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An Exploration of Voice and Verse: The Poetry of Mary Barnard

Molly O'Hara Ewing
St. Cloud State University

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by

Molly O'Hara Ewing

B.A., Nazareth College of Rochester, NY, 1977

A.M.L.S., University of Michigan, 1978

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Chairperson

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Dean
School of Graduate and Continuing Studies

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Molly O'Hara Ewing

The poetry of Mary Barnard has been largely ignored by scholarly and literary society since she began writing in the 1920's. This is due in part to her variety of subjects, themes, and forms, as well as to her relatively small output. Nevertheless, it comprises an important contribution to the development of American poetry in the twentieth century, a fact which has been acknowledged by her peers such as Ezra Pound, Marianne Moore, William Stafford, and Sam Hamill. This study of her poetic development identifies and examines several important aspects of and influences on Barnard's verse in order to assess her contribution to the free verse movement and to contemporary American poetry in general.

Her broadest theme, nature, takes many forms in poems that address subjects such as her native Pacific northwest, weather, the passage of time, human life and death, and various animals. Another broad theme, mythology and folklore, is really a subdivision of her fascination with nature that takes human nature as its focus. For Barnard, the study of mythology is a unifying force which connects the past, present, and future of human history.

Time is important as more than a theme in Barnard's work. It also points to her concern for the musical and vocal aspects of verse, which must, for her, be measured in time. Because poetry is temporal, Barnard has never ignored the power of meter even as she has worked to overcome the stifling effects of traditional (iambic) English language metrics. Her quest to discover a new metric, loyal to the natural rhythms of spoken English, led her to study Greek metrics and quantitative metrics, and to combine characteristics of quantity and stress in the balanced line that forms the basis of her own metric.

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Approved by Research Committee:

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Steven F. Klepetar Chairperson

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Chapter 1

BACKGROUND AND INFLUENCES

When Mary Barnard began to be interested in poetry she was young enough to be unaware that the building blocks that fascinated her were being actively shunted aside as poets on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean embraced the free verse movement. As an elementary school child in the 1920's she experimented with "rhyme and a swinging rhythm" (*Assault on Mount Helicon* 24), producing doggerel in the manner of James Whitcomb Riley and Robert Louis Stevenson, whose work she enjoyed. Over time the doggerel transformed to sensitive lyric verse such as this sonnet, composed while she was still in high school:

> If I should ever write a noble verse
> To be remembered after I am dead,
> This is my wish: that it shall not be read
> From textbooks or for school; for there's no curse,
> No fate for poetry that could be worse
> Than being stuffed in an unwilling head,
> Dissected, analyzed and beauty-bled,
> And hurried graveward by a textbook hearse.
>
> O, let it not be read except from choice,
> By beauty-lovers who will never groan
> And read because they must, but will rejoice
> In singing lines, or read and let alone
> At least. Let it be thus or let my voice
> Sing ever these small tunes, unheard, unknown.

"Impassioned Sonnet"[1] discloses much about Barnard's poetic attitude and origins. Despite its occasional lapse into affectation ("beauty-bled") and the high speech of "O, let it not be read . . . " the poem reads quietly and naturally, with sound and sense moving along parallel tracks towards a strongly understated climax. It exhibits a fine understanding of the sonnet form, managing to distill a rather complex idea into sixteen lines of iambic pentameter that do not overpower the natural flow of English speech. Her wish for readers who ". . . will rejoice / In singing lines . . ." provides an important clue as to what constitutes a "noble verse" for this poet. And we learn from the last sentence that she already defines her poems as ". . . these small tunes. . . ."

She was a junior at Reed College before Lloyd Reynolds, a creative writing teacher, persuaded her to relax her style and work at free verse instead of conventional meter and form. Even a cursory reading of Barnard's recent writing makes it evident that she still closely identifies poetry with song, and that she has not abandoned the discipline of meter, rhyme, and rhythm. Her particular expedition into free verse was undertaken without abandoning the roots of the revolution. She is no seeker after novelty, but always a seeker after the complex beauty of the simple. In 1940 she restated her commitment to these aspects of poetry when she wrote "A Note on Poetry" for her collection *Cool Country* in the New Directions volume titled *Five Young American Poets 1940:*

> Poets, in their particular field, work with words--not only the meanings of words, but the sounds of words, and this to me

[1] I received "Impassioned Sonnet" in a letter from Mary Barnard dated 9 January 1992 with the following note: "I believe this was published in the school paper. I must have been 16 or 17 when I wrote it. If I remember correctly, it was also published a year or so later in the Reed College QUEST, when I was a freshman at Reed."

> 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. (*Five Young American Poets 1940,* 5)

Rhyme and rhythm certainly have their role to play in the building of metrical and melodic patterns. And, as she matured as a poet, Barnard added to them from her developing knowledge of Greek metrics, Italian verse, linguistics, and the liberating and restricting nature of free verse.

Equally important with these historical underpinnings is her sense that they flow from a universal human appreciation for the rhythmic nature of life. In the beginning there was rhythm: heartbeat, jumping rope, breath in and out. For young Mary Barnard words came next: the poems of James Whitcomb Riley and Longfellow; then came the rhymes: end rhyme, half-rhyme, assonance, alliteration; all of them sounding in time that is measurable by ticks of the clock, beats of the heart or metronome. For Barnard, poetry began as a music of words without notation other than their arrangement on paper.

The poetic values Mary Barnard defined in 1940 continue to command her loyalty and talent today, as evidenced by her poetry as well as by published interviews with her. The early poem and the 1940 statement quoted above are typical of Barnard's firm optimism that poetry is accessible, and that ordinary readers can and should be trusted to find meaning within it.

It would be impossible to do complete justice to sixty-some years of poetic output in this context, small though that output might be. It should be possible, however, to examine a selection of her work in light of those

values, and the values of the free verse movement, to determine her roots, her strengths, and her contribution to American poetry.

One of the first questions that must be asked, even if it cannot be answered fully, is, why Barnard has been so little acknowledged by the literary establishment over the past sixty years. It is in part because she is uncatagorizable, having published not only her lyric poetry which embraces such various themes as mythology, family, nature, history and poetry writing itself, but also short stories, verse translations, and a collection of essays inquiring into the origins of myth. Even when one adds her 1979 *Collected Poems,* the memoir published in 1984, and *Time and the White Tigress,* an essay-in-verse which won the Western States Book Award for Poetry in 1986, her output is equably notable for its variety as for its small size. In a review of the *Collected Poems* Valerie Trueblood observed that

> . . . she seemed to have become one of those who write something uncatagorizable, something people will know exists, perhaps appreciate, but not *want* the way they want a Black Mountain poet or a copy of Laforgue. Writers of this kind are lightly noticed, especially when their output is small or irregular, even when they number Pound and Williams among their admirers. (Trueblood, 10)

Barnard also noted in a recent letter to me that her two most enduring themes, nature and mythology, "were utterly out of fashion from 1930 onwards for almost forty years" (personal correspondence, 9 January 1992). By the time popular interest in nature poetry revived, a new generation of poets such as Gary Snyder was on hand to keep the forward momentum of contemporary poetry from doing much retrospective sleuthing for the overlooked writers of the previous generation.

Early in her career Barnard made a conscious decision not to pursue poetic fame despite (or, perhaps because of) her dedication to her chosen work. As is obvious from "Impassioned Sonnet," she had realized as early as her high school years that she wanted to be a writer, and she fully expected that "eventually [I would] be able to earn my living by my writing, that is, by writing what I wanted to write" (*Assault on Mount Helicon*, 30). This young naivete was followed, soon after her graduation from Reed College in 1932, by two years of depressing employment as a social worker for the newly formed federal Emergency Relief Administration. It was the beginning of a long struggle, documented in *Assault on Mount Helicon*, to maintain a respectable degree of financial independence so that she might continue to write.

By 1939 that struggle had led Barnard to Buffalo, New York, where she assumed the position of curator for the Lockwood Memorial Library's developing poetry collection at the University of Buffalo. In Buffalo she found herself depressed, she explained,

> . . . not by the poets who had published one volume and then fallen by the wayside, but the *successful* poets who issued a volume of poems regularly every three to five years, keeping their names always before the public . . . and yet, within a few years after their deaths, were completely forgotten. We had shelves and shelves of these poets, rows of dusty names. . . . I had come to the conclusion that a poet had to run very fast indeed to stay in the same place-- that is, in the public eye and memory—faster than I would ever be able to run. I might as well save my breath (*Assault on Mount Helicon*, p. 200-201).

If she had ever been inclined to pursue poetic fame in her lifetime, this experience evidently impressed her with the folly of such an endeavor. When I met with her in the summer of 1991 Mary Barnard described her lack of interest in developing a following of devoted readers by contrasting her

approach to publication with that of May Sarton, a contemporary of Barnard's who has spent enormous personal energies courting her audience and enhancing her own reputation, even self-consciously referring to herself in later work in the third person as "Sarton."

Barnard, on the other hand, delights in self-irony. There is not a hint of self-importance in her work, rather a constant undercurrent of real wit which springs from joyful humility. She expressed frustration that her editors and reviewers have often overlooked or chosen to downplay the wit in her work as if it were incompatible with lyricism. Many of her poems, such as the one below, successfully disprove this idea.

> Ink black but moving independently
> across the black and white parquet of print,
> the ant cancels the author out. The page,
> translated to itself, bears hair-like legs
> disturbing the fine hairs of its fiber.
> These are the feet of summer, pillaging meaning,
> destroying Alexandria. Sunlight is silence
> laying waste all languages, until, thinly,
> the fictional dialogue begins again:
> the page goes on telling another story. (*Collected Poems* 49)

In a poem like "Fable of the Ant and the Word," which I have quoted in full, Barnard uses a cartoon-like humor to state her attitude towards her work. There is absolutely no hint of tragedy in the statement that the author has been canceled out. This wry wit is usually most evident in such personal poems, where self-depreciation is made gentle by the humor with which it is applied. The ant, so like a printed letter with its inky-black hair-like legs, is being a very proper ant, moving independently, even as a proper poem takes on life independent of its author, and "goes on telling another story" beyond her reach. In the forward to her memoir Barnard argues for the same

disinterested attitude when she describes her 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. (*Assault on Mount Helicon*, xviii)

Another poem, "The Spring," written more recently than "Fable of the Ant and the Word" which was first collected in *A Few Poems* in 1952, illustrates the same delightful self-irony as it celebrates the comparable simplicity of a small spring and her career. The spring described, with its "thick standing mint" (*Collected Poems* 43) rises in the side yard of her old family home on the Evergreen Highway in Vancouver. "A mere trickle," it remains nameless despite the "two little ponds / to its credit" which inspire Barnard to compare the spring to herself: ". . . a poet / with two small collections of verse." She does not hedge the insignificance of the spring or her two small books, but neither does she demean them. Such small things are worth celebrating for their place in the grand scheme of the world.

"Suggested Miracle," like "The Spring" is included in the section of the *Collected Poems* which Barnard says deal with poetry writing (Helle, 190). In it she directly addresses "My townspeople, my acquaintance" as she observes that "Fishing looks an idle occupation, / idle as mine: gillnetting / at the confluence of two rivers / for fish of two colors" (*Collected Poems* 39) It is a wonderful comparison for a northwest poet to make among people who know, as she does, that fishing is a most tenuous, strenuous, and difficult occupation. It only looks idle (as does poetry writing) to the ignorant.

She goes on to ask the townspeople's permission to allow her to lower them under her river, to be her net. The formal query (. . . may I / lower you

under this river / nose to nose with the salmon?") is pro-forma, for Barnard is merely acknowledging what she frequently does in the process of poetic composition. This sort of unexpected image—the poet's acquaintances serving as a muse trapped like fish in her net—is one of Barnard's great delights in poetry.[2] It is an attitude she most often assumes when dealing with a personal revelation, and it has the two-pronged effect of intensifying the reader's understanding of the poem and creating a firm barrier of irony between the reader and the poet. Barnard is never confessional, but where she chooses to reveal herself, as in "The Spring," she adds enough ironic humor to insure that no reader make the mistake of taking her (not her work, her) too seriously. Thus she begins "Chanson Pathetique" from *Cool Country* with high drama:

> My mouth draws the candleflame
> Straight and high with a cold breath.
> But once utter my name.
> Save me from this death. (*Cool Country* 26)

and ends it with wit that sparkles with pleasure in itself despite the pathos:

> My heart's under your staircase
> In a tea canister.
> Pray step lightly on that place
> Or slide down the bannister.

This unique ability to present intense emotion clearly while seeming to hover objectively above it may be behind William Carlos Williams' early complaint about Barnard's work:

> . . . you're in New York and living not too easily here. But I don't see that in the form of your poems. I don't see any flaws in the masonry as if something had hit you. . . . Your objects don't seem to me to be or to have been looked at in moments of

[2] For example, she says in "Remarks on Poetry and the Physical World: ". . . to me its most endearing / quality is its unsuitableness." (7-8), *Collected Poems*, 35.

