

CHAPTER ONE

“SPARE BUT MUSICAL”

The Poetry of Mary Barnard

In the year before Mary Barnard wrote the letter to Ezra Pound that was to change her life, she picked out a new bright red student's notebook by the Chief Company, its cover emblazoned with a Native American in full headdress, and set a goal. “These four years,” she wrote on the first page, referring to the intellectual and creative awakening she had experienced at college, “must be crystallized into one clear stone.” Among scatterings of wistful observations about art, love, melancholy, and memory, interspersed with ideas and lines for poems that might somehow crystallize it all, is an important entry dated October 31, 1932—“one clear stone” of thought regarding what this passionate young woman of twenty-three wanted for her poetry:

Things have a certain starkness about them in an autumn rain. I should like my writing to be like that—hard substantial colors, *on* something, not transparent. The cherry tree limbs are black, round, shiny, the leaves yellow crescents scattered among curled brown ones on the greening [grass?]. Newly turned earth is a heavy red color. Shapes of things are emerging from their summer mistiness, their disguise. The dancer has cast off her floating satin, and her movements are the pure, true lines of beauty.¹

It's easy, from this, to see why Barnard was so determined to make contact with Ezra Pound the following October when she looked him up in *Who's Who* in the public library in Vancouver, Washington, the frontier town in the Pacific Northwest in which she had grown up, where “the Roaring Twenties . . . hardly roared at all”² and sent him some poems with a plea to “consider the geographical state of Washington, and how unlikely I am ever to meet

anyone who could help me.”³ Barnard’s desire for a poetry of “things” with a “certain starkness,” of “hard substantial colors” devoid of “mistiness” and superfluous wrappings of “floating satin,” recalls what Pound had wanted when he was of a similar age; indeed, in Barnard’s prose here, one can almost catch a glimpse of the one poem that came to typify his Imagist movement, the “wet, black bough” of Pound’s “In a Station of the Metro”⁴ flickering in Barnard’s image of the “black, round, shiny” limbs of the cherry tree in autumn rain.

As this book will explore, the “Pound connection,”⁵ as Barnard termed it, took her to New York, where she was to spend the best part of the next twenty years mixing in modernist circles, and brought her to the attention of the influential literary journals of the day—*American Prefaces*, *New Democracy*, *New English Weekly*, *Partisan Review*, *Poetry*, and *Townsman*—as well as to the notice of Pound’s publisher in America, James Laughlin, whose newly established *New Directions* printed Barnard’s first collection, *Cool Country*, in 1940. The “Pound connection” also landed Barnard a job as the first Poetry Curator at the Lockwood Memorial Library at the University of Buffalo, where she worked collecting manuscripts of the modern poets between 1939 and 1943, as well as introductions to “someone NOT so much in sympathy with the contents”⁶—Marianne Moore—and someone who was: “Better send a carbon of yr / stuff to ole Bill / might cheer him. Billyum Bullyums, 9 Ridge Rd / Rutherford,” Pound encouraged Barnard in 1934.⁷ As they did Pound, Barnard’s poems certainly cheered William Carlos Williams, as well as Moore, and both, too, became lifelong friends and mentors. It was Moore who first recommended Barnard to Morton Zabel at *Poetry* in 1934, which awarded her the distinguished Levinson Award in 1935 (two years after Moore herself had won the prize), as well as to the Library of Congress for the position of chair of poetry (which unfortunately came to nothing). In 1949, Barnard visited Italy, at Pound’s encouragement, touring places that featured in *The Cantos*, as she improved her grasp of Italian and returned to New York, fired up with thoughts of Europe and eager to begin new writing projects.

But then events appeared to take a bad turn. Early in 1951, Barnard fell seriously ill with not one but two successive, near-fatal viruses. In February, she came down with “the Bug-of-the-Year” and entered Lennox Hill Hospital on Manhattan’s Upper East Side for a long stay.⁸ Upon discharge, considerably weakened, exhausted, and with no partner to look after her, Barnard travelled home to her parents in Vancouver, where, as their much-adored only child, she was sure to make a good recovery. She was wrong. Almost as soon as she arrived she developed serum hepatitis and was swiftly admitted once again to hospital. The heady days as “a provincial in New York,” as Barnard put it, tearing around the metropolis in her distinctive green beret, were over.⁹ Permitted to sit up for fifteen minutes a day for one month, half an hour a day for the next month, Barnard soon realized “that it would be not just one month, but many months, before I would be able to live a normal life again.”¹⁰

Such confinement, however, was to prove pivotal to Barnard's career. Rattled by the advice of her doctors, Barnard felt

that I must do something to make this catastrophe *pay*, to move it somehow from the loss column to the profit column, to make it turn out to be, like all the disasters in English history since 1066 and all that, "A Good Thing." I wanted to feel, when at last I was able to be active again, that I had accomplished something.¹¹

There were two rules for the "good thing"—it would have to be something that she would not have done had she been on her feet, and it would have to be something she could do manageably while propped up by pillows. Having allowed her Greek to lapse after working at Sapphics in the early days of her correspondence with Pound, Barnard set to re-reading the classical Greek poets when she received an unexpected gift from a well-wisher. Hearing about her illness while in Rapallo editing his book of Pound's letters, the poet and translator D. D. Paige mailed Barnard a copy of Quasimodo's slim volume *Lirici Greci*. Buoyed by her improved command of Italian following her recent tour of the country, Barnard not only devoured the book but found that it enabled her to return to the puzzle of translating another poet renowned for writing with a "certain starkness": Sappho. The task had perplexed her for years; Barnard had tried to read Sappho in the original, but she felt that she needed a crib, or notes, or a lexicon. What she found in English "only left me wondering what all the fuss was about."¹² But the Italian translations changed all that. Being shown the text through the medium of a language that was not English had a distinct advantage; it left Barnard with a mind free "to balance between the Greek phrase and the Italian phrase, while I searched for the truly equivalent phrase in living, not lexicon English."¹³ Within a year, she had a draft of the manuscript that was eventually to become her most commercially successful book, *Sappho: A New Translation*, a continuous best seller since its publication in 1958. The "good thing," as Barnard had hoped, had come.

