted on 10 Apr 2018

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Sarah Barnsley. *Mary Barnard. American Imagist*. Albany, NY: State U of New York P. 2013. Pp. xx + 176. \$25.95 (Pb).

In 1982, reflecting back on her writing career and the relatively scant attention she had received as a Modernist poet and essayist, Mary Barnard said that she “had sort of fallen down the cracks,” having been “too late for Imagism,” and “too early for the Lowell, Berryman, Jarrell wave.” Yet, from her earlier attempts at finding a “balanced line” to share the experience of her native Pacific Northwest to her incisive renditions of Sappho (which have never gone out of print), and her later interest in the mythology of time, her work displays a passion for “working out the measurement”¹ which is both intrinsically modernist in its reimagining of genesis and specifically American in its embrace of a localist poetics. In this respect, Sarah Barnsley is right to claim that it deserved more than a mere addition to the field of recovery studies. By drawing on the Barnard archives at Yale’s Beineke Library, her convincing monograph succeeds in making a case for Barnard’s original poetic output and for her contribution to the evolution of American free verse.

In her first chapter, Barnsley adroitly combines an overview of Barnard’s long life (1909-1991) and career with an introduction to her modernist aesthetics. Her elegant prose draws a compelling portrait of the poet while providing illuminating insights into the “spare but musical” measure she honed during the two decades which constituted her formative years, mostly spent in New York. This productive period, which saw the publication of two collections of poems, *Cool Country* (1940) and *A Few Poems* (1952), started at the turn on the 30s when Barnard was studying at Reed College, in Portland, Oregon, where she excelled at Greek and gained a thorough knowledge of classical and modern literature, including the modernist experimentations of Eliot, Crane, Sitwell, H.D., and Pound. Soon after graduating, impressed by Pound’s technical excellence, she sent six poems and a plea for help to Rapallo. Pound was prompt in offering guidance with the search for life speech rhythm, conciseness, and exact diction. He was also helpful in getting Barnard a job as the first Poetry Curator at the University of Buffalo’s Lockwood Memorial Library, where she worked in 1939-43. An even more crucial influence, according to Barnsley, was William Carlos Williams’s localist aesthetic and insistence on the “rhythmical powers of inclusion” of the “foot”². Barnard’s experience of her native region proved vital in providing the very texture and structure of what Babette Deutsch, another mentor, called her “verbal landscaping.” “North Window,” written shortly before Barnard moved to New York in 1936, is examined by Barnsley as an example of the way her oppositional poetics fuels a tension between scarcity and lavishness until forcing “passage to another country” whose mystery is left for the imagination to comprehend: “We sit among the grasses / Among

bloodless stones / Or lie at night upon white fur / Watching night gather under the rafters / Speaking of the queen's emeralds."

In the following section, perhaps the most absorbing, Barnsley goes on demonstrating how the nature of Barnard's native landscape trained her into the imagist aesthetic before she had ever heard of Pound's "A Few Don'ts." Commenting upon early Washington sawmill sketches Barnard made while accompanying her father on business trips as a timber broker to the logging sites, she argues that the structural austerity of mill architecture provided Barnard with an enduring model of verbal economy, making her poetry "an imaginative mill of alterations, erasures and reformulations to produce something honest and resonant" (33), as exemplified in these lines from "Highway Bridge": "After the passage this that we thought shattered / Absorbs the falling fragments of sound. / There is a deeper silence than before / Where two ruts dip under the river's border / And do not reappear." Examining the importance of the "flat blank space" of the Pacific coast on Barnard's pared down lyrics, Barnsley then slightly inflects her focus to address Barnard's affirmative, gendered "sand poetics." Placing the Vancouver poet in conversation with H.D., she argues that the oxymoronic qualities of sand (continuous/discontinuous, hard/soft, moist/dry, opaque/transparent) makes it "an empowering substance that accompanies scenes of transformation and recovery" (41). However similar their sand poetics might have been, H.D. and Barnard never grew close. Was it, Barnsley suggests, because they had too much in common? Did Barnard fear that she might be accused of imitation? If H.D. was another strong tutelary figure for Barnard, yet their relationship remained somehow abstracted and devoid of the warmth and cordiality that marked her exchanges with Pound and Williams.

Discussions of Williams's and Pound's respective influences crisscross throughout this monograph. Barnard shared Pound's passion for Greek while he trusted her knowledge of the Sapphic cadence to guide her in her experimentation with a new "amerikan langwidge." Preconising a strict regimen of metrical exercises, he encouraged her to develop a more musical measure and took great pains to send her Lavignac and Laurencie's *Encyclopédie de la musique* which contained numerous analyses of Greek lyrical poetry founded on the idea that Greek metrics and prosody could be translated into modern measures. Pound was instrumental in helping Barnard's consciously experiment with a range of Greek meters until she found the musical principle of balance that fitted her own poetic ends. Without shying away from technical details, Barnsley devotes the main part of her fourth chapter to showing how Barnard "weighted syllable" produces a musical cadence *within* the line that approximates the speaking voice. This analysis logically proceeds from the discussion, in the preceding chapter, of Barnard's "Sapphic-American modernism" in which Barnsley considers what she calls

“Sappho’s covert presence” in Barnard’s 1936-51 poetic production before she pulled off her masterful *Sappho: A New Translation* (1958). Barnsley discerns traces of Sappho’s aesthetic in Barnard’s fascination for compressions and the gaps surrounding them, and in the binary tension wrought by the subtle balancing of local and national, private and public³.

This “democratized lyric” and dramatisation of the experience of the American space takes us back to Williams who, Barnsley insists, was the main impetus behind Barnard’s quest for an intimate knowledge of localism and the American idiom, as illustrated in “Roots” (1938): “Rain on the windshield, / Roads spongy with sawdust / Have meant in the end / A love of a place that grows into the body.” It is interesting to learn that it is only after she relocated to New York in 1936 that Barnard was able to articulate her regional experience “with a look as deep as the continent,” as she writes in a poem entitled “Encounter in Buffalo.” Moreover, in devising her own form of free verse governed by the weighted syllable, she found, as Williams wrote her in a letter of 1952, a way of “measuring the measure” equal in strength to his own experimentation with the variable foot. “Between them,” Barnsley concludes, Barnard and Williams worked simultaneously at the formulation of a distinctively American brand of free verse” (111). It is, therefore, all the more regrettable that Williams failed to include Barnard in his various essays, particularly his 1954 “On measure: Statement for Cid Corman” which Barnard thought had a lot to do with their ongoing conversation on musical rhythm. Overall, Barnard’s aesthetic integrity and willingness to pursue her own brand of imagism in defiance of changing trends may have accounted for her having fallen through the cracks of critical attention. In bringing her achievement to light, Barnsley’s remarkable monograph expands our grasp of American modernist poetry.

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¹ Barnard, Mary. Interview with Don Swaim. *Book Beat*. CBS, WCBS, New York: 11 September 1986, CBS. Radio.

² On this subject, Barnsley adeptly quotes 1932 letter to Kay Boyle about the search of a “workable poetic form” (*The Selected Letters of William Carlos Williams*. Ed. John C. Thirlwall. New York: New Directions, 1957. 129-36).

³ For a detailed discussion of Barnard’s sapphic measure, see Sarah Barnsley. “Making It New: Sappho, Mary Barnard and American Modernism.” *Synthesis* 5 (Fall 2003): 71-93.