> sufficient emotional stress. You see them and you put them down clearly but you don't seem much hurt or elated. . . . (WCW, letter to Barnard dated 6 October 1938, quoted in *Assault on Mount Helicon,* 136).

But, what bothered Williams has been praised by others. Barnard's clarity and "quiet elegance" have been noted by numerous reviewers, as well as her intellectual approach to the natural world which puts up its own barriers. The clear images are frequently startling, and the quiet tone is often coupled with active verbal metaphors, which may initially leave readers with unmet expectations. William's complaint about her lack of emotional intensity may have also been influenced by his dislike of her poetic structure, and his well-known suspicion of traditional metrics.

In her memoir Barnard has little to say about William's great quest in his poetry for the rhythm of American speech. She acknowledges that her interest in Greek metrics may have annoyed him, for "he was determined that Greek rhythms were as alien to American speech patterns as the well-worn English version of iambic pentameter" (*Assault on Mount Helicon,* p. 287). Different though their tracks into free verse were, they did share its concern with seeing things fresh and sounding fresh. But when Barnard broke the old metrical molds she continued to hear the fragments echo; what Williams broke he discarded. In a 1979 *Agenda* article Barnard describes her different approach to the quest for an American metric:

> It was held then, and still is held, I believe, that iambic pentameter comes closer than any other meter to approximating English speech rhythms. That may have been true at one time, but I do not think it is true today, or at least, it is not true of American speech rhythms. I wanted to find the sound of the speaking voice that was native to me. I admired the poetry of William Carlos Williams, and approved of his endeavor to find

> an American metric, but I did not feel that he had found the solution, or at any rate, not the solution that would work for me. (63-64)

Williams would not use anything with identifiable relations to "the old." Barnard, on the other hand, notes in her memoir that she "once heard a dining car waiter chanting in perfectly recognizable dactylic hexameter:

> Luncheon is now bein' served//in the dining car five cars forward. Please take your seat checks with you!" (*Assault on Mount Helicon* 287).

This canny ability to recognize and appreciate such ancient metrical rhythms in contemporary usage is an indication of how she fits Timothy Steele's tribute to the contemporary users of classical metrics:

> . . . not the least pleasing feature of a fine contemporary poem in meter is this: it enables one to hear a voice which—in its phrasing and the rhythm of its thought—is distinctively of one's day and yet which at the same time recalls the cadences and shapes of speech that characterized earlier masters working at earlier stages in the language. (Steele 289)

Williams did wax enthusiastic about Barnard's 1952 publication of twelve recent poems in the pamphlet called *A Few Poems* because, as he wrote her, they took as their unit of measure, not accentuated feet but elapsed time. He wrote that they represented "a new way of measuring verse according to the expanded requirements of the age" (WCW quoted in *Assault on Mount Helicon*, 286). Ironically, Williams seems unaware that Barnard's metric, which is composed of what she calls "variable feet that nevertheless balance one another" (Helle, 192), is also loyal to its roots in Greek verse. In the same *Agenda* article quoted above, she describes how she came to take both stress and quantity into account as she developed her own metric: the line that balances with itself and with every other line in the poem.

> . . . I took quantity into account. I thought of a long syllable rather as a weighted syllable, weighted with a long vowel, a cluster of consonants, a stress, or an emphasis dependent on sense, a conversational emphasis. A "long" might be one of these or a combination of two or three. (65-66)

For this poet, freshness lies more in the use to which she puts the building blocks at her disposal more than her ability to proclaim their uniquely contemporary American character. Like Pound, she is acutely aware of the varieties of structural techniques and their potential use for poetic effect.

After her graduation from college, when she was casting about for help in launching a literary career from the comparative isolation of the Pacific northwest, Ezra Pound surfaced as the obvious choice. He was familiar with Greek, as were most all the free verse poets Barnard admired (*Assault on Mount Helicon* 54); he had a reputation for helping younger poets get published; and she hoped that his own miserable experience of artistic isolation at Wabash College, from which he fled to Europe, might help him empathize with Barnard's own situation. She was also confident that he would take her seriously, a confidence that he justified immediately and repeatedly over the next forty years.

In a recent interview with Anita Helle, Barnard described her fear of not being taken seriously by the (male) literary establishment:

> I have always said that in the arts the harm comes not from men who are trying to keep women down, but comes from the pat on the head and the chuck under the chin. Encouragement without a real edge on the criticism. That's the biggest pitfall. (Helle, 197)

Pound did not chuck her under the chin. Nor did Marianne Moore when Barnard wrote to her on Pound's advice that she would be less

sympathetic to her "contents," and therefore more objective than he. Whether or not she was objective, she most certainly was sympathetic to Barnard's quest for critical response, and did what she could to help her get into print. Barnard's first publication outside of college magazines was the poem "Shoreline," which appeared in *Poetry* magazine in 1935 after Marianne Moore advised her to send something to Morton Zabel, who was acting editor for Harriet Monroe at the time. Barnard doesn't write many occasional poems, but her contribution to the seventy-fifth anniversary issue of *Poetry* celebrates, in part, that occasion:

On Arriving
A Poem for Poetry *on Its 75th Anniversary*

The first of countless printed rejections
from Poetry came sixty-one years ago.
(I was sixteen. You were fourteen.)

The scribbled "promising" on the margin
anaesthetized the pain somewhat.

Eight years and God only knows how many
rejections later, Morton Zabel
(Harriet being then in China)
accepted "Shoreline" and at last
I thought I had arrived. . . . (*Poetry* 12)

Feminist theorists may be troubled by Barnard's forthright acknowledgement of her debt to Pound and Williams, if not Moore. How could such paternalistic relationships (Pound even referred to himself as "grandpaw" on occasion) have had the liberating influence she claims for them? I think Barnard is an example of Jeredith Merrin's observation that "strongly oppositional feminist theories of literary influence . . . have tended to overlook such positive intersections and interactions." In her thoughtful

examination of the uses of masculine traditions in the poetry of Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop, Merrin calls for

> . . . more flexible approaches to reading that, while firmly committed to the same feminist concerns, acknowledge and allow more for discussion of the layered complexities . . . that characterize the finest women poets' (and all our most accomplished poets') individual relations to their literary inheritance. The poetic imagination, after all, has many methods of survival, and the uses of tradition remain inexhaustible and unpredictable. (Merrin, 137-138)

In Barnard's case, the poetic imagination is fired by a humane, rather than consciously feminine, response to her literary inheritance; and she has employed traditions and innovations of female and male poets to best advantage in pursuit of her poetic goals.

Barnard's literary inheritance is as old as Homer and as recent as Williams, and she finds no disloyalty in claiming it all, feminist polemics be damned. The sex of her chosen mentors and literary forebears is a non-issue for her. Indeed, Barnard has studiously avoided the polemic of every time, despite her association with characters of political and literary passions such as Muriel Rukeyser and Ezra Pound. When she does comment on public issues, as in "Letter From Byzantium" in *Collected Poems*, or "Travel Notes" published in the *Cincinnati Poetry Review* in 1981, she does so with penetrating observation that soars above any political agenda.

Important though their influences on Barnard were, Pound and Williams had limited roles to play in her poetic development. She has never been an imitator, even of those poets she most greatly admires. Pound's most important role in her development (aside from his lack of pats on the head or chucks under the chin) was most likely his recommendation that she

work with Greek metric, including quantitative Sapphics in English, to learn how to recreate the sound of human speech within a metrical structure. Williams, on the other hand, seems to have acted as a barb, sometimes responding with indiscriminate praise, sometimes criticizing unhelpfully, constantly sending Barnard back to reaffirm her own strength of poetic conviction.

The following chapters will examine several other important influences on Mary Barnard's poetry. First is the accident of geography which is her grounding in the Pacific northwest; second is her use of folklore and myth; and third, the influence of Greek metrics and her Sappho translation. Finally, through a detailed study of two poems, we shall examine how Barnard intertwines all three to create her own uniquely enduring art.

Chapter 2

IMAGES OF THE PACIFIC NORTHWEST

Barnard's Pacific northwest poems may be divided into two distinct categories which share, nevertheless, an understated sensitivity to the characteristics of the region. In the *Collected Poems* there are three sections of Pacific northwest poems. The first and second, composed of childhood memories and adult observations of the majestic natural world, were first collected in "Cool Country" in 1940; the third group consists mostly of later poems which are smaller in scale, focusing on domestic scenes. These more recent poems concern themselves with backyards, lumber mill crews, pumps, and rain, rather than mountains, oceans, train trestles, and rapids. And, as the poetic vision telescopes, the lines get shorter and the imagery more dense.

"Roots" is an early poem which celebrates, fiercely and wholly, Barnard's uniquely personal experience of the northwest. As a young girl and later, she loved to drive the back roads of Oregon and Washington with her father, a lumber wholesaler who frequently traveled to small sawmills. It is the roads to such lumber operations that are "spongy with sawdust" (*Collected Poems* 11), a strange sensation under wheels or feet. The sensory combination which makes up this poem—rain on the windshield while driving on a spongy road—creates a rush of emotion that Barnard says is as much a part of her as her own blood. Her connection to the landscape is so total that her " blood should run clear amber" like the sap under the bark of

the trees. Her passion for this place is physical : "a love of place that grows into the body."

But, Barnard does not have amber blood tying her to the trees of this place she loves. Instead of tree roots she has the logging roads "extending like root tendrils / under the angles of mountains." These spongy roads satisfy her longing for the mountains. She uses them like roots; nourishing herself on the drive along the lush, green mountain road that ties her to the northwest she loves.

"Roots" begins and ends with the image of rain on the windshield of a car, but the closing image has been "sharpened" (to paraphrase the poem) by the addition of a location in time as well as place. It is evening. This fact suggests a long trip, nearly at its end, and the quiet satisfaction of a day happily spent. The automobile is a comfortable shelter from the raw elements; it separates her from the forested mountains at the same time as it brings her closer to them. Her comfort lies in the fact that the road-roots remain behind, always inviting, always ready to usher her back into the mountains where her life's blood flows.

There is a resigned irony in the fact that the experience described here as "Roots" is really such a rootless one. The logging road may well seem like a root by which humans are tied to the land, but in actuality it is a boundary between the speaker and the mountain. She remains in the automobile, and she is on her way home, away from the spongy sawdust roots she loves like her own blood.

It is not unusual for Barnard to use such simple images in powerful ways. An examination of two poems that feature a common Pacific northwest sight, the trestle, may serve to further illustrate this aspect of her

work. "Logging Trestle," set in the Pacific northwest, was collected in *Cool Country* in 1940. "Encounter in Buffalo" appeared in *A Few Poems* in 1952. The earlier poem is a direct treatment which presents, rather than merely describing, the rotting trestle, and could serve as a fine example of Ezra Pound's advice in "A Few Don'ts for Imagists" that poets should be more concerned with direct presentation of the 'thing' than with description of it.

The disused logging trestle is 'presented' with a paucity of adjectives and only one metaphor which is, itself, a simple presentation of another similar object: "an abandoned wharf" (*Collected Poems* 18). The poem's richness lies in its keen observation of details which offers the trestle to readers like a photograph upon a tray of words. Verbs frequently take the place of adjectives, creating an immediacy which adds to the sense that the poem *is* the thing being presented:

> The rails **move out** from the hillside
> across the piling **lengthening** its stroke
> where ground **slopes** riverward. (emphasis added)

The shape of the poem on the page reflects this same motion, each stanza containing at least one line longer than any in the previous stanza, creating a visual thrust to match the verbal one. The second stanza (quoted above), is the only one in which the longest line is not the last; and its final line describes a vertical drop rather than the horizontal reach of the trestle. The longest line is given over to description of the piling that lengthens as the ground slopes down to the river, and the last line drops off like the slope it describes.

The poem is well served by its wealth of verbs which stand in active contrast to the abruptly terminated trestle on which nothing happens anymore. The trestle is part of a lively landscape of light and shadow

Neither cloud nor rain casts
a chill into the valley
like that of a trestle fallen into disuse

Sky opens between the cross-ties . . .

in which it has taken on a purpose for which it was never intended. As an active part of a landscape the trestle is rescued from, what is for Barnard, the tragedy of uselessness. Later in this study I will examine "The Fitting" and "Now," two other poems which indicate the how important are purpose and usefulness in Barnard's world.

The abandoned logging trestle extends into light and creates shadow; the metaphor of the abandoned wharf which rounds out the end of the poem reaches into wind at the shoreline: "The broken column stands against cloud / as though an abandoned wharf extended into wind." By ending the poem with a metaphor based on another Pacific northwest sight, Barnard has created a geographic circle large enough to encompass the Cascade mountains and the Pacific Ocean.

"Encounter in Buffalo," written out of the extended misery of Barnard's three years in that inhospitable climate,[3] is the opposite of a circle. The poem is linear, stretching from the "flat, expressionless" (*Collected Poems* 29) country of western New York State all the way across the width of the continent, to touch a fleeting memory of home. It is a poignant presentation of emotion, as subjective as "Logging Trestle" is objective, but just as true to Pound's admonition to be direct.