But if it led to the one "good thing" of *Sappho*, then Quasimodo's Italian volume surprisingly led to another, for Barnard's critical audience at least. In her recollection of the power of the *Lirici Greci* can be found a neat articulation of the aesthetic that has eluded many of Barnard's critics, compelling as her verse may be, an aesthetic Barnard herself was deeply reluctant to specify outside of the poetry itself. Of the *Lirici Greci*, Barnard recalled:

I found here, in Sappho's Greek, as revealed to me now through the medium of the Italian, the style I had been groping toward, or perhaps merely hungering for, when I ceased to write poetry [for a

time in the mid-1940s]. It was spare but musical, and had, besides, the sound of the speaking voice making a simple but emotionally loaded statement. It is never “tinkling” as Bill Williams . . . characterized it. Neither is it “strident” as Rexroth described it. It is resonant although unmistakably in the female register.¹⁴

“Spare but musical” is exactly how one might define the poetry of Mary Barnard. The phrase itself is a delightful compression of the very Imagist principles that Barnard took to heart upon reading F. S. Flint’s “Imagisme” and Pound’s supplementary essay “A Few Don’ts by an Imagiste” for the first time in 1933, where she encountered the now legendary three rules of Imagism that had appeared in the pages of *Poetry* twenty years earlier:

Direct treatment of the “thing” whether subjective or objective.

To use absolutely no word that does not contribute to the presentation.

As regarding rhythm: to compose in the sequence of the musical phrase, not in sequence of a metronome.¹⁵

Born on December 6 in the same year as Pound’s involvement with the “forgotten school of 1909,” as he was to refer to T. E. Hulme’s club of nascent Imagists, Barnard might be best considered as a something of a late Imagist, her “spare but musical” minimalist idiom an emblem of the kind of rhythmical terseness that typifies much of her poetry, most notably that of her formative years, the 1930s through the early 1950s, mostly spent in New York, that are the focus of this book. Take, for example, a stanza from Barnard’s poem “Shoreline” that Zabel printed in *Poetry* in 1935:

Litter of bare logs in the drift—
The sea has had its sharp word with them. The smudged odor
Of wild roses, wild strawberries on the dune shoulder
Stains as with color the salt stench of the sea.
It is a naked restless garden that descends
From the crouched pine
To shellfish caught in flat reflecting sands.¹⁶

There is an alluring tension throughout, the varying line lengths endowing the stanza with a lushness appropriate to the image of the “naked, restless garden” of wild flowers and fruits, yet kept in check by the clipped grammar of the first and third lines; the paring away of the excessive padding of articles and conjunctions effects a prickly rhythm commensurate with the starkness of “bare logs” and the physical restraint of “the crouched pine” and “shellfish caught in flat reflecting sands.” But it is the “musical phrase” that

wins through here; the spare, staccato rhythm recedes as the stanza develops and is all but dissolved by the single sentence at the stanza's close, which flows effortlessly over three enjambed lines without the jarring interruptions of punctuation. Intriguingly, Barnard specifies that the "naked restless garden" lies *between* the crouched pine at the head of the beach and the shellfish entrapped in the sands at the shoreline, and in this she might be said to be making a gesture toward her Imagist sympathies—bracketing an image of sumptuous plenty with images of restraint is suggestive of the way in which the Imagist poet's restrained language enables the "naked restless" growth of the "emotional and intellectual complex in an instant of time."¹⁷

The verbal restraint of Barnard's "spare but musical" poetry parallels other kinds of restraint that have textured the poet's reception so far. She published two collections of short poems, *Cool Country* (1940) and *A Few Poems* (1952), during her years as a "provincial in New York," but the recent recovery of manuscripts from Barnard's literary estate since her death in 2001 indicates that Barnard's output was prolific in this period, with enough material for at least two more books, if not more. True, some of this material includes the kind of typical high school "doggerel" that is the poet's rite of passage, as Barnard was the first to admit, but much of it is not, and perhaps nowhere is Barnard's late Imagism more accomplished than in one poem she had tucked away for more than sixty years, "North Window," written shortly before she first departed for New York:

North Window

A book with a green binding
And snow dropping out of a shallow sky:
The falling away of light and blood,
Of all yellow and rose
Leaves only

Forced passage to another country,
To a beach without wharf, quiet
Like a lake beach.
 Green cloth and polished horn,
 Stairways of unstained wood.
We sit among grasses,
Among bloodless stones
Or lie at night upon white fur
Watching mist gather under the rafters,
Speaking of the queen's emeralds.¹⁸

There is again that tantalizing balance between tautness and expansion; the verbal restraint of the first two clauses, terse in their itemizing tone,

is gently replaced by a sentence that falls over several lines with all the combined delicateness yet consequent thickness of the snowfall alluded to in the poem. This sentence, beginning “The falling away,” is at first entrancingly pared back into the margins over the course of three lines, only to rapidly grow into lines that are suddenly longer and denser with assonance and consonance, reminiscent of the way spare flurries of snowflakes can form thick carpets of snow surprisingly quickly, a swiftness not lost on Barnard, who locates sheets of “white fur” in close proximity to “mist” toward the end of the poem. In the imagery, too, there is a paring back, a sense of the life of things draining out of them. The sky is shallow; light and blood slip away; the result is “forced passage to another country,” but even there lie further extinctions—excommunication from the world in the form of a “beach without wharf,” “bloodless stones.” And yet among all this scarcity, there is wealth and lavishness. Like the “naked restless garden” that blooms amid the restraint of the beach, the scene is suddenly graced by images of “white fur” and “the queen’s emeralds.”