The perspective is a pedestrian's; the tone is thoroughly lonely with its long spondees and trochees— "The country lies flat. . .," "Not one hillock. . .

[3] see my discussion of "Persephone" in Chapter 3 for details about Barnard's attitude towards her Buffalo, New York exile

buried bone." There are the expressionless faces of strangers in a city of closed doors and buildings large enough that "no street extends beyond the view from the corner."

The occasion of the poem is a late summer evening with "the red sun" setting behind the high railroad embankment while the poet walks along the sidewalk at the base of the embankment.[4] A freight train moves slowly along the rails above, and the setting sun flashes between its wheels as the train moves out across the viaduct, leaving the poet behind on the sidewalk. The moment is suddenly freighted with her memories "of childhood meals and all crossings at sunset." The city remains foreign, like a 'thin . . . theater backdrop"; but the train with its "familiar box-car shapes" offers the lonely westerner a promise that she will, like it, someday make the long journey across the continent to see "the span of trestles above mountain gorges" of which the freight train on the viaduct has reminded her.

The trestle in this poem is a memory of home which, despite the metaphor connecting it to the viaduct at hand, remains out of reach. The poem presents the instantaneous act of remembering, not the fullness of the memory as fleshed out by the intellect. The sight of the trestle and the train, and the sound of the train combine in a flash that transports the poet to the place evoked in the last two lines of the poem, a place which shelters many "buried bones" in her memory.

In a review of the *Collected Poems* from *The American Poetry Review* Valerie Trueblood made the keen point that Barnard "is pathetic in a tearless way, speaking of . . . a 'trestle' fallen into disuse. . . . She is at home

[4] In a letter dated May 10, 1992, Barnard provided me with some details of the setting: "The viaduct did not cross the river (that would have been a bridge). It crossed Main St . . . The dictionary says a viaduct is a bridge. But not in my vocabulary."

with a vocabulary of pathos banished . . . before she ever began [writing]" (Trueblood, 11). This is pathos in the best sense of the word, distinguished from its more sentimental cousin, pity. Barnard's clear-eyed vision and spare, unembellished language present a balanced world as well as a balanced line; and her readers are trusted to come to their own emotional conclusions.

Trueblood also comments on how changes in American English since the 1930's have antiquated words and phrases from some of Barnard's early verse. "Lowland pastures," "thicket," and "hillock," for example, are uncommon words in the 1990's. Barnard comments on another effect the passage of time has had on her work in the preface to her memoir:

> Recently, hearing Gary Snyder read his poetry to a college audience, I was amused at a reference to his brief career as a whistle-punk. It struck me that he and I were probably the only people there who knew what a whistle-punk was, although they are not yet a totally extinct species. Log ponds, too, are a rarity. . . . (*Assault on Mount Helicon*, 7-8)

Barnard has always been conscious of barriers to her work, but in the forty-plus years between the publication of *Cool Country* and *Assault on Mount Helicon* the nature of those barriers has changed. In 1940 the Pacific northwest was a relatively unknown part of the American landscape. Climate, geography, and demography combined to insure its rather thorough isolation from mainstream America. It is obvious from her "Note on Poetry" in *Cool Country* that Barnard had thought long and hard about this facet of her work:

> 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. (*Five Young American Poets 1940* 5)

While recent population trends in the United States indicate that the Pacific northwest is no longer "a little-known landscape," those same demographic changes have drastically altered some aspects of contemporary readers' approach to her work. Roads "spongy with sawdust" are difficult to find anymore; the disused logging trestle that thrust, half rotted, into the clouds, has long since fallen, the wreck of the wine ship, the *Alice,* disappeared in a storm decades ago, and the "vermilion steaks of the salmon" are not nearly so common in the rapids as they once were. And many, if not most, younger northwesterners have never seen a log pond, much less a whistle-punk. Where geography may have once isolated Mary Barnard's poetry from her readers, time now puts it in danger of seeming nostalgic or sentimental.

While noting this danger in her review of *Collected Poems,* Valerie Trueblood credits Barnard's "severe restraints [of] language" with overcoming it. She is almost always terse without being stingy. In Trueblood's words she focuses "all her energies . . . on the short, clear, burdened, most hardworking and most effortless-seeming form. A poem of hers is like a pack burro walking on small hooves, carrying a household" (11). Such a quality goes a long way towards preventing a slide into sentiment, even in the face of such phrases as "Not one hillock shelters a buried bone."

This redeeming restraint is evident in Barnard's earliest poems, such as "Playroom" as well as the late ones which Barnard says have "become increasingly terse," partly as a result of what she learned from Sappho while doing her translation (Helle, 190). "Playroom" is a memory piece which presents a collage of images that are more suggestive than descriptive. It evokes the "raw smell of rubbers and wrapped lunches" in a timeless

schoolroom where "little girls stand in a circle singing / Of windows and of lovers" (*Collected Poems* 3). Such a song suggests the tragic romance of *Romeo and Juliet* as well as fairy stories like *Rapunzel*. The sad sound of their singing is compared to the "mournfulness of muddy playgrounds" which keeps the children inside at recess.

The song like a "handed-down garment" is pathetic just because the children cannot fathom its sorrow. "Wheel of sorrow, centerless /" carries in its four words the full aural image of these childish voices, sad without understanding why, spiraling upward to die out on the "grave summits" (silent as tombs) of the mountains looming over the playground. The ensuing silence pulls us back down to the school and into the classroom with its pungent odors and muffled singing. The girls sing of a tragedy that is beyond their comprehension, even as too-big clothes are not filled out by small bodies. The suggestion is that they will grow into tragedy even as they grow into hand-me-down clothes. The pathos is not in the song, or in the children themselves, as in this suggestion that they are already contained by the wheel of sorrow which has no center. Barnard lets the poem's images, particularly that of the handed-down garments, carry the emotional weight, thus clarifying and objectifying it in a manner that firmly denies the suggestion of sentimentality.

Many other poems not included in the Pacific northwest sections of *Collected Poems* still draw their images and metaphors, if not their themes, from that geography, for as William Stafford observed in his introduction to *Collected Poems*, Mary Barnard has "never relinquished [her] perspective of being alone—somewhat—on the far, far coast." The powerful little poem "Now," for example, deals with the process of aging and dying by inches. Its

spare lines, short words (it is composed of 15 two-syllable words and 30 one-syllable words), and old cliche ("high on a dry beach") reworked into a powerful metaphor for the physical and mental decay that can prelude death, form a blunt and unblinking meditation of the biological end many of us may face someday, if not "Now."

Far removed though it seems from any sense of the northwest, it nonetheless draws its images from the ocean shore. It is water, the lifeline of mollusks and us all, that trickles to a stop, leaving the animal to dry out, die, and rot on the sand. Barnard's intimacy with the biological truth of the cliche "high and dry" gives this small verse an unsettling power. Knowing, as Jane Van Cleve points out in "A Personal View of Mary Barnard," that when she wrote it in the 1970's "Mary was nursing a parent, looking Death right in the face" (111) only adds to its power. Barnard says that she is "looking ahead," thinking about the future, and then repeats

I think—
almost
I think—

setting her own intellectual powers in stark relief against the ". . . thought / someday going awry / and trickling to a stop," making it obvious that much of her self-worth is wrapped up with her intellectual ability to wrestle with just such issues as this. The emotional intensity of the poem overrides intellectual objectivity, however. *"Almost,"* in italics, leaps at the reader like a heart pang that cannot be ignored any more, and forces the emotional ending, gently accepting of the possibility of a "smelly shell / high on a dry beach," but continuingly hopeful for her own future: "but / No. Not yet."

Water in all of its various forms (rain, mist, tidal pools, surf, ice, clouds) makes regular appearances in her poetry, along with salmon, vertical

geography in the form of mountains, valleys, and cliffs; and traditional occupations of the Pacific northwest such as mining, fishing, and lumbering.

It is worth examining one overtly watery Pacific northwest poem here to explore Barnard's vision of that world in greater detail. When "Shoreline" was originally published in *Cool Country* it had a slightly more traditional appearance than it does in the *Collected Poems*. The stanzas are the same, every word is the same; but the inclusion of capital letters at the beginning of every line in the earlier edition affects the reader's attitude.[5] It is more self consciously verse; particular words and internal phrases are highlighted in the earlier version in a way that forces word stress and interpretative intent. The newer version seems more comfortable with itself, more willing to look like native speech than poetic proclamation:

> The transitory ponds and smooth bar slide
> Easily under the advancing tide
> Emerging with the moon's
> Turning. (*Cool Country* 11-12))

becomes, in *Collected Poems:*

> The transitory ponds and smooth bar slide
> easily under the advancing tide
> emerging with the moon's
> turning. (*Collected Poems* 8-9)

The difference is subtle, but it points out an important development in Barnard's style. Somewhere between the publication of *Cool Country* in 1940 and *Collected Poems* in 1979, Barnard learned to trust meaning to the line,

[5] Barnard provided some historical insight into her use of capital letters in a letter to me dated May 12, 1992: "I was on the point of abandoning them long before I did-- as early as the late 'thirties--but then one of my Reed [college] friends refused to read a poem by Marianne Moore, because (she said) she just couldn't read a poem that didn't have capital letters at the beginning of the lines. . . . I was very surprised, but I decided that I didn't care much one way or the other, and if the lack of caps was that off-putting to some people, I'd better go on using them."

whether that line consist of sentence, phrase, or single word. Upper case letters cannot be heard by the human ear. In a good free verse stanza like this one, they are unnecessary. The capital letters in the earlier version do not affect the sound of the poem, they merely serve as visual bumps that interrupt the melodious assonance of long o's and u's and e's. The later version gives us the whole four-line stanza without the artifice of internal capital letters.

At an early point in this poem Barnard has described the foreign sensation of walking "the planked streets of the town" after spending all day at the beach where the "slipping texture of the sand" creates "a sand pillow under the hollow instep." Such feet, she says, are rigid and uncomfortable. I would compare this poem *with* the initial capital letters to that rigid and uncomfortable sensation. Without them it slips along as naturally as human speech; with them the eye senses planks that it does not desire any more than the human foot after a day at the beach.

"Shoreline" opens with a line of perfect iambic pentameter, enjambed, so that it flows without pause to the lyric caesura after "falling water" in the second line, which marks the end of regular meter.

> The sea has made a wall for its defence
> of falling water . . .

It is a smooth and rhythmic introduction which sets up an undertone of expectation. Through the variations which follow we continue to listen for fragments of that most common English poetic form, much as we detect an underlying regularity to the roar and echo of the surf. The fact that the sentence ends with an extra, unstressed syllable anticipates the switch to

trochaic rhythm in the refrain to come. The upbeat, iambic rhythm is cut off in mid-beat, creating an immediate sense of loss.

The choice of word order in the first sentence raises two possibilities: the sea defends its "falling water" with a wall, and the wall of falling water is the defence. Within the context of the poem both are accurate, for the sea creates its defence out of itself. The surf *is* water rising and falling, and it does, "with the next wave," drag under anything that surrenders to its power.[6] Sandra McPherson has pointed out this image as an example of Barnard's special "nerve to redefine the surf as a wall of falling water for the sea's 'defence'" (McPherson, 250).

It may seem strange to refer to this as a rejection, but when we are at the shoreline, the "moving ledges" of the surf, we are aware of a kind of rejection by the sea. It continually pushes us back towards the shore. The dune does not reject us, does not push us away or drag us under as does the surf, we do not work to survive on the dune as in the grip of an undertow. We are creatures of the land, and at the shore the pounding surf reminds us that "Sand is the beginning and the end / of our dominion."

There is an overwhelming sense of intimacy with the Pacific northwest shore in this poem. In the children's section, description is wrapped tightly with memory so that the reader feels the "wind under the eyelids" and the "confusion walling the ears." This is the Pacific northwest coast at its most elemental, sensory level. The wind never stops, but one may, occasionally, seek refuge from it in the hollow of a dune where, protected from both wind and surf, a still moment forces awareness of the unceasing din that "walls the

[6] Barnard provided me with the following illumination in her letter of May 12, 1992: ". . . regarding the surf as defence—try launching a boat into it. I believe it can be done even on that beach by the Coast Guard, but no amateurs had better try it."

ears." Pacific northwest beaches, not just the water, are cold, but the children adapt, strip off layers of sweats, and seem to absorb warmth from the sand where they occasionally fling themselves belly down to escape the chilling wind and trails of fog. In her memoir Barnard briefly recollects vacations spent at Ocean Park, a beach resort near Oysterville:

> . . . you pack your oldest clothes, only. . . . There is a furious undertow. . . . At Ocean Park we always lived by the tides. We went surf bathing despite the cold of the water. Ridge after ridge of breakers made swimming impossible except for the strongest swimmers, who went out beyond the breakers. . . . There was an evening ritual of watching the sunset from the dune top, one's own dunetop or a bench at the top of Main Street where it crested the dune. Or, instead of sitting, one walked up the beach as far as the *Alice,* a wrecked French wineship whose mast rose out of the surf about a mile north of the village. Through all my childhood the mast stood erect, though slanting, still bearing two spars where seagulls perched at sunset. It stood for years, and finally fell in a violent winter storm. (*Assault on Mount Helicon,* 18-19)

Such is the shoreline of the children.