The influence of the Imagists is acute in both “Shoreline” and “North Window,” particularly that of H.D., of whom Pound was reminded when he first read Barnard’s work. In part this was due to geographical circumstance; the coastline of the Long Beach Peninsula, Washington, that inspired many of Barnard’s poems such as “Shoreline,” had about it the same kind of plain, hard grittiness found in the windswept seashore of H.D.’s *Sea Garden* poems. Just as H.D. registered emotional intensity in the “hard sand,”¹⁹ the discarded “amber husk” of dried-out fruit,²⁰ the “meagre flower, thin / sparse of leaf” of a sea rose,²¹ so, too, did Barnard find elevation in the spare and the abandoned elements of the beach with its “litter of bare logs in the drift” and “flat, reflecting sands,” freighted with emotional significance. Something of the sharp but mysterious, otherworldly qualities of *Sea Garden* is present in the “queen’s emeralds” of “North Window” that seem, at first, quite out of place in this specific, rural scene—perhaps this is a metaphor for the rich, jewel-like shine of snow melting on the evergreens outside the “North Window” of Barnard’s Washington home? Read beside the “green” of the “book” and the “cloth,” the “emeralds” evoke northwestern color. Yet combined with the “white fur” on which the speakers lie, they suggest an entrancing, if slightly puzzling, opulence; we may not be able to make a confident grasp of their meanings, but these images give the poem a marvelous glaze, as if adding varnish to “unstained wood.” They endow the poem with the same kind of “accurate mystery” that was attributed to H.D.,²² whom Barnard admired, and whose work, F. S. Flint said in “The Poetry of H.D.,” had “the precision of goldsmith’s work, in ultimate effect it is mysterious and only to be comprehended by the imagination.”²³ Indeed, it is interesting to speculate that Barnard’s work, with its American brand of Hellenic hardness and use of Greek themes, is suggestive of what H.D.’s work might had been like had she not gone to Europe²⁴—and might, in part, explain H.D.’s reluctance to correspond with Barnard. As that formidable cor-

respondent of the American modernists, Viola Baxter Jordan, saw it, H.D. was a "jealous thing—she never mentions you and I always say something about you or your work in my letters," she explained to Barnard.²⁵

Yet perhaps Barnard's late Imagism resonates most strongly with the kind of work put out by the American modernist poet who vehemently defended his choice *not* to uproot to Europe, "Ole Bill" Williams. Barnard's attentiveness, in her red "Chief" notebook, to the "shapes of things emerging from their summer mistiness" in the autumn reminds one of the praise afforded by Williams to the "twiggy / stuff of bushes and small trees," the "stuff" of "patches of standing water," of "reddish / purplish" bushes that come into stark clarity as objects are defined "one by one" in the first poem of *Spring and All* (1923).²⁶ Her choice of autumn, rather than spring, as the time of creative stimulation is perhaps a reflection of Barnard's more measured and composed relationship with the outside world, as befitting a generation which, Edmund Wilson felt, had arrived after "the last hysteria of the boom and the stock market crash" and whose "sobering effect" had yielded a "literary revival" in American writing.²⁷ Of Williams's importance to the questions she was asking of poetry, Barnard was in no doubt, as the October 2, 1932 entry into her Chief red notebook—before she had begun writing to him—testifies:

A day like today makes a physical demand which I cannot meet. The tautness of the spiderweb in the holly tree, the evenness of the lawn, the long tendrils of red Virginia creeper demand song and I am silent. The slight wind, the curved wings of the woodpeckers in flight demand high deeds and I am inactive. The sunlight, too brilliant to last . . . demands sudden, intense love-making—most absurd of all. I am passive, unexpectant. The significance of these things—who can say what it is? W.C.W.? the red wheelbarrow²⁸

The direct "statement" feel of "Shoreline" (where the sea's rhythms are likened to speech) and "North Window" (which uses variations in sentence rhythm to emphasize changes in scene) comes from the keen ear that Barnard had, like Williams, for the easy musicality of common speech. "I believe in the sound of words. By that I mean words that sound as if they grew together, although they may be common and not particularly beautiful in themselves," wrote Barnard in a preface to the poems she submitted as part of her senior thesis at college.²⁹ Like Williams, Barnard takes American vernacular speech and, directed by its rhythms, makes poetry out of it; she does not "poeticize" live speech. To aid her, Barnard formulated her own special measure, the "balanced line," which, like Williams's "variable foot" or the "open formation" he noted of Whitman's example,³⁰ allowed for the endless variability of spontaneous, common speech to be set in verse that used the principle of elapsed time,

as in music, rather than the accent as a means of “measuring the measure,” as we shall see later. “This . . . approach to free verse, which I could accept, simply meant that, instead of using the interminable iambic pentameter, you wrote for all variations,” Barnard recounted to Jane Van Cleve amid the publicity for *Collected Poems*; “that is what I worked on—trying to work out other arrangements of stresses and syllable lengths that would work in English [language] verse and would make a thing hold together.”³¹

Added to this, there’s the intense focus on the local; not the adopted local of New York that furnished a good number of Barnard’s poems (although the city inevitably featured in some of her work), but the local of her beloved Northwest, with which she felt a primal, deep-rooted connection. Like Williams, Barnard was eager to write the American local in modern idiom. And, in some ways, Barnard’s personal experience of her region, I will argue, furnished Barnard with the coordinates for producing her “spare but musical” style. Although it is easy to detect the recognizable lush and fecund “wet, heavily wooded wild country”³² of the Northwest in Barnard’s poetry—there is plenty of what she called the “cool country” of rain, fog, mist, mountains, evergreens, salmon, and huckleberries in her writing—there were two spaces that formed her “local” and inspired much of what she wrote that contrast with this lushness: the isolated sawmill settlements she experienced as the daughter of a lumber merchant, spare and minimal in their construction, that inspired poems such as “North Window” and, of course, the desolate Long Beach peninsula of “Shoreline,” which, although densely blanketed with evergreens, is characterized by its bare, plain coastline and deserted beaches. This localized version of the Northwest comprised of quiet, spare, lonely places not only played a significant role in her formation as a poet, it made her particularly sensitive to a poetics, like Imagism, so thoroughly focused on the minimal.

These are important contours to identify, for some have missed them. Despite being admired and championed by important figures in literary modernism, wide publication in the leading poetry journals of the 1930s and 1940s, and numerous accolades (as well as the *Poetry* Levinson Award, she won the Elliston Award for her *Collected Poems* in 1979 and the Western States Book Award for her long poem *Time and the White Tigress* in 1986), Barnard has, curiously, drawn limited critical attention. For all her association with Pound, both as an apprentice (“one of Ezra’s string of ponies,”³³ said Williams) and, in time, as a close family friend (Laughlin saw her as “Ezra’s daughter”³⁴), until very recently Barnard has been considered as an occasional footnote in accounts of the more familiar names in American modernism and not as a subject worthy of study in her own right.³⁵ This marginal attention is strange, given the richness of scholarship that has emerged in recent years on members of the so-called “ezrauniversity” and those heirs of Williams’s legacy, and it is stranger still if we consider that such recoveries have coincided with efforts calling attention to women in Anglo-American modernism. The most sub-

stantial examination of Barnard to date is in the form of a special issue of *Paid-euma*; yet even here critics fall short of adequately defining Barnard's oeuvre, some saying it is "uncategorizable."³⁶ This lack is what this book aims to fill: to fully investigate the character of Barnard's poetry and lift the footnote to the center of the page in the story of American modernism in its later period.

Of course Barnard's neglect is not simply the fault of the academy. Partly there are pragmatic issues—Barnard lived a very long life (1909–2001), with her archive finally being acquired by the Yale Beinecke Library in 2005³⁷—and it is a challenge to situate a life being led, especially that of a writer like Barnard, who fiercely eschewed personal examination. There is also the chaos and mess of human relationships that affect reception; the new Barnard archives show that, for example, much of Barnard's correspondence with Pound was omitted from D. D. Paige's *Selected Letters* on the say-so of Olga Rudge. "As he made you his ambassador [in the United States], you entered, perforce. And perforce she is jealous," Paige told Barnard privately in 1950 as he tried to deal with Rudge's demand that he "cut *all* letters to women."³⁸

But there are also issues of changing literary trends. Perhaps the poetry world of the 1930s and 1940s was not quite ready for Barnard's poetry of "a certain starkness" after Pound, Williams, and H.D., who were seen to have moved far beyond their Imagist phases. For some, Imagism expired with the First World War, and a specifically "new" poetry was incapable of emerging until after World War II; the interwar years were "about" something seemingly more profound than questions of form. According to John Crowe Ransom at *The Kenyon Review*, Barnard's work did not appeal to his "metaphysical" tastes:

I think your poems are singularly consistent, and in a certain mode which continues to strike me as a little limited. Probably I am opinionated about this. I like them but not enough. It may be that 17th Century poetry, to which I am addicted, and "metaphysical" poetry such as is written by your contemporaries, have spoiled my tastes.³⁹

Macmillan editor Theodore Purdy thought her manuscript, given to him damp and curling after being caught in a heavy downpour as she resolutely made her way down Fifth Avenue to deliver it by hand one wet September afternoon in 1938, showed "exceptional promise . . . you have the equipment and material for writing verse of real importance."⁴⁰ Like Ransom, though, Purdy thought Barnard's work had its limitations; as with the best of Moore's poetry, Purdy observed that "these poems exert primarily an intellectual appeal . . . and [so] have a limited readership."⁴¹ So it seemed that editors, although they liked Barnard's "singularly consistent" work, simply did not think there was a contemporary audience for it—among their readers, at least. For Williams, there was some virtue in Barnard's poetry of "a certain

starkness": "I like the steadiness of the feeling back of the poems," he wrote to Barnard in early 1935 after receiving the letter of introduction that Barnard had been encouraged to send by Pound; "you have succeeded in matching this with a line which while full of restraint is never forced."⁴² Florence Codman, editor of Arrow Editions, which published E. E. Cummings and Robert Fitzgerald, also perceived something of Barnard's exacting subtlety. Encouraged by Williams to "go to see Miss Codman *at once*" upon her first arrival in New York in the spring of 1936,⁴³ Barnard wasted no time at all and Codman, who had been reading Barnard's poems in the magazines with increasing interest, quickly requested a manuscript. "You do have the most delicate, almost hurting fineness of perception locked in one of the most certain techniques that I have met in a long time," Codman later told Barnard in 1937; "it's so very quiet and so very sure."⁴⁴ However, the Arrow reader report was mixed. The reader admired the measured restraint of Barnard's idiom and its "stretched out clarity":

The statements themselves are pleasantly perceptive and often freshly perceptive; usually the poem is made out of three or four or five statements of this kind arranged in a particularly open, detached sequence: the effect of particles reflectively dropped to make a pattern.⁴⁵

Yet this very "open, detached" quality, in which language emulates the spare grace of "particles reflectively dropped to make a pattern," was also a cause for concern for Arrow's reader, who complained elsewhere that Barnard's poems were "too slight to sustain themselves." H.D.'s early Imagist poetry had caused similar alarm: she was praised on the one hand for writing a poetry of "accurate mystery" yet derided on the other for writing a "petty poetry that can be said in the one minute before lunch."⁴⁶ F. S. Flint had written:

You take a poem like ["Sitalkas"] for instance. . . . And you cannot argue it out by syllogisms. It might have come out of the Greek anthology; but that does not bring you any nearer to it. In fact, the more you attempt to reason about it the less will you get out of it. It must work on you like an evocation.⁴⁷

Flint's notion, here, that "you cannot argue it out by syllogisms" might explain the problem that John Crowe Ransom had with Barnard's poetry, for the metaphysical poets he aligned himself with produced a poetry rich in syllogistic rhetoric that was anathema to the "direct presentation" of the Imagists Barnard was influenced by. And so, despite her initial enthusiasm, Codman felt obliged by the reader's report to decline Barnard's manuscript, but she maintained her support, suggesting employment leads and making Barnard a

gift of fifty dollars to keep her in New York to improve her writing. “I feel like a racehorse—having somebody gambling good money on what a month in bluegrass would do for me,”⁴⁸ Barnard told her parents.

The gamble paid off, or so it seemed. Following success with his *New Directions* magazine, by the late 1930s James Laughlin was looking to extend into book publishing and had in mind a selection of work by young American poets who had appeared in his magazine. With four men signed up (John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, George Marion O’Donnell, and W. R. Moses), Laughlin was determined that a fifth poet be found and that that poet should be a woman; the choice was either Bishop or Barnard. Holding out for publication of a book of her own, Bishop declined the invitation, but, a little beleaguered by rejections, Barnard accepted at once. The result was *Five Young American Poets*, a *New Directions* showcase anthology of debut collections by emerging midcentury poets. But where Laughlin saw some depths to the poems collected as *Cool Country* (“they require several readings. Your gift is not ostentatious,”



FIGURE 1. Publicity photo of Mary Barnard (1940) for *Five Young American Poets*. Photo by Hermine Duthie Decker. Mary Barnard Papers. Courtesy of Aletha Decker Carlton.