Layered over this young memory in the poem is the universally tragic potential of the ocean: "the fears / that breed in darkening kitchens . . . following storm . . . cold waiting in the wind and rain / for the late sail." This adult encounter with the power of the ocean's "moving ledges" whipped to a frenzy by stormy weather, forces a retrospective note of nostalgia into the previous section. It is only the innocent children who can resist those ". . . fears / that breed in darkening kitchens. . . ." Barnard's immediate family were not seagoing folk; but this section evokes the ageless fear of personal tragedy shared by all people involved in a dangerous livelihood. It is mythic and brooding, in contrast to the bright immediacy of the children's section. The same mood resurfaces again two stanzas later when a shipwreck

suddenly looms up from the sand.

> . . . The cracked ribs of a wreck
> project from the washed beach.
> Under the shell-encrusted timbers
> dripping brine
> plucks at the silence of slant chambers
> opening seaward. What moving keel remembers
> such things as here are buried under sand?

This description does not have the sensory quality of a "sand pillow under the hollow instep." It is more abstract and romantic, moving subtly and swiftly from one metaphor to another. The "cracked ribs" click on the image of some huge carcass, perhaps a whale; the "shell-encrusted timbers / dripping brine" remove the wreck from the beach to deeper fathoms of the ocean; and, finally, the "slant chambers" suggest a sea shell. It may have some basis in memory of a real wreck,[7] but its development in this poem more suggestive of Penelope waiting for a ten-years late sail. It is an adult image of the fear of loss and limitation rather than a child's memory of an exotic and mysterious ancient wreck.

The twice-repeated trochaic refrain "Sand is the beginning and the end / of our dominion," a whitmanesque incantation filled with melancholy, sets a tone which is maintained throughout the poem. The falling rhythm of the trochees was anticipated by the falling water of the opening line. It is obvious that one of the most important things which has been lost is the insatiable lust of children for the shore. Those (adults) who know the "fears / that breed in darkening kitchens. . ." and rebel against the coastal fog that chills their fearful watch for "the late sail" may still remember that childish joy which permeated all five senses, but it is only a memory.

[7] "The wreck described is the Caoba, long buried until winter storms uncovered it about 1932. I first saw it about the time I wrote the poem." (personal correspondence dated May 10, 1992)

After the children's section the poem abruptly asks a question:

> Did you, as I,
> condemn the coastal fog and long for islands
> seen from a sail's shadow?

The fact that the query is asked in the past tense makes it likely that the speaker is still referring to her childhood memory of the shoreline, and asking her readers whether they shared what she later refers to as ". . . the childish avarice of horizons." But, this question could also spring from the more recently described fears of the women, waiting alone after a storm, for a sail they fear may not come. Such women, too, would condemn the coastal fog that causes shipwrecks, and hope for a well-placed island to save their loved ones from drowning.

These women long for dunes which are "more passive to the wind than water is." The dunes do not respond, like the ocean, with a defence of falling water (waves) and moving ledges (breakers) to the wind's onslaught. They are passive, and their passivity opens up the possibility of life. It is not only human life which stands a chance of survival here; the dunes are a "naked restless garden" supporting "wild roses, wild strawberries . . . the crouched pine . . . and shellfish caught in flat reflecting sands."

It seems contradictory that this description of the dunes as a garden is preceded by the statement that the shoreline is "infertile, narrow, prone. . . ." Sand dunes are the point of transition between the safety of the earth and dangers of the ocean. Strawberries and roses grow only on the shoulder of the dune, with the thin sea grasses which begin to anchor the sand; but this small harvest of strawberries and roses is no crop at all compared to the lush orchards and fields of the valleys just east of the shoreline. The actual cliffs, "the shelving sand" are barren because they are passive to the wind. This

sand blows and shifts and slides under the influences of wind and water. It is treacherous and fickle, much like the waves that drag under "those who surrender." As "Shoreline" progresses, from childhood back through time to collective myth, and then forward from the mythic "silence of slant chambers / opening seaward" to the calm present moment of the "clear lagoons / behind the shattered hulk" as the tide advances slowly in the moonlight, the wind finally dies down, and quiet reigns. The tidal pools are clear and unruffled by waves, the movement of the sea grass is "thin," not violent, and the incoming tide slides easily over the flat sand bars.

The final perspective of the poem is both wide and deep. We are standing far enough back from the shore to be removed from the "confusion walling the ears" and the "cold wash of the beach," but close enough to watch the advancing tide and the "thin / movements of sea grass on the dune rim." We have also watched the scene long enough to know that the transitory ponds and sand bars lost to the tide will later emerge "with the moon's / turning." Time and distance work together to create the final wisdom of acceptance. ". . . sand / is the beginning and the end / of our dominion."

Human dominion is as narrow and infertile as the shoreline. It is just as powerless in the face of sea and wind as the late sail that may or may not return after a storm, and it ends at the same place it begins: between the moving ledges of the breakers and the shifting sands of the dune. It is a meeting place between will and nature, where the wise person learns that nature always takes precedence over will, and that the only way to obtain personal dominion is to submit to the greater power of nature, even as the "things that are ours" have submitted: "the shattered hulk, thin / movements of sea grass on the dune rim / bending against cloud. . . ." These

broken, thin, and seemingly fragile things have endured, and will continue to endure the onslaught of tide and wind.

It is not just the words of the final stanza which create a sense of peace. From "litter of bare logs in the drift—/ the sea has had its sharp word with them," we move to "the transitory ponds and smooth bar slide / easily under the advancing tide/ emerging with the moon's/ turning." The alliteration of hard consonants (l and s and w) gives way to long vowel sounds (o's and u's). Endstopped lines which force the eye and voice to pause are traded for enjambed rhyming couplets, which, as the lines grow shorter, become more musically dense. The final line consists of the single word "turning," but it has two partial rhymes in the previous line, "emerging" and "moon's," and two in the second line, "under" and "emerging." As a single trochaic foot set off by itself it also emphasizes the idea of gentle submission to the inevitable. The falling rhythm prepares the reader aurally for the final sound, words, and wisdom of the last stanza.

The tone of "Shoreline" manages to be both personal and formal. The poem embraces its reader with inclusive vocabulary such as "our," and "we," and the use of personal questions like "Did you, as I, / condemn the coastal fog . . . " and reflective questions such as ". . . What moving keel remembers / such things as here are buried under sand?" Even as the ocean shifts its personality in the poem, beginning with wild summer wind and cold sun, moving through winter fog and storm, and ending, finally, with the dune roses and clear lagoons of a rare quiet evening, the tone of the poem changes with its weather.

The first stanza, with its use of the impersonal "its" and "those" is as formal and aloof as the undertow it describes. There is not a hint of

connection to the human condition. This begins to change in the refrain that follows: "Sand is the beginning and the end / of *our* dominion" (emphasis added). The poem has reached out to acknowledge its readers; and this contact continues through the next section which invites remembrance of any childhood day at the shore. By speaking of the children in the present tense ("they walk with rigid feet the planked street of the town") the poet universalizes her experience of the shore. But, with the shift to past perfect tense in the question which follows ("Did you, as I, / condemn the coastal fog . . .) she completes a circular movement by personalizing this universal experience.

As the poem continues, this tonal shift occurs several more times with the same effect. "This, then, the country of our choice" is followed by a description so abstract we must depend on context to identify it as the shore:

> It is infertile, narrow, prone
> under a dome of choral sound:
> water breaking upon water.

Such a distant view, emphasizing the flat narrowness of the beach and the musical quality of the breakers, contrasts with the children's experience of shelving sand dunes, wide beaches, and ears walled shut by the continuous noise.

Immediacy has given way to the wide-angle lens of distance and experience. And, even as we leave the intimate memory of childhood, we are ushered into an intimate experience of adulthood. As "we lose the childish avarice of horizons" we gain the knowledge of geography ("The sea ends / against another shore . . .") and history ("What moving keel remembers / such things as here are buried under sand?"). The question is rhetorical, and reinforces the formal tone of the adult portions of the poem. Just as the

children's beach has been abstracted to a "country" that is ". . . narrow, prone / under a dome of choral sound," the "cracked ribs of a wreck" have become ". . . the silence of slant chambers / opening seaward."

This combination of formal and personal is clearly evident in the last stanza of the poem where they merge into self-conscious introspection. The peaceful final scene is described simply; repetition of the phrase that introduced the theme lends a deceptively simple sense of circular motion which is reinforced by the reference to the tides and the lunar calendar in the last section.

"Shoreline," then, is a complex poem which uses the sights, smells, climate, geography, and history of the Pacific northwest to create a poem which presents what imagists referred to as "the thing itself," and what, in our computer age, might be called the "virtual reality" of the shore. All aspects are present, from the sensation of walking barefoot in sand to the slow measure of time by the tidal cycle, shipwrecks and sea shells, dangerous undertows and peaceful tidal pools. Despite the universality of every section of the poem, the total effect is uniquely northwestern, with its heavy surf, wind, dunes, cold storms, wrecks, and wild strawberries. No reader will ever mistake this for a meditation on the Mediterranean shoreline, or even the north Atlantic as Emily Dickinson described it one hundred years earlier:

> An Everywhere of Silver
> With Ropes of Sand
> To keep it from effacing
> The Track called Land. (*Complete Poems*, #884)

Dickinson's shoreline is much tamer, with its thin "ropes of sand" surrounding the ocean gleaming silver in moonlight. It has not the sense of time and motion in "Shoreline" with its awareness of the "advancing tide"

and "the moon's / turning." Imagist though Dickinson's poem is, it presents only a single image which is much more universal than the collage of images Barnard provides.

Even in a geographically defined poem like "Shoreline" Barnard hints at another major interest: folklore. The question "What moving keel remembers / such things as here are buried under sand?" suggests the way that history is remembered and passed on through time. The sailors aboard the "moving keel" keep alive stories of many things that are dead and buried: ships, cities, people. And, over time, many such stories pass into the realm of folklore or, in the case of Homer's stories, myth. For Barnard, the shoreline is more than an image of the Pacific northwest, it is also a major connection to the mythic past of all cultures.

Chapter 3

MYTHOLOGY AND FOLKLORE

Mythology. To name it is to separate it from what most of us call "real." It was not so for Mary Barnard as a child. Two of her childhood books included re-tellings of Greek myths along with original short stories and brief biographies of important historical figures. She absorbed them indiscriminately, noting in her memoir that she ". . . had to do a little sorting out later, as between Ulysses S. Grant the general and Ulysses the Greek hero" (*Assault on Mount Helicon* 11). As a high school student she was mentored by a talented English teacher who assigned her extra readings in Homer and Greek drama; by the time she learned ancient Greek at Reed College she was shouting lines from Homer into the roaring breakers at Ocean Park. From childhood on, mythology has been a regular part of Barnard's life, intimately associated with poetry through her reading of the classical poets and dramatists. No wonder, then, that it appears so regularly, if unexpectedly at times, in her work.

Included in the first group of poems she sent to Ezra Pound for consideration in 1933 was "Lethe," which appears as the final lyric in her *Collected Poems*. Pound's succinct response is quoted in full in her memoir: "'Lethe' the best because there is more IN it" [sic] (*Assault on Mount Helicon* 53). More than *what* he does not say, but it is worthwhile to investigate exactly what is in "Lethe," and how it appears there.

Formally and dispassionately "Lethe" expresses the speaker's passion for the things of earth: created and creative, past and present. This is not the Lethe of Dante's *Purgatorio* which washes away the memory of sinfulness, but a force like that of the flood in Yeats' "Byzantium" washing away the mire and blood of "That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea." Barnard is less ambivalent than Yeats about her reaction to forgetting "The fury and the mire of human veins" as she prepares to join the shades of Hades. Whereas his poem celebrates the complexities of human passion which give rise to timeless art, hers mourns the temporal nature of all things, art included. Phrases such as ". . . the delicate sculpture of a lifted hand" (*Collected Poems* 101) manage to embrace art and physiology. This deliberate imprecision leaves readers with a generosity of interpretive ranges.

The long midsection of the poem serves as a list of remembered things the speaker is unwilling to forget by drinking the waters of Lethe. While it is obviously not a complete list, it is interestingly representative. Intimately personal items such as "the color [of] the lips and the eyes / beloved" are given equal weight as broadly universal urban "cities," and ". . . the dye / of the world's color," and "the fires of earth" which evoke the natural world. The whole of classical civilization is called up with the single word "pillars" (which were not much a part of Barnard's personal world in the 1930's). These few images evoke memory on both collective and personal scales, and remind us that what is lost at the river of oblivion is more than individual consciousness.

The last (and lasting) image of the shade, lingering at the brink of Lethe unwilling to forget while she is, for the last time, consciously remembering, is an unsettling one. The final stanza has a quietly accusing, albeit gentle tone:

The living will forget
more quickly than I,
dead, lingering with lips unwet
above Lethe.

We, the living take for granted the individual and collective memories which enrich human experience, and we are often guilty of memory lapse or loss, as indicated by the much-quoted warning that those who cannot remember the past are doomed to repeat it. Barnard's ending is also unsettling because it is so open-ended. We do not know whether she will drink of Lethe's water when that time comes. We know that she is "unwilling," but we do not know for how long she will linger above the river "with lips unwet."

The poem stands in tribute to memory on several levels: first, the remembered history of Greek culture from which we have inherited our understanding of the River Lethe, second, the collective idea of memory as it is known to all cultures, and third, the personal memories of an individual which are elemental to the identity we call 'self.' Barnard puts a twist on the philosophy of memory by suggesting that it is fully understood and appreciated only at the moment of its loss.

The poem has a quiet, formal tone which belies the suggested passion of the speaker for the temporal world. It is a lamentation spoken from the mind as well as the heart, for in Barnard's poetry, the intellect is always equally engaged as the emotions. Her choice of simple future tense in the first sentence ". . . I shall lean" carries the weight of deliberate choice with its stress on "lean," and the suggestion that the action so described may not occur for a long time. At the moment she is merely thinking about that

future time and planning her response to it. It is an intellectual examination of human emotion which the ancient philosophers would have appreciated.

Despite the depth of Barnard's personal knowledge of ancient history and mythology, her meaning is never obscured by difficult allusions. For example, the poem "Prometheus Loved Us" from *Cool Country* can be grasped whether or not one knows of Prometheus' connection to humankind. With or without Prometheus it is a meditation on the human condition which celebrates the twin life-giving forces of water and fire. And like many of Barnard's poems it braids together three disparate strands (mythology, the Pacific northwest, and the personal) into a uniquely patterned expression of human value. Prometheus is mentioned only in the title where a generous circle is drawn around him and "us," embracing the mythological god and common folk in Barnard's thesis for which the poem sets out unexpected evidence of the god's love for humans.

Like "Encounter in Buffalo" the occasion of the poem is a solitary walk at twilight, one of Barnard's favorite times of day. It is raining softly, and the speaker is wandering aimlessly at the edge of town, observing minute details of the intimate (". . . rain on my coatsleeves, / drops clinging upon the prongs of the wool" (*Collected Poems* 75)) and the universal (". . . Vacant lots / spill grass on the sidewalk") as she casts about for a reason to remember ("record") the scene.

This dispassionate observer is waiting for a moment of passion which occurs in the final stanza when ". . . fire pricks through the rain / and the street is stung to life," and she says her "Heart leaps, like a fish striking." This dazzling reflection of firelight in the rain which momentarily transforms the dim street is Barnard's proof of the existence of God, proof that "Prometheus

Loved Us." Even the most uninformed reader can grasp the connections between the love proclaimed in the title, the "match-wing of fire," and the sudden life in the dark street.

Knowledge of the Prometheus myth adds depth to the the poem's meaning rather than being the key to understanding it. The act of observant walking described by the poet becomes further proof of Prometheus' love when one knows that Prometheus caused mankind, alone of the animals, to walk upright and lift his head to the sun and stars. Her question "Should I record anything?" is more poignant because Prometheus taught us the use of letters and numbers. And, most obviously, the life-giving warmth and light of fire was Prometheus' special gift to mankind, stolen from Zeus who retaliated by having him chained to a rock for 30 years. For a poet who walks to observe, observes to record, and records to create poetry, the gifts of Prometheus are especially precious and indicative of his love for her kind.

The Pacific northwest is most evident in this poem in the weather: a persistent, gentle rain that does not impede the walker nor soak through her coat. But it also appears in the final , unexpected image of the fish striking, which hearkens back to the poet's observation that the "Runnel of rain at the curb will / drop down to the river. . . ." The sudden sight of a trout leaping from still water as it feeds on insects is perfect here, for the fire that suddenly illuminates the street is described as an insect:

> . . . merest match-wing
> of fire pricks through the rain
> and the street is stung to life.

"Match-wing" sounds close to gnat-wing, and also conjures up an image of fireflies which are like winged matches flickering in the night sky over fields and "vacant lots" where the grass is unmowed. Like an insect,

this tiny glimmer "pricks" and stings. In the final simile the bright insect wings take on a new purpose: feeding the fish that leap for them. Just so, has the poet "caught" her poem; just so, does that final image of the fish striking infuse the poem with feeling like the sting of fire in the rain-dark street. In the best imagist fashion, Barnard has again presented, rather than described, the emotion, images, and action of the poem.

This is not the only time Barnard uses the act of fishing to describe poetry-writing. "Suggested Miracle," which, like "Prometheus Loved Us," appeared in *Cool Country* has her salmon fishing for "The silver and red fish. . . " (*Collected Poems* 39) that are ubiquitous to the Pacific northwest. There she observes with affectionate regret that her "catch" does not tempt most of her townspeople. They are content with real salmon, which can be eaten, rather than her metaphoric trophy. As the title implies, it would take a miracle to bring them "nose to nose" with such an allusive thing as a poem.

Poems like "Prometheus Loved Us" exhibit Mary Barnard's special talent for making mythology contemporary. Another fine example is her "Persephone," wherein the Greek character takes on the persona of a twentieth-century northwesterner remembering her homesickness ". . . for the raw working and scars of the surface: / furrows, quarries, split wood . . . " of her beloved homeland. These images of the natural world are the same, everyday Pacific northwest images that surface in many of Barnard's other poems: orchards, saw mills, quarries, and sunshine warming the rocks and wildflowers of mountain meadows. The subterranean world, on the other hand, is described in terms that echo Dante's *Inferno:*

> From there in any direction
> one walked endlessly upon short grass tufts
> stiff as cactus in the aridity of cold.

> The lake wharves were icebound;
> the wind, unending, circling the earth's interior,
> brought no news.

It is a cold, dry, windy place where Persephone starves as much for "speech with the living" as for the the "fruit of lost orchards" and the warmth of the sun, just as the damned begged Dante for earthly news in *The Inferno.*

Persephone speaks to us directly, with calmness that is possible only because she is remembering past circumstances, but also with passion because she knows that she must descend those "subterranean flat stone stairways" again each autumn. Her description of the vaulted ceiling of the underworld as ". . . the facade / of the hiding place of earth's treasure" is confusing at first, for all the "treasure" she describes is on the forbidden surface. It helps to realize that when Persephone is in the underworld the treasures of the earth are hidden from her; thus does the surface become its own "hiding place."

This poem has a biographical basis in Barnard's years as curator of the Poetry Collection at the University of Buffalo, New York. If it is not a thinly disguised description of her own exile, Barnard's time in Buffalo certainly must have sharpened her sensitivity to the suffering of an exile like Persephone, isolated from the natural world she loved. Her memoir is unflinchingly honest about her dislike for Buffalo:

> Besides the snow, the wind, and the cold, there was ice underfoot all winter long. . . . During the frequent blizzards, pedestrians clung to ropes stretched on downtown streets. The combination of ice and wind made it almost impossible to stand up. . . .(172)
>
> While my work at the library was interesting and stimulating as I had been assured that it would be, life outside working hours continued to offer no stimulus at all. . . . (188)
>
> The four years I spent there were made more tolerable by my long vacations at home... and by trips to New York that were not as frequent as I should have liked. . . . (192)

These excerpts from her memoir list the same discomforts that Barnard's Persephone notes: wind, cold, ice, emotional and intellectual isolation. Much like Persephone, Barnard's exile was made tolerable by her periodic escapes from it.[8]

Perhaps because mythology is so alive in Barnard's hands, she has not been content merely to make metaphors out of its stories. Her collection of essays on the origins of myth, *The Mythmakers*, was compiled to support her thesis that myths originate in the real experiences of human beings. In her discussion of Pleiades myths, "The Dancing Stars," she asks some penetrating questions:

> . . . Are folktales invented simply for entertainment's sake, passed from tribe to tribe, from culture to culture, and, here and there, adapted to religious uses, thus becoming myths? Do they well up from some deep psychological reservoir, taking the form of a myth in one culture and an Arabian Night's entertainment in another? Does the myth outlast its cultural use and so become a folktale? Is there any relation between the myth and folktale? Is there any difference between them? (*The Mythmakers*, 129)

Barnard is not without her own opinions on these questions, but she refrains from promoting them as definitive. Instead, in *The Mythmakers*, she expresses a strong desire for various scholars to investigate the same questions that she has raised so that myths, folktales, and fables will be given the serious intellectual attention necessary to keep them out of airless academic pigeonholes. She has done her part in this endeavor, not only by the essays collected in *The Mythmakers*, but also by the creation of a body of verse which keeps the air circulating among all the questions and categories she identifies.

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[8] In a note postmarked 24 Feb. 1992 Barnard confirmed my hunch: "Re/ "Persephone"--- yes, Buffalo."

Barnard is adept at using myths metaphorically, so that her poems derive strength from the power of the stories behind such characters as Persephone and Prometheus. As she explained to Anita Helle:

> I am interested in myth as metaphor, deliberate, not unconscious metaphor. . . . These are not my metaphors—they are traditional in different parts of the world. (198)

Her recognition of the metaphoric power of ancient mythologies is a refreshing change from the tendency of most contemporary poets to create metaphor out of personal mythologies for which no *Oxford Dictionary* exists. For Barnard, the common threads running through myths and folktales of all cultures create a powerful net in which to capture in poetry any aspect of the human condition.

This is not to say that personally meaningful metaphors (especially Pacific northwest ones) are not also evident in her work, but that they are braided together with the universal and historical in ways that leave no doubt that, for Barnard, a poem is no mere appendage to her own psyche, but a separate living entity which is to be respected and known for its own sake. In this way "Persephone" exists outside of Barnard's miserably cold experience of Buffalo, NY, for its power is not merely personal.

An earlier poem than "Persephone," "Wine Ship" will serve to provide further illustration of this feature of the poems. The poem was, no doubt, inspired by the childhood sight described in *Assault on Mount Helicon* of

> . . . the *Alice,* a wrecked French wineship whose mast rose out of the surf . . . erect, though slanting, still bearing two spars where seagulls perched at sunset. (18)

Its opening stanza is a lyrical restatement of the same scene:

A mast askew in the surf,
wood of another climate
bedded forever in half-liquid sand. (*Collected Poems* 94)

Without the prose description of the real *Alice* from the memoir it would have been impossible to place this poem in the realm of the personal, for that first stanza also presents a stereotypical image of any ancient shipwreck. The tilted mast is also a first harbinger of many things in this poem that are not as they should be, and it stands an an emblem of a world off balance. From that romantic, but disconcerting scene emerges "the sharp-eared foreigner" of the second stanza, the miserable survivor of the wreck who at once becomes the subject of local (northwest) survival folklore and the object of Barnard's imaginative ruminations about his past life.

The survivor is described in terms of his losses; like Persephone, he is homesick for the warmth and light of his native land as "his flesh wither[s] in ". . . the cold winds of this coast." His sharp ears may have been noted by the locals in summary of his differences from them, much as the Chinese focused on the long noses of their first European visitors. They are another unsettling suggestion that things are not quite right. Barnard goes on to create a civilization for the survivor with suggestive images that, at first, seem so fragmentary that it would be impossible to place them. But their cumulative effect is unmistakably Mediterranean; and by the time we hear "the tap of hidden hooves" in the last stanza we know that the sharp-eared foreigner who struggled out of the wrecked wine ship was a satyr, an attendant of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, now better known by his Latin name, Bacchus. He comes from "another climate" of "moss" and "myrtle groves" and warm sand, he is familiar with shrines, and along with the

"sweet wines / spilt in the sea" he has lost his "mirth." In addition to sharp ears, he has "small hand[s and a] white throat" and "long eyelids."

The Pacific northwest weather is not kind to the satyr, whose ". . . flesh wither[s] in the cold winds of this coast." Despite Barnard's emotional attachment to the shoreline of her home, she is able to empathize with the satyr, whose reaction to the region is much like Persephone to the underworld. Unlike "Shoreline," this poem presents the northwest coastline as a ". . . forlorn meeting of sea and land," still powerful, but notably unappealing.

The satyr's effect on the locals is suggested by the ". . . outlandish lights [that] appear / in the woman's eyes" when she hears the "disturbing rhythm" associated with the Bacchanalia. Barnard's description of the anonymous woman's eyes also hints at the wildly passionate dancing of the mænads in the ancient rites which celebrated Dionysus' death and rebirth. But such dancing, too, is out of place on the damp, wind-swept coast of Oregon where the berries are bitter and "the sweet wines/ [have been] spilt in the sea." Barnard says that "In this forlorn meeting of sea and land / mirth is lost over the stormy water" just as the wine has been lost in the wreck.

The poem can be read on many levels. It is local history about a real wreck; it is a local folktale about the exotic survivor of that wreck; it is a bit of classical mythology woven together with the childhood memory of a slanting mast in the surf; it is the story of an unwilling emigrant adapting to his new location; and it is a discomforting metaphor for a world out of balance; and a suggestion of the half-recognized and misunderstood powers which affect our lives when we least expect them.