he told Barnard⁴⁹), there were others who did not warm to her spare, subtle lyrics with their focus on lonely, natural spaces. Allen Tate's review of *Five Young American Poets* passed over Barnard's *Cool Country* in two cruelly dismissive sentences, devoting several paragraphs instead to Randall Jarrell's *The Rage for the Lost Penny* and John Berryman's *Twenty Poems*, doing much to establish their reputations. Tate's verdict had some impact; the anthologist Oscar Williams left Barnard out of his *New Poems: 1940*, telling Barnard at a New York party that he "expected that I would agree with [Tate's assessment]. He did."⁵⁰ She was further shunned by another prominent anthologist; *Cool Country* was "nothing but Imagism," Louis Untermeyer sniffed on a visit to Buffalo,⁵¹ but perhaps this was no bad thing, for Untermeyer's judgments did not endear him to many. "Louis Unt. has done more than any man living to discredit poetry," Pound was fond of quoting Eliot as saying, as Paige reassured Barnard⁵²; another of Barnard's voluminous correspondents, the poet and critic Babette Deutsch, put it rather more bluntly—Untermeyer was "worse than exhausting."⁵³ Having taken Barnard under her wing in her early years in New York, Deutsch told her to pay no attention to Tate, either. "I saw Mr. Tate's strictures on you," Deutsch wrote on May 30, 1941; "I've been thru that mill too."⁵⁴

Maybe there has always been something a little difficult to define about Barnard, making her perplexing to some, entrancing to others. "You are a strange creature," Williams told her in a letter of March 26, 1937, but this was not a put-down. "Every once in a while I think of you as a romantic, then you stick something in my eye to wake me up. I wish you could circulate more in every way," Williams continued, finding a vital currency in her work.⁵⁵ But to most of her New York contemporaries on the Eastern seaboard, it was Barnard's regional background that was unusual and incomprehensible, and in their presence, she said, she felt like "an awkward young woman with sawdust in her hair."⁵⁶ Her Northwest of the Cascade mountains and Coast Range forest logging camps was, she would say, "a little-known landscape"⁵⁷ that continually found its way into Barnard's poetry and that, she felt, marked her as an "awkward" kind of writer. In 1936 and 1938 she secured invitations to the artist's summer colony at Yaddo, in Saratoga Springs, Upstate New York. It quickly became clear to her that a poetic language gap existed on account of where she had come from:

It was at Yaddo that I first realized how little chance my poems had with born-and-bred New Yorkers who thought they heard hawks cawing in the woods, and supposed that all railroad trestles were of iron construction. I hadn't known of the existence of iron trestles until that summer. What I meant by "mountain" was something quite different from what they meant by the same word.⁵⁸

Deutsch "enjoyed what [Barnard] said about saw-mills" and thought that "they should make good poetry," as she told Barnard in a letter while she was at Yaddo in the summer of 1938—but they were "all so foreign to a native New Yorker."⁵⁹ A few months earlier, Deutsch had felt that "it was odd to have you speak of the Massachusetts coast as 'domesticated,'—it is so much wilder than the meek suburban or semi-suburban or pseudo-rural landscape that I am accustomed to."⁶⁰ As a result, Deutsch was not surprised that Barnard was not quite clicking with some of her contemporaries whom she met at Yaddo: "Muriel [Rukeyser] I do know, and like. But I can imagine her coolness to your verbal landscaping."⁶¹ Not that it was easy to relate the subject of this "verbal landscaping" to the native New Yorkers, for the "little-known," "remote" landscape of Barnard's Northwest was still finding its feet as a region even when Barnard was growing up. By the 1920s, Vancouver, Washington, was a busy port town shipping out lumber and grain from the region's growing lumber trade, having for a long time been the only settlement in the Pacific Northwest to be continuously occupied—and not to be confused with Vancouver, Canada. And yet almost as soon as the town founded on the banks of the Columbia River by Captain Vancouver had reached its commercial peak, another, bigger city, Portland, had sprung up on the Oregon side of the Columbia River, becoming the region's economic and cultural epicenter. If Downtown Vancouver had any identity at all for Barnard while she was growing up, it was that of "Portland's convenient 'little Las Vegas'"⁶² because of all its card rooms, pawn shops and quick loan establishments, which proliferated well into the 1980s. This all added up to what Barnard called "an amorphous blob. . . . Vancouver, poor girl, like many of our young people, has had a hard time trying to find out who she is."⁶³

If it was difficult to communicate this "new" land, it was also difficult to communicate the "new" model of liberal arts education that Barnard had enjoyed at Reed College in Portland, Oregon, which positively nurtured an independence among its students that would have been alien to some she met East during the "era of the Vassar girl: Rukeyser, Eleanor Clark and Mary McCarthy,"⁶⁴ as Barnard put it. There were no fraternities, sororities, or intercollegiate sports typical to American college culture at Reed. Contrary to Eastern conservatisms, women students enjoyed unprecedented freedoms, being allowed to smoke anywhere on campus and living in dormitories left unsupervised. "Education at Reed undoubtedly had a lot to do with the independent life so many of us chose to lead or fell into—marriage a possibility but definitely not a necessity," Barnard later explained to a cousin. "But then Reed attracted women who were, even in high school, more interested in their own intellectual development than in marriage and maternity. Co-eds who were primarily husband-hunting didn't go to Reed or if they did, they didn't last long."⁶⁵ To those on the outside, Reed was a breeding ground for immorality.

The fact that the college was nondenominational inflamed its infamy, as did its employment of supposedly radical professors. "Rumor persisted that the principal subjects taught at Reed were 'atheism, communism, and free love,'" Barnard recalled.⁶⁶ Added to this, during Barnard's time there, Reed insisted upon a genuine diet of the liberal arts. There were no English courses or English majors. All students read classical and European literatures and were encouraged to read them in the original, an education of which Pound would have approved. As part of the comprehensive sweep of literature, Reed professors were teaching the work of modern poets long before colleges in the East; "when I was in the east I was shocked to learn of the benighted condition of most of the colleges, at least [as] regards the modern poets," Barnard informed Pound in 1937.⁶⁷