Many other poems than those which deal directly with mythological figures such as Persephone or Prometheus are influenced by Barnard's lifelong study of myth and folklore, and, like "Wine Ship" illustrate the difficulty of making a distinction between them. "Ondine," a very early poem (for which, along with "Lai" and "Wineship," Barnard won the coveted Levinson Award from *Poetry* magazine in 1935), is equally unsettling, and as spooky as any of Robert Frost's supernatural narratives. The ghostly ondine of the title appears in the narrator's home just as matter-of-factly as the satyr climbed out of his shipwreck, which makes the strange story that follows oddly believable, and its terrifying effect on the speaker the most believable of all.

The story is simple: a cold and grieving water-spirit appears beside the hearth at suppertime to accuse the narrator of stealing a piece of driftwood. The narrator denies having done so, and the ondine departs, leaving puddles and her ". . . silvered cedar knot" (*Collected Poems* 92) of a stool behind. When the narrator throws the cedar knot onto her fire it explodes ". . . with a white flash, / a crackling roar in the chimney and dark smoke." After this strange encounter the narrator is terrified that the ondine will ". . . return and bring her sisters with her" to drag her off to a watery grave.

Clear visual images in the poem's five stanzas are carefully chosen to highlight the drama of the story. The host has her first twinge of uneasiness when she observes that, no matter how hot the fire, ". . . no steam went up from her dark dress." Later, after the ondine has left, she graphically describes her growing fear:

> Now I am frightened on the shore at night,
> and all the phosphorescent swells that rise
> come towards me with the threat of her dark eyes
> with a cold firelight in them;

and crooked driftwood writhes
in dry sand when I pass.

That image of great ocean swells, glowing with phosphorescence as they move threateningly towards a lonely figure on the shore, is far from forgettable. And finally, we are left with "the melting foamline of the latest wave," an image of oblivion as total as the drowning death feared by the narrator.

The spooky images in "Ondine" are matched by a quality of sound that echoes the moods of the poem. It begins with a single line of iambic pentameter that introduces what promises to be a good yarn. But the second line casts aside iambic rhythm with the forebodingly heavy three-beat phrase "made dark tracks," which has the effect of casting an ominous shadow over the poem. Throughout the poem "o" and "oo" assonance echo the ghostliness of the strange title; while the near lack of such sounds in the final stanza suggests that only the annihilation it describes will put an end to the narrator's fear of the ondine.

The irregular use of rhyme and assonance creates two separate compartments within the poem. The first three stanzas, which describe the encounter with the ondine, are tied together by end-rhymes carried over from one stanza to another ("feet" and "eat" in stanzas one and two, "rare" and "hair" in stanzas two and three). There is no such carry-over from the third to the fourth stanza, which also marks the change from past to present tense: "Now I am frightened. . . ." Perhaps as an indication of their more tentative nature, (they deal with a fear that may or may not have any basis in reality) assonance, rather than true rhyme, ties together these last two stanzas. The emphasis on "—ise" sounds in the fourth stanza echoes the sound of the surf

as waves recede from the shore, and makes the narrator's presence on that shore all the more realistic. Readers hear the surf with her in the emphasized assonance of "rise" and "eyes" and "writhes." By the final stanza all that remains of that echo of the surf is the repeated long 'i' sound in "tide" and "side," an echo dimmed by the change from assonance to rhyme.

The final two lines of the poem returns to iambic pentameter with its beautiful image of "the melting foamline of the latest wave" made threatening by metaphoric connection to the "long pool in my bed" that the narrator fears will be all that is left of her if the ondine returns to drag her out to sea on the receding tide.

When Anita Helle asked Mary Barnard to discuss the ondine as an image of the muse she neatly sidestepped the question by speaking instead about its publication history, and about Elinor Wylie's influence on it:

> **Barnard:** . . . I found a poem by Wylie I was obviously drawing on when I wrote "Ondine . . . " the visitor in her [Wylie's] poem is the ghost of a drowned sailor. And it's perfectly possible, you know, to absorb things and then have them go down into the unconscious and come out as inspiration. The poem's called, I believe, "The Coast Guard's Cottage." I was much embarrassed to find it. And the other strange thing is that this poem of Wylie's is more like my poem— it's not much like her other poems.
>
> **Helle:** Is the similarity to your other poems the fairy-tale motif?
>
> **Barnard:** Yes, in part. Rex Arragon pointed out to me before I put the *Collected Poems* together how much myth permeated my early poems. . . . (Helle 193)

More important than Wylie's possible influence on "Ondine" is, I think, Barnard's deliberate connection between fairy-tale or folktale and myth in her acknowledgement of that shared motif. It seems to offer a partial answer to the questions posed in *The Mythmakers*, and quoted above, about

the relationship between myth and folktale. Barnard's poem certainly falls into the realm of folktale, for it has no basis of origin (so far as I have been able to determine) in Mythology; yet Barnard herself connects its "fairy-tale motif" to her definition of mythology. A few other early poems will serve to further illustrate Barnard's use of the relationship between fairy-tales and mythology.

At first glance "The Fitting" appears quite regular. There are three stanzas, the first two consisting of two sentences each, and the third, longer one, of a single sentence. It has the appearance of a sonnet despite its seventeen lines. It appeared in *A Few Poems*, published in 1952, but the dress fitting it describes so disturbingly was much more commonplace in the '20's and 30's than in later decades.[9] There is a quality of intimacy about the poem which suggests that it is based upon personal experience with dress fittings. The ". . . knuckle / shocking the flushed skin" and the "cold hands / of elderly dressmakers" have the power to make the reader cringe like the girl being fitted. It seems likely that the poet has personal experience of the physical discomfort described in this poem.

The sense of the poem as personal memory is reinforced by several additional features. The elderly dressmakers are described in fairytale-like terms as a "trio of hags" with "withered lips" holding the pins of their trade. They have no uniquely identifying characteristics except for the girl's reaction to them. She is made both physically and psychically uncomfortable by their "muttered words" and hard, cold knuckles. To a young girl, anyone past middle age may seem a withered hag; and the poem is honest about this

[9] In a letter dated April 5, 1992, Barnard remarked to me; "I daresay I came at the very end of the tradition of dressmakers who went from home to home once or twice a year and made clothes for all the female members of the family."

aspect of childhood. The girl stands before a deep ". . . well of the mirrors . . . ," but her reflection therein is fogged by the dressmakers' muttered breath, which reinforces the haziness of details in this memory snapshot. There is no indication of what sort of dress is being fitted; it is insignificant to the poem, for the product of this fitting is the girl, not the frock.

As an invented folk-tale, the strongest image in "The Fitting" is the trio of hags who are modeled on the three fates, the Moirai, who spin, measure, and cut the thread of life for each of us. The "tape-measures" of Barnard's elderly dressmakers which ". . . entangle, bind, and define" the young girl's body, serve the same metaphoric purpose as those thread of life. The "soft snipping sound" of the scissors at her heels takes on the power of inescapable fate, limiting, focusing, and finally eliminating some of her choices for the future.

In this light, not only is the fitting itself a miserable experience, but so too the end result. ". . . [H]er hands will make nothing" in contrast to the unseen, presumably male, hands hammering outside the window. Fate denies this young girl even the satisfaction of the dressmakers who produce the garment they are fitting to her. "Her life is confined here, in this depth, / in the well of the mirrors . . . " which were described in the first line as a prison. It is, of course, merely an image that is endlessly reflected in the half-circle of mirrors, but the poem suggests that this image may usurp reality. In the eyes of the dressmaker hags, who, on another level, represent the detrimental effects of restrictive society on a girl's ambitions, an artfully draped and defined exterior "image" takes precedence over the vulnerable "flushed skin" of the girl which is to be hidden. Even the word "fitting" in the title suggests, wryly, that this is the socially accepted life for such a girl.

There is very little music in this poem. Even the few examples of alliteration do not soften its sound. The h's in ". . . hags with the cold hands" are widely spaced and separated by the hard sound of "cold" which stops the easy flow of words like a shiver. The same is true of the soft "s" and "sh" sounds in ". . . Censure will be a knuckle / shocking the flushed skin." In the middle is the hard, cold (in both sound and image) "knuckle" which makes us wince. And again in the poem's final image of ". . . the scissors / making a soft, snipping sound" at her heels, the whisper of the shears serves as an unavoidable reminder that much of life is fated, and beyond our ability to alter, even as we cannot dictate the moment that the thread will be cut.

If Barnard's poetry was better known it would be surprising that this powerfully feminist observation has not been anthologized in collections of modern women's poetry. But Barnard, despite her exemplary feminist life, rejects that label in its contemporary definition, for reasons articulated clearly in the final pages of her memoir. A close reading of this poem in light of that statement on feminism makes her stand on the issue quite clear.

> First, I grew up thinking that women were already liberated. We had the vote; we wore clothing that allowed freedom of movement; we were welcome at co-educational colleges and universities; we could travel alone, and pursue our careers in whatever city we chose; instead of being pressured into marriage, we could choose to marry or not to marry. . . . I never at any time needed my "consciousness raised." My ego was in good shape, and still is. . . . When I read Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*, which was published during my second or third year in college, I thought it a wonderful book and took to heart her advice to women writers: do not . . . mount the soap-box and harangue your audience on women's rights when you should be getting on with the story; do not waste time and energy railing against men; abandon any consciousness of your sex when you write, and write simply as a human being. (*Assault on Mount Helicon* 313)

Barnard may have abandoned consciousness of her sex when she wrote "The Fitting," but it clearly exhibits her sensitivity to the feminine experience, and her indignation at past and/or present restrictions on some women. It is a poem that could only have been written by a woman with some personal knowledge of societal censure and confinement, as well as dress fittings. (In her memoir Barnard reports with some satisfaction that she has never owned a pair of white kid gloves, which was considered a basic necessity in some segments of 1930's and 1940's society.) In retrospect, her particular life is most certainly not the life anticipated for the girl in the poem; but the misery of such lack of fulfillment as it describes might have snipped at her heels a bit, even in low-brow Vancouver, Washington in the 1920's.

The fairy-tale qualities of the story in this poem may also be an indication of how far removed from Barnard's personal experience it is on the metaphoric level. Other women have used the genre to describe personal experiences in their lives (Ursula Le Guin's essay on her abortion comes to mind), but Barnard's healthy ego tends to rear its honest head more bluntly whenever the occasion suits (see my discussion of "Prometheus Loved Us," for example, or "Now," or "Inheritance").

In the *Collected Poems* "The Fitting" appears with a grouping that Barnard says deals with "childhood and growing up" (Helle, 189). If it does refer to her personal experience of dress fittings, then the use of present tense throughout the poem serves to freeze the image of the girl "imprisoned among mirrors," and separates her quite effectively from the woman who grew out of the experience. She is forever, and merely, an image in the mirror of memory, dim and distorted, not to be analyzed in light of circumstances yet unknown. Nor should she be further distorted by the

application of feminist rhetoric. Her story is complete in itself; it will not be well served by the application of Helene Cixous' theory of female castration.

Most importantly, she is a folk-motif, offering in story form, a lesson in the frailty of human life and hope, the interconnectedness of people in a society, and the limits of personal ambition. The situation may be peculiarly feminine, but the lessons it offers are universal and timeless.

The poem on the page facing "The Fitting" in the *Collected Poems* deals even more obviously with fairy tales, but instead of archetypal elderly hags it offers a beautiful, good, virgin princess as victim of unnamed evil. It is composed entirely in past tense, making it clearly a memory, and rescuing it from the dangers of anthropological or psychological interpretation. The reader first learns what impressions such storybook heroines made on the poet. As a child she valued, and therefore remembers that they all had long flowing hair, they were pale, and their weeping merely added to their beauty:

> The tears of princesses were cool as rain.
> They wept purely into their unbound hair.
> Tears were ornaments to be hung
> at the pale eyelids like jewels. (*Collected Poems* 5)

The first two lines are complete sentences, short and factual, creating a tone of childlike simplicity as they describes the universal characteristics of all princesses. The list gathers momentum with its enthusiasm for the subject as it progresses. The middle stanza is one long sentence, ending with a clause full of chivalrous, romantic adjectives and absolutes which ring true for folk stories from *Rapunzel* to the *Weaver Princess* of Chinese mythology:

> and they always cried with perfect reasonableness
> for lasting sorrow or bloody-hilted
> abhorrent wickedness
> presented at the unguarded breast.

It is true that such storybook characters always cry "with perfect reasonableness," but to see it written out that way is to realize just how absurd is such an idea. Tears are a result of human emotion, often of passion, which is, by definition, opposed to reason. Perfectly reasonable tears are staged, not real. This hint of dissatisfaction with the weeping princesses is developed in the final stanza when they are compared to spun sugar which melts in the dew. By their reasonable nature, the tears of princesses' wash away our faith in them. There is no substance to such beauty or emotion.

The poem's final image, however, is not of the delicately beautiful princesses, but of some real person, perhaps the child whose memory makes up the rest of the poem, caught in a storm of weeping, face swollen by the tears which drip from her chin. It is the sort of crying which perpetrates itself. Whatever the original reason for her tears, she now continues to cry simply because she has "too many tears." The implied comparison is made stronger by the fact that the princesses' tears are "cool as rain," reasonable, and serve to ornament their faces, whereas human tears distort one's features, and are described as scalding hot, and unreasonably passionate.

Barnard's Pacific northwest origins are displayed, even in this poem, which has a theme and subject totally unrelated to the region. Tears like cool rain is a homey image to one who spends four or five months a year in rain that is not only cool, but also so gentle and misty that locals refer to it as "Oregon sunshine." The rain of Mary Barnard's metaphor is obviously such a rain, not the steamy cloudburst of a midwestern shower, nor the violence of a Great Lakes thunderstorm. The gentle, cool rain of Pacific northwest winters ornaments natural elements just as Barnard describes the tears hanging like jewels from the princesses' earlobes. Such liquid jewels hanging

from flowers, leaves, spider webs, and pine needles are an everyday occurrence in her region of the country. The passionate weeping of the real child is not graced by any such images of natural adornment, for it does not need to be likened to the natural world; it is natural, unlike that of the princesses.

The superficial theme of "The Tears of Princesses" is the limitation of fairy tale images, especially for women and girls; Barnard's genius lies in her use of the motif to strengthen a poem which expose the flaws of that same motif. Like "The Fitting," it can be read as a fable, this one describing the archetypal images and unreality of story-book romance.

Barnard wrote a number of fables of her own, in prose and in verse. I discussed "Fable of the Ant and the Word" in my introduction; I would like to end this section by examining another such fable in verse, "Fable from the Cayoosh Country," which was published in *Cool Country* in 1940. It is a poet's fable, dealing with the relative eloquence of human words and animal cries.

The poet says she has gone as ". . . a missionary, into the mountains, / taking the grammars of all languages" (*Collected Poems* 98-99). She comes from ". . . the settled country" with its penchant for words, names and stories, into the ". . . inarticulate world" which she describes as "A region crowded with nameless mountains." Like the westering pioneers of the Oregon Trail one hundred years before her, Barnard knows the part words play in conquering the wilderness. Named mountains and rivers are much less wild than nameless ones; and a wilderness peopled with missionaries spreading "the word" is well on its way to being tamed.

But the animals have no use of her preaching; ". . . the blessing of the noun and verb" are worthless to them. From the ". . . furred ear of the bear, /

[and] the expressive ear of the young doe" the poet learns the limits of that language which has been like a religion to her. Even the "Indians [that] passsed at our feet" avert their profiles from her, preferring to look into reflections of the natural world in the "clear lake." She despairs, flings her books into a stream, and then begins to listen to its "monologue" as roles are reversed and the stream preaches to her.

The stream describes for her the great "debate of the beasts" when the animals spoke against one another with such violence that "they all but accomplished their own extermination." At the height of the debate, "eons ago," the animals abandoned speech, and, ". . . said the stream, in six languages. / They have never seen any cause to repent their decision." The one thing the did not lose by rejecting speech, was their true nature:

> Had the mountain goat need of his eloquence
> to make of his native rocks a rostrum?
> Did the beaver's young learn industrious ways of a proverb?
> The humming bird was a fiction. What legend could please her?

In good imagist form, these beasts present themselves without benefit of description, and their presentation is more articulate than if it were clouded with detail. Indeed, the presence of language had previously threatened to exterminate them.

But our poet is still a creature burdened with language that has been transformed by her wilderness experience from a source of power to a source of evil. She has a prophetic dream in which ". . . a tide in the lake . . . flooded southward into the settled country," seemingly to exterminate the evil of language at its human source. This deluge bears striking similarities to its Old Testament predecessor in which Yahweh sent forty days of rain to flood the earth and exterminate evil people. The missionary narrator says that her

". . . consternation was that of a poet, whose love / if not his living was gravely endangered." Her love is for the beauty and power of language evident in poetry; in the face of the inarticulate power of the wilderness she has been forced to acknowledge its potential for evil as well as its primal futility. She can still make poems, but if the settled country is flooded, there will be no one to listen to her art except the doe about whom she has earlier said "What I said, she obviously did not [understand]."

In the end, the poet awakes to find ". . . the lake was in place." No deluge has occurred, but also no "purification" of human language. Nevertheless, she has hope for herself, as the poem ends with her hesitant question: "Perhaps if one rose now and bathed in the water?" The implication is that this poet will purify her art by immersion in the nameless lake of the "inarticulate world" so that her words will retain the natural eloquence of that world. It is a fitting wish for an imagist poet, as well as a fable steeped in many eloquent lessons about the nature of language and poetry. It also serves as an extended metaphor for Barnard's life-long quest for a metric which is true to the natural purity of spoken language.

Chapter 4

SAPPHO, GREEK PROSODY AND THE BARNARD METRIC

When Mary Barnard first appealed to Ezra Pound for critical advice on her poetry in 1933 he responded, in part, by recommending her to the study of Greek metric, in particular quantitative meter and sapphics. In addition, he noted: "Music rots when it gets too far from dance. / Poetry when too far from music. . . . [T]he difficulty in WRITING music is in the RHYTHM NOT in pitch. . . . Get a metronome and learn HOW long the different syllables, and groups of them take [sic]" (*Assault on Mount Helicon* 55) She took him seriously, began to work at sapphics, and studied the copy of Laurencie et Lavignac's *Encyclopedie de la Musique et Dictionaire du Conservatoire* that Pound mailed to her from Rapallo for that purpose.

In it she found a discussion of Greek quantitative dimeters which became the basis for her development of the "balanced line" which approximates American speech rhythms. In an *Agenda* essay Barnard explains the origin of her metric as follows:

> I was interested in certain lines, dimeters, in which the longs and shorts constantly varied in position, but balanced... I played with these meters off and on for years . . . I found that Pound's line, "Eyes, lips, dreams, and the night goes," scanned by T. S. Eliot as a spondee, a dactyl, and another spondee, really made better sense as a balanced line:
>
> Eyes, lips, dreams, / and the night goes
>
> Occasionally I used balanced dimeters in my own lyrics. . . .
> (*Agenda* (1978-79) 64-65)

When Barnard came to translate Sappho, some 20 years after first encountering dimeters, she incorporated both balance and duration into the metric she developed to accommodate Sappho's style as she describes it:

> . . . spare, but musical . . . the sound of the speaking voice making a simple but emotionally loaded statement. . . . never tinkling. . . . neither is it strident. . . . It is resonant although unmistakably in the female register. (*Assault on Mount Helicon* 282)

Her translation effort has been hailed by scholars and poets alike as "nearly perfect," as Burton Raffel acclaimed it (*Hudson Review* 236). In his "forward" to *Sappho, a New Translation* Dudley Fitts said it is ". . . exact translation; but in its composition, the spacing, the arrangement of stresses, it is also high art." Fitts explains his enthusiasm thus:

> What I chiefly admire . . . is the direct purity of diction and versification. There are perilous guesses, audacious twists, and inevitable flights to the authority of intuition alone. . . . What Miss Barnard perceives, and what no one would have ever guessed from the general run of talk about Sappho, is the pungent downright plain style. . . . Like the Greek it is stripped and hard, awkward with the fine awkwardness of truth.

In his comparative review of her translations with those of Kenneth Rexroth and Richard Lattimore, Raffel insists that, at times, Barnard becomes Sappho: "The sheer penetration Miss Barnard achieves is staggering: she is Sappho, here. Nothing else could have brought to life that astonishing first line" (238). Angela Christy reached a similar conclusion in her study of the translations when she noted that, despite her scholarly focus on the "accuracy, appropriateness, and syntax" of the Barnard poems, she "discovered that the most beautiful, underlying essence of the Barnard poems is that Barnard, as translator, is temperamentally akin to the original poet" (Christy 12). This enthusiasm is an excellent indication that Barnard has achieved her own goal

of conveying the cadence of the speaking voice which she ". . . swear[s] in the teeth of those who have said otherwise . . . " (*Assault on Mount Helicon* 284) underlies the stanzaic form.

The reception of Barnard's *Sappho* by poets and scholars alike indicates that she has achieved more than mere translation of sense, meaning, or sound. She has achieved poetry. In an essay on poetry translation in his recent book *A Poet's Work,* Sam Hamill says that Barnard's effort is superior to previous Sappho translations in English simply because

> she says more with fewer words . . . her commitment to poetry outweighs her commitment to words. She articulates a structure which contributes to the understanding of the poetry far more than it obscures. It is good poetry in American idiom. (85)

Angela Christy's sensitive study of the accuracy and fidelity of Barnard's translations also makes note that Barnard's skill at ". . . unusual tightness and sparsity in syntax, as well as a euphonious arrangement of words . . ." in her original prose and poetry "contribute enormously to the beauty of her *Sappho* poems" (11). Christy also notes Barnard's unique organization of the poems she selected for translation: a temporal arrangement that allows readers to "follow poetically a brief biography of a passionate woman who needs to love, who understands her emotions, and who needs to express them." As Christy describes it:

> Barnard's biography begins at dawn with a very young, sprightly Sappho and ends with her death; in the middle of this arrangement are the famous poems composed at the height of her maturity and creativity. This careful and thoughtful sequence is unique, sensible, and appealing. (12)

The temporal arrangement is unique to Barnard, but certainly not a surprising choice for the author of *Time and the White Tigress* to have made. The temporal world of nature has always played a major role in her work,

whether as trees, rivers, and mountains in the early poems or sun, moon, and stars in the later ones.[10] Times of day and seasons of the year are suggested in many poems, as are other indications of time's passage: the phases of the moon, ocean tides, the movement of clouds, salmon runs, harvests. There is always a sense of action, whether it is as brief as a smile, fast as a swallows' flight, slow as a tide, or the decay of an abandoned railway depot. Two early poems that share Barnard's early interest in the natural world as revealed in wilderness will serve to illustrate her fascination with this subject.

"The River Under Different Lights" (*Collected Poems* 21-23) describes three different views of the Columbia River: first the rapids of the Columbia Gorge where "light has the dull luster of pewter / and the clouds move sideways," then the shipping channel in Portland where "riders in the fogging buses peer / at snatches of river between madrona and fir, / at the prow of a white vessel," and finally the estuary "where fresh water meets salt." In the course of the poems the reader follows the progress of the river down from the Cascade Mountains, through Portland and Vancouver, then on northwest to Astoria where it flows into the Pacific Ocean.

In "Journey" (*Collected Poems* 25-27) the poet describes a full day's hike in the mountains. It begins in the morning when "the sun / rising crumbles the mountain rim in flame," continues into the afternoon when ". . . [t]he sun licking/ the stream splashes / scalding light into shade" and "heat pants from the rocks," ending finally in the evening when "Darkness comes so slowly even in these deep canyons," and the". . . [f]ar moon, cold light, memory . . . journeys from twilight till dawn." The slow, inevitable passage

[10] In a letter to me dated January 9, 1992 Barnard noted: "In the WHITE TIGRESS, I moved from trees rivers and mountains to sun, moon and stars, but it's still the natural world."

of a day is beautifully presented in these three poems that capture the unique characteristics of three different times of day.

The Sappho translations may have heightened Barnard's sensitivity to time due to the circumstances under which she prepared them. She was seriously ill with serum hepatitis, and her recovery required a lengthy bed rest. Her poem, "Picture Window," expresses a keen understanding of the slow time to which an invalid is party. In it, the speaker is an astute observer of familiar scenes of rhythmic repetition: "The gulls by day, the moon by night / pass and repass the window, weaving time; / opposite, the clock ticks; I move between" (*Collected Poems* 81). She turned to Greek as a way of passing time in bed, and then to Sappho after friends in Italy sent her Quasimodo's *Lirici Greci,* with its parallel Greek texts and Italian translations that showed her, for the first time, the beauty of Sappho's poetic voice. As the months of bed rest ticked by slowly, Barnard concentrated intently on each word choice:

> "Why had she used 'dawn's golden sandals'? Why sandals?" Mary remembers ruminating until she happened to glance at a patch of sunlight sliding across her own carpet. "Of course, that's it!" (Van Cleve 108)

Not only was Barnard's *Sappho* a significant achievement in translation, it also influenced her development as a poet. Although she had experimented with quantitative meter and the "balanced line" before, the work with Sappho showed her a way to integrate that new metric with its ancient origins more thoroughly into a terse and lively poetic voice. Barnard told Anita Helle:

> Some people have written to me that they have been unable to tell early poems from late ones, but I feel that they've become increasingly terse. I was leaning toward this without knowing how to get there before I did the Sappho, but when I did the translating I learned more about the way I wanted to do it. (Helle 190)

Barnard's metrical achievement with Sappho is best illustrated by examples from her translations as she herself scans them. First, a brief fragment where the balanced line equals a single foot:

Tell me

Out of all
mankind, whom
do you love

Better than
you love me? (*Agenda* 66)

The scansion makes it obvious that stress is assigned by the sense of the question, and results in a conversational tone that still retains poetic formality.

In a longer poem Barnard 's scansion clearly shows her application of "balance" within each dimetric line:

For, let her
run, she will / soon run after;
if she won't / accept gifts, she
will one day / give them; and if
she won't love / you --- she soon will
love, although / unwillingly . . . (*Agenda* 67)

The effect, unlike iambic pentameter, is unobtrusive; for the metric serves the sense of the poem rather than vice-versa. The long and/or stressed syllables occur at conversational points of emphasis, or natural pauses for breathing; and the result is that Barnard has translated into English, not just Sappho's sense, but also her sound: the swiftly-moving "speech-cadence" that she was also seeking for her own poetry.

In a delightful little poem on the frustrations of reading Sappho in older English translations, Barnard succinctly describes their limitations,

while creating an instructional example how they differ from Sappho's own style:

Static

I wanted to hear
Sappho's laughter
and the speech of
her stringed shell.

What I heard was
whiskered mumble-
ment of grammarians:

Greek pterodactyls
and Victorian dodos. (*Collected Poems* 64)

Angela Christy's comment on this poem is helpful: "Amusing but not silly. Intelligent but not stuffy. On target and melodious . . . like Sappho" (8). It is also helpful to examine exactly how Barnard goes about achieving this result. The poem has been whittled to perfection; every syllable that remains is necessary. The first stanza moves quickly, with stresses only on Barnard's desire ("I wanted to hear") and the qualities of Sappho's poetry which she admires: "laughter," "speech," and "stringed shell." Then come the translators, the "whiskered . . . grammarians" (shades of Yeats' "Scholars" with their bald heads, shuffling carpet slippers and phlegmy coughs!), and the poem momentarily loses its momentum in slow, multi-syllabic scholarly jargon that does not easily slide off the tongue. The slowness is forced, in part, by the repetition of "m" sounds which create the mumbled static of the scholars.

But, in the hands of a poet, even jargon can become poetry, as Barnard illustrates in the last two lines of "Static." In her hands "Greek pterodactyls" becomes a metaphor loaded with the suggestion that Greek metrics (dactyls)

have something in common with an extinct winged reptile when in the hands of the nineteenth century Greek grammarians whose Sappho translations Barnard found so unappealing.

The image of the dodo, an ungainly flightless bird that became extinct in Victorian times, works at several levels. First is the obvious comparison between it and the also extinct pterodactyl which could, at least, fly when it did exist. There is also the suggestion of a bumbling lack of intelligence which the dodo did not share with the more exotic and ancient pterodactyl. And finally, there is the fact that there are no degrees of extinction; it is fruitless to translate Greek dactyls into Victorian (English) dactyls, they are still as dead as dodos, and cannot carry the sound of "Sappho's laughter."

The poem picks up speed again in these lines, despite the paleontological terminology. Unlike the slow w's and m's and b's of the previous stanza, these consonants (especially k's and t's and d's) roll quickly off the tongue. Barnard's choice of a word with Greek etymology carries the sound of that language with its quickly spoken syllables, just as her phrase "Victorian dodos," with its long 'oo' sounds, is weighted down by our century's somewhat negative judgment of those generations. Finally, I would like to suggest that we *d o* hear Sappho's laughter in this last stanza. There is something intrinsically funny about a flightless bird, and the suggestion that Sappho in Victorian English had been rendered as dead as a pterodactyl surely would have amused her.

I also hear an echo of Sappho's laughter in Barnard's little poem "Eternal She" (*Collected Poems* 70) which celebrates the laying of an egg from the hen's point of view. Set in Ravenna, it suggests the weighty history of western civilization with its references to a "brick tomb" that contains

"certain mosaics," the emperors Justinian and Theodoric, and "roman / lawgiver and barbaric invader." All this is held up in contrast to the simple yet eternal world of the hen with its "warm clover" and the all important "new egg." In the context of the poem it is obvious that the egg is more important than the politically and artistically significant artifacts around her. It is a beautifully succinct political statement, suggested by a story simple enough for a child's picture book, combined with intellectual metaphors of western political history.

The poem called "Carillon" in the *Collected Poems* was originally published in Barnard's 1952 pamphlet, *A Few Poems,* under the title "Dick." The title change is insignificant, serving to slightly universalize the occasion it describes. But "Carillon" remains an intimate poem, with its memory of a "honey-tongued" hour that will ". . . echo / in the stroke of all hours forever" (*Collected Poems* 41); and it is a good example of Barnard's concern for the integration of poetic sound, sense, and effect in a seamless artifact which Sappho would have appreciated. Since it was written before Barnard began the Sappho translation[11] it also serves as an example of her long-standing concern for melopoeia, subtlety, and directness which eventually attracted her to Sappho's poetry; and it is an example of her "occasional use of balanced dimeters" in her verse.

Almost all its 14 lines are divided by punctuation, naturally creating the dimetrical line that is the basis for her variety of balanced feet. In the few lines where punctuation is not present, the sound and sense of the line work together to create a natural caesura that delineates two feet in each line. In the first stanza, for example:

[11] In a letter dated May 14, 1992 Barnard noted: ". . . you will have to omit any influence of Sappho on this poem—it was written several years before I started the Sappho."

> In the morning, / early, sitting
> eating our loaves / on weedgrown milestones
> at the edge of the city, / we hear the bells
> swinging, / challenging the attentive air.

each line is enjambed so that the pauses illustrated above approximate dimeters. In the final, longer phrase, "challenging the attentive air," we experience the fading of the bells' sound into that silence, just as the sound of the unaccented "air" fades from the lips. At the same time, the pace of the stanza is matched to the action. The restful couple breakfasting on bread is described in measured phrases that require full stops between each word: "early, sitting / eating. . . ." The repeated vowel tones (morning, early, sitting, eating) are noticeably slower-paced than those describing the action of the bells. The long, slow first syllable of "swinging" is quickly finished up by its rhyming echo: "ing;" and "challenging" with its quick middle syllable and echoing "-ing", gallops across the page rather than plodding as do "sitting" and "eating." The repetition of "ing" sounds throughout the poem recreates the sound of the remembered bells; so that we do not just hear about them, we actually hear "the four-leaved pattern or a quarter hour" echo in the rhythm of the poem.

Of course, elapsed time is a part of the theme of the poem as well as being a physical characteristic. It begins with the morning bells and ends at twilight, when the same bells now toll as in memory of the day that has passed in the interim. There is a holistic attitude to time in this poem which describes the process by which the future becomes the past, which is remembered in the present as it was in that future past, and will be remembered into future futures.

Bringing the mythological sphinx into the poem universalizes it by extending a bit of personal history back into ancient times when Oedipus first solved the riddle of mankind: "What creature with one voice walks on four legs in the morning, on two at noon, and on three in the evening?" (Avery 1028). That riddle, too, had its origins in the passage of time in a human life. But this present "conundrum" is answered by the bells themselves which will go on stimulating her memory of what the day brought, even as they first stimulated that question:

> . . . oh what
> will the day bring? What, when the bells
> ring evening, will we remember?
> Of hours and quarter hours, which
> will be honey-tongued? Which echo
> in the stroke of all hours forever?

then becomes at the end of the poem:

> . . . Remember?
> Remember wondering: oh what will the day bring?

Time has become a web where the announcement of the present moment will be forever bound to a memory of the past.

It is significant that the poem does not answer the question of the "sphinx in the bell tower;" we never know exactly which hour or quarter hour is honey-tongued. It is tempting to suggest that it is, perhaps, the only hour described in detail: the breakfast of plain bread enjoyed at the beginning of the poem. It may also be the hour of remembering that can happen at any time. But, we do not know for certain; and we do not mind. "Honey-tongued" (with its suggestion of the sweet sound made by the bell's clapper every hour and quarter-hour) embraces any possibility we care to imagine.

Such subtlety is the key to Sappho's art; it is a characteristic Barnard shares with her.

There are four groups of poems in the *Collected Poems* that are arranged specifically to illustrate temporal changes. The two that deal with landscapes, "The River Under Different Lights" and "Journey" were discussed earlier in this chapter. The other two were composed after her *Sappho,* and may have been influenced by that translation work. In these more recent groupings, Barnard's interest in nature has shifted rather drastically from temporal beauty to the stark reality of human decay brought about by time.

"Two Visits" (*Collected Poems* 44-45) deal with her last two meetings with Ezra Pound: in 1961 at Martinsbrunn, and in 1964 at Sant' Ambrogio. The earlier poem describes ". . . an old old shaman" whose ". . . masks have all slipped off / except a death-mask stark / as marble." He seems to look at her out of his own past rather than his present. Suggestions of death are present in her attention to the "bone," "skull," and "jaws" of her subject, but these images of death are contradicted by his warm hands and sharp eyes. In contrast to this picture of a man on the brink of death, the image of Pound in the second poem is of his ". . . firm old feet, soft-shod. . . " steadily "climbing the wet stones of the *salita*." He is alive and lively, albeit in a very different sphere from T. S. Eliot, who had just been awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by Lyndon Johnson (hence ". . . the drumroll from overseas" for "Possum"). But he looks at her distantly, and the reader knows that Barnard is acutely aware that their relationship will be altered by death in the near future.

The final group of poems is called "Later: Four Fragments." (*Collected Poems* 57) Each fragment consists of five short lines that meditate on different

effects of time. The brevity of each line, directness of the images, and the term "fragment" to describe the poems all indicate the influence of Barnard's translation work on this composition. In the first fragment the setting sun's long shadows create "hillock and hollow / in what were / noon's flat meadows." This pleasant image is followed by a defiant protest:

> Don't let them tell you
> it will all come right
> in the end. It won't.
> It won't. It won't. Never."

The reason given is that "Death is always the end." This cry of despair is expanded upon in the third fragment which notes that "Once the sea flowed before us / as far as the Four Quarters;" but now ". . . it narrows / to a ribbon track behind." Both time and choices run out, even as the tide does. The fourth fragment offers a thin bit of comfort in the form of "memory" that ". . . come[s] clear / only between sleeping and waking."

This poem is similar to "Now" in its unflinching look at time's effects on the human body and spirit. But "Later: Four Fragments" contains a bitterness that does not appear in "Now," with its refusal to act on the intellectual temptation of suicide. There, the final response, "not yet," (*Collected Poems* 85) makes it clear that any future suffering is still worth gambling on the present moment. Here, in "Later: Four Fragments," the inescapability of death seems to overwhelm the present, just as "the dams have drowned / the rapids . . . " In this final fragment, time has lost its holistic complexity, and what is mourned is the eventual absence of time itself. It is a very Greek attitude, one which the poem shares with one of Barnard's Sappho translations:

We know this much

Death is an evil;
we have the gods'
word for it, they too

would die if death
were a good thing. (*Sappho: A New Translation* 87)

Barnard, like Sappho is unflinching; she examines the ugly side of human life as well as the beautiful, and is able to create poetry out of both. To paraphrase another of her translations, she "prod[s] the / beach rubble" without squeamishness (*Sappho: A New Translation* 84).

Another type of rubble is prodded in "A Picture of the Moon," which mourns the death of lunar mythology, brought about by human exploration of the moon, in particular by photography that ". . . has laid a waste / of sand over the last outpost" (*Collected Poems* 90). Our scientific knowledge of the moon disallows the ". . . Chinese magicians / swinging in space on silken belts," Heng O, the Chinese goddess of the moon, and the image of the Pleiades as "Her dancers in their rainbow silks." A rich mythological history has been traded for moon rocks and widely-distributed photographs of lunar dust and rocks.[12]

The simplicity of the language disguises a complex pattern of rhyming vowels that still sounds like spontaneous speech. The effectiveness of the poem is dependent on that sound, as it is a deeply felt elegy for centuries of folktale and myth related to the moon. Mournfulness is reflected in the long vowel sounds that are emphasized by frequent use of assonance: "photography has laid a waste / of sand over the last outpost."

[12] In a letter dated May 14, 1992, Barnard told me: "It was written before the moon-landings. I rather think that is important. With the landings a new myth began."

Barnard herself told Anita Helle that "A Picture of the Moon" was "written almost entirely by ear" (Helle 192); and her ear is one that has always been fine-tuned to the tonal effect of vowels. Linguists have long agreed that vowel sounds form the melodic basis of spoken language, and that the placement of accented vowels decides the rhythm and melody of a particular phrase.[13] So it is natural that an aural poet like Barnard will work with vowels to achieve her desired melodic effect.

This is not to say that Barnard ignores the effect of consonants. In this poem there is a striking example of alliteration, and several other places where internal consonants are repeated to powerful effect. The slow, mournful first and last stanzas of "A Picture of the Moon" are ponderous bookends to images of the delightful, lost mythological world described in the middle two stanzas. The sound of repeated "s's" in ". . . Chinese magicians / swinging in space on silken belts" reinforces the action described, and lends it a sense of quickness. These lines slide off the tongue because of the alliteration as well as the fact that the accented vowels are short, not long. In contrast to this, the repetition of "w's" in the fourth stanza slows the sound in a way that the alliterative