Thus Barnard found herself in the unusual position of being thoroughly grounded in what is now regarded as the modernist tradition while it was still contemporary, and she was developing her own voice as a poet as she was taking classes on Eliot, Joyce, Hart Crane, Edith Sitwell, H.D., and, of course, Ezra Pound, at a time when his work was deeply unpopular with Americans ("at Reed College you are practically venerated," she told him in 1934).⁶⁸ If American colleges were taking notice of Laura Riding and Robert Graves's damning assessment in *A Survey of Modernist Poetry* in 1928 that Imagism carried little literary weight for the twentieth-century poet, Reed was not one of them. By 1937, William Carlos Williams was a staple feature of the Reed creative writing curriculum, long before he made the reading lists of the now ubiquitous master of fine arts (MFA) course. It is small wonder, then, that Barnard saw no gaping schism between herself and the work of the modernists; *these* were her "contemporaries," she felt, rather than those "metaphysical" contemporaries of what she would later call the "Lowell, Berryman, Jarrell wave."⁶⁹ Jarrell, we might remember, regarded modernism as a complete and finished event by 1942 in his essay "The End of the Line," something for poets to respond to and to distance themselves from, certainly not something that had scope for development.⁷⁰ For him, although modernism had provided "the most successful and influential body of poetry of this century,"⁷¹ it had also run its course, producing a terminus at the end of a track out of Romanticism. So while the likes of her contemporaries Jarrell, John Berryman, and Howard Nemerov were turning away from the kind of spare, direct presentation of the Imagists at "the end of the line" in favor of a difficult, technically complex, deeply ironic poetry, Barnard was enthusiastically pursuing modernist lines after Pound, H.D., Moore, and Williams, refining Imagist aesthetics grounded in the local, cultivating free verse lines governed by musical principles and American speech patterns, and courting an exactness and coolness of lyric with the "sound of the speaking voice making a simple but emotionally loaded statement." Modernism, for Barnard, was not an expired aesthetic standing in the way of a new poetry; it was an ongoing project of which she was a part.

Works like *The Cantos* did not leave her feeling that a finite point had been reached from which she had to depart; instead, Barnard treated modernist work as working material to be used toward the achievement of as yet unfulfilled goals. Her American measure, for example, refined over two decades, developed in part from her assessments of Pound's use of classical meters from *Personae* to *The Cantos*. Just as she had always had older friends at college—she was more at ease with students in the year above her than with her immediate peers—so too did Barnard feel more comfortable with the earlier modernists than she did with other midcentury poets in her peer group, with the exception of Elizabeth Bishop, perhaps, the only contemporary with whom she felt she had anything in common; Bishop, too, had her own version of the "Pound connection" in Marianne Moore.

If Barnard's affiliation with modernism made her stand at a tangent to her peers, then matters were not helped by the fact that she was resolutely apolitical at a time when the New York poetry scene was dominated by Leftist poetics. Although she published many poems without "political implications," as she told her parents in 1938,⁷² in the *Partisan Review* and *New Democracy*, she did so not out of political conviction but because she thought political journals looked more favorably upon modernist work like hers; she hoped, as Deutsch did, that she might be "set up by being accepted by the experimental magazines."⁷³ Williams was perplexed by the fact that she had "the will and courage to . . . face the modern world without bitterness," he told her in 1937,⁷⁴ and Marianne Moore's first impressions of Barnard were similarly clouded by puzzlement at her surprising disconnection from the political world, although unlike Williams, Moore saw no "courage" or virtue in this. Barnard, Moore reported privately to Pound, "ought to 'read the papers' and be not wholly in the dark about politics and interests of others."⁷⁵ Barnard's apoliticism only intensified as major conflicts such as the Spanish Civil War and the Second World War stirred up political fervor among her contemporaries. Although Pound tried—and quickly gave up—to interest Barnard in his politics, he was still scolding her during her visits to him in St. Elizabeth's for "sitting up on the fifth floor at Minetta St. taking no interest in the world about [her] and never going to see anybody."⁷⁶

But Barnard was not as naïve, or as insensitive, as her contemporaries thought. When Wall Street crashed in 1929, during Barnard's college years, many fledgling northwestern businesses, including her father's lumber business, took a sharp knock, and Barnard felt it keenly. With the Barnard house mortgaged to the hilt and the family surviving on borrowings from her father's life insurance, Barnard financially scraped through college by "hashing" for meals (waiting on tables in the student cafeteria in exchange for meals). When she graduated in 1932, it was to increasingly bleak job prospects, and she took what employment she could get. Ironically, this turned out to be working for the Emergency Relief Administration, doling out unemployment benefits that she herself came close

to drawing. As a case worker on and off for several years before she arrived in New York, Barnard worked directly with the poor, interviewing the long-term unemployed in “the constant noise and confusion and smell” of the Vancouver relief office or making visits to homes with “a filthy interior where children peed on the floor as a matter of course, and the front yard was heaped with empty but unwashed food cans.”⁷⁷ Such firsthand experiences did not make Barnard a socialist, for she found that the members of the American proletariat that she met were “unrepentant capitalists” who sought dollars, not social justice.⁷⁸ So when Barnard found herself surrounded by poets and artists spitting revolutionary invective at New York gatherings, she found *them* to be naïve, not herself: “The revolutionary aspirations of a Vassar beauty in pink culottes from Bonwit Teller seemed to be totally unreal and probably born of guilt combined with a desire to be in the swim. I could not take her seriously.”⁷⁹

If Barnard stood out among her peers for poetics that embraced Poundian modernism and eschewed politics, the difficulty of placing her was compounded by the fact that, as modernists go, she was simply *not* experimental, at least not overtly. Throughout her career, Barnard remained sceptical of “modernist pyrotechnics.”⁸⁰ Louis Zukofsky, for example, left her “speechless,” she told Pound; “Nothing in the western wildernesses aides me to a comprehension of his poems.”⁸¹ As for Gertrude Stein, there was only one thing to do with her work, as she explained to her parents while she was looking for work in the Manhattan temping agencies in 1939:

I’ve discovered the real . . . use for Gertrude Stein—typing practice. She’s much better than the exercises in the manual, which are not quite as repetitious as she is in her most repetitious moments, and she doesn’t have the moral flavor the manual has. . . . Another advantage is that you have to keep your eye right on the book or you get lost.⁸²

Nor did she have much interest, at the time, in writing the kind of modernist long poem that seemed to Pound, Eliot, H.D., Williams, and others almost unavoidable in the interwar years, amid increasing cultural fragmentations that demanded some cohesion, and although Barnard lived her emergent years in bohemian New York, she steadfastly refused to poeticize the new forms of the city in favor of a poetry on the themes of nature and mythology, which, she lamented, were “utterly out of fashion from 1930 onwards for almost forty years.”⁸³ But she took some comfort from Marianne Moore: “it is NOT necessary to be Bohemian” like “Dr. Williams and his friends,” Moore counseled when Barnard first arrived in New York,⁸⁴ encouraging her to keep up what Williams described as “the more or less conventional surface” of her work if it sufficed.⁸⁵ None of this eventually mattered, for, like Williams, Barnard had some influence on those open form poets that Donald Allen called “the new

American poetry" in his groundbreaking anthology of 1960. Gary Snyder was one admirer, who had attended Barnard's Reed College with Philip Whalen and Lew Welch; Ed Dorn was another, who considered her work to be "of the highest quality," recalled Robert Bertholf, one of Barnard's successors as Curator of the Poetry Collection at Buffalo.⁸⁶ But Barnard was happy to keep a measured distance from the pyrotechnicists, to play the part of "a feminine and extremely muted obligato to the male impetus of Ferlinghetti" as she described a rare public appearance with these other poets to Williams⁸⁷—happy, in fact, to sound a quiet, but confident, defiance against the expectation that to be avant-garde one had to be *evidently* formally difficult.

But being "extremely muted" had its drawbacks, of course, in terms of reception. For one, Barnard held many more poems back than she published, regardless of the judgment of others. The decision not to publish, by Arrow Editions, was a major knock-back, however kind and generous Florence Codman had been to Barnard in those early New York years; very few of Barnard's early poems, including the remarkable "North Window," were ever presented to publishers again. The fact that such poems were neatly preserved at the time of Barnard's death suggests that she had felt them to be of some worth, for Barnard's friends and peers knew that she made very selective decisions about what of her work was worth keeping and what was not. Anything she felt superfluous or dispensable, she discarded.⁸⁸ Such self-imposed restraint in publication was also practiced by Barnard's contemporary Elizabeth Bishop, who chose, like Barnard, to publish around ninety poems in her lifetime but whose posthumously published *Complete Poems* contains at least double that number. Despite their common friendships with Marianne Moore and the critic Victor Chittick, who had taught Barnard at Reed before moving to the University of Washington, Barnard and Bishop did not meet until 1973, when both poets found themselves both to be in the Northwest at the same time, Barnard having returned home to Vancouver to look after her parents, Bishop having reluctantly accepted a teaching position at the University of Washington. "It was a great pleasure to meet you Friday and the strangest thing about it is that we never met before" wrote Bishop after dropping in on the Barnards in Vancouver.⁸⁹ Part of the delay was due to a natural reserve, like Barnard's. "For most of her writing life," Ian Hamilton observed, "Elizabeth Bishop was known for not wanting to be known."⁹⁰ The same might be said of Barnard. "I dislike personal questions, whether they are coming or going" she declared in her literary memoir *Assault on Mount Helicon*.⁹¹ Bishop despaired of the so-called confessional poets ("You just wish they'd keep some of these things to themselves"),⁹² and Barnard was equally aggrieved by public outpourings of the soul; a poetry reading by James Agee, for example, gave her "the uncomfortable feeling that I was eavesdropping on a man who was saying his prayers."⁹³

Just as Barnard shied away from writing reviews, even if she knew her name emblazoned in bylines might have brought her more notice, so too was

she reluctant to comment on her own poetry. She felt, like Bishop, that her poetry said all that she wanted to say, declaring in the preface to *Assault on Mount Helicon*, that she carried a “conviction that lyric poems should be able to float free of biographical anecdote or footnotes, so that the reader may appropriate them as an expression of his own experience, observation, or emotion, or at least as an extension of his own experience, not the writer’s.”⁹⁴ When in 1939 she was asked to supply formal commentary on her poetry to the public, Barnard’s self-effacement was to mark her out as very different from her peers. Barnard’s contribution to *Five Young American Poets* stood out not only because she was the lone female voice (“the sexapple,” as Laughlin teased her⁹⁵) but because she said so little about herself in the preface that Laughlin had made mandatory for publication. Against Jarrell’s six-page preface, Berryman’s three-and-a-half-page preface, three pages of introduction from Moses, and two and a half from O’Donnell, Barnard’s preface weighed in at a mere three paragraphs, not even filling the page. “Your note on poetry is terribly short,” Laughlin had chided her in the run-up to publication; “are you sure you don’t want to say more? You say almost nothing about your forms and nothing about your attitude to contemporary methods.”⁹⁶ Barnard was sure she didn’t want to add anything further, for Laughlin had missed the point. For all of Jarrell’s faux modesty—he began his lengthy preface with the words “I may as well say what the reader will soon enough see, that I don’t want to write a preface”⁹⁷—Barnard’s trim offering was cool and measured in tone, as befitted her aesthetic:

Any artist is to me a person who takes nothing for granted; one who, while perceiving the thing’s traditional wrappings, sees the thing itself with freshness, as though never encountered before; sees the article as itself, the package as something else, and neither as a reproduction of the picture in the ubiquitous advertisement.

If I have made myself clear, it must also be clear that I could ask nothing more important of poetry just now. Poets, in their particular field, work with words—not only the meanings of words, but the sounds of words, and this to me is extremely important. Beyond these two things, poetry may do different things and be good in different ways; but without freshness of vision, and craftsmanship in the building of metrical and melodic patterns, the poetry might as well be journalism.

What I am trying to do in my own work must be apparent in whatever I have accomplished. My approach to almost any experience is, by an accident of life, through a little-known landscape which proves a barrier to some readers. I think of

that accident as the luckiest chance of my life, and cannot be sorry for it. Very few of the poems collected here have been written during the past two years, when I have had little opportunity for writing; but I feel that my aims have been sharpened rather than changed, as the world changed.⁹⁸

For those curious about her aims, Barnard directs them to the work itself—"what I am trying to do in my own work must be apparent in whatever I have accomplished," a mantra somewhat reminiscent of what Williams had said to John Riordan in 1926, that "it is the making that is the articulation."⁹⁹ But she gives away her Imagist influences in the first paragraph, "the thing itself" resonating with "the thing" of which Pound called for "direct presentation . . . whether subjective or objective," the "freshness, as though never encountered before" reminiscent of the immediacy of the intellectual and emotional complex that the image presents, the insistence on "melodic patterns" recalling Pound's insistence on the musical phrase. While acknowledging the commercial realities that surround the circulation of her work, Barnard insists upon the primacy of "the thing itself" over the need to satisfy the desires of consumers with "a reproduction of the picture [of poetry presented] in the ubiquitous advertisement," a sentiment she expressed to Williams when she had begun working on the "good thing" of her Sappho. "If I have my way, we'll circulate things privately—no reviews, no bookstore sales, no advertising"¹⁰⁰—all that mattered to her was "your good opinion [more] than a dozen ecstatic reviews."¹⁰¹

When it came to writing *Assault on Mount Helicon*, Barnard was at pains to make it "more about other people than about me," as she told James Laughlin; "I'm just not that interesting." With her curatorial and researcher's background (she assisted Carl Van Doren in the 1940s with the editing of Benjamin Franklin's papers), *Assault* was a work of socioliterary documentation, an "intellectual autobiography," thought her editor August Fruge, which reflected her researcher's sense of the need for accurate description rather than a story of the self, or a "tell-all" of those famous writers she knew. Barnard could perhaps have carved out more of a name for herself with *Assault on Mount Helicon* if she had divulged more about the private lives of Pound, Williams, and Moore, but she didn't, and she cared little for those reviews that criticized her for leaving out sex and politics. Appalled by the recommendation of one of the manuscript's readers that she supply full excerpts from her correspondence with Pound, Barnard reiterated in her preface that she possessed "a reluctance to set forth the dramatic details of other, more interesting lives in order to satisfy a public (and editorial) craving for gossip,"¹⁰² a longstanding reluctance that she had been perfecting since the 1930s, when others began to notice the shine Pound had taken to Barnard ("Won't you write me a good long letter telling me all about E.P.?" Deutsch begged Barnard in the

early days of their friendship).¹⁰³ On Pound and the midcentury New York literary milieu, Barnard wanted to set some critics straight as the first major accounts of him and Williams began to emerge. Although she did not tolerate Pound's notorious politics, she did feel that his nurturing of young talent and his continuing influence on American poetry of the 1930s and 1940s had been somehow forgotten in the scurry to canonize his celebrity. And so *Assault* became "essential reading" about Pound, as Peter Levi is said to have declared in a damning assessment of Humphrey Carpenter's 1988 biography of Pound in the British national newspaper *The Independent*¹⁰⁴; Carpenter, Levi thought, played down the cultural value of the "Pound connection" to America's mid-century poets. "Your book," May Sarton told Barnard in 1984, "does [Pound] a service in that he comes through as such a life-giver—all that getting poets to meet each other and the cogent severe eye."¹⁰⁵

But it would be a mistake to conclude that Barnard was not interested in making a name for herself—a name as a poet, that is. She was shy, yet not unwilling to write, out of the blue, to Ezra Pound; she was modest about her ability, yet resolute about breaking into respectable national print; and for all her apparent timidity, Barnard stood up to Pound's critical (and, in the early years, personal) punches. "I was on the receiving end of Ezra's blasts for twenty-odd years," she told the editor of her *Collected Poems*; "I well remember one that began 'You damn fool!'"¹⁰⁶ Although she abhorred the idea of doing poetry readings ("I am not a performer," she told the prize givers of the May Sarton Award she won in 1987),¹⁰⁷ she tenaciously attended the many literary parties she was invited to, followed up contacts, and frequently fired off letters to anyone she thought might help her get published (anyone who she thought it worth being helped by, that is). She was not put off by drawing blanks, as when she went to tea with Ford Madox Ford. "Ole fatty (M. Ford) is at Ten, Fifth Ave / encourager of young talents. . . . I don't know if he has a phone but you don't need a letter of introd / if you say I sent you" wrote Pound in 1939.¹⁰⁸ Immediately Barnard wrote to Ford and was very quickly invited round. But the whole affair was "a very strange experience. Nothing like I expected"¹⁰⁹; Ford had misread Barnard's intentions, and instead invited her to one Mrs. Ford's open afternoon teas, which was even more insufferable for one guest's gossip. "When I left I still don't know whether they knew how I happened to be there,"¹¹⁰ Barnard concluded, but she was not discouraged, and soon made acquaintance with other New York writers at Pound's suggestion, including T. C. Wilson and E. E. Cummings, as well as, of course, Williams and Moore, both of whom she had begun correspondences with while she was still living in Vancouver.

Added to this, Barnard left behind a very complete and well-organized archive. Every travel journal earnestly typed up, every letter to her parents retained and in order after they passed to Barnard after their deaths, notebooks clearly marked, sketchbooks and photographs bound together, Barnard

curated her own life as much as she curated those of modern poets at Buffalo; one cannot help but feel that Barnard's meticulous protection of her own work was in part a quiet act of anticipation of some future recognition. One of the most intriguing self-referential poems to appear in *Collected Poems* is "Late Roman," a tiny poem which looks, and sounds, like one of Barnard's fragments from Sappho:

Late Roman

I shall be
an historic
figure also,
Mr. Achilles.

One digit in
one of Gibbon's
many footnotes
will denote ME!¹¹¹

Nothing less than being "an historic / figure," Barnard demands, if we identify Barnard with the "I" speaking. After all, "ME" is comprised of Barnard's first initials, "Mary Ethel," the name she was commonly known by when she was younger; being of a different case and appearing at the end, this "ME" literally "footnotes" the poem. There is the familiar swift movement from restraint to expansion seen in "Shoreline" and "North Window," this time in the tone rather than in the imagery; the poem moves from humility, as the first stanza depicts a patient figure making a deferent address to "Mr. Achilles," toward bombast in the second stanza, as the speaker demands recognition. Any charge of arrogance is immediately countered by the implicit humor of discussing footnotes with Achilles, the mythical Trojan hero with the vulnerable heel that hastened his death. Despite the tone of muted but high ambition, it turns out that the speaker's desired fame is to be suitably recognized, her contribution properly noted, the "digit" in "many footnotes" given its *full* due—hence the unconventional capitalization of the footnote "ME," a sardonic gesture against those critics who had barely credited Barnard's presence on the American poetry scene. The "Late Roman" that Barnard seeks justice for in accepted accounts of the Roman Empire such as Edward Gibbon's can thus be interpreted as a defense of her own role as a "Late Imagist" within standard accounts of American modernism; here, then, is Barnard's message to literary historians to appropriately reference her achievement; one honored, I hope, in this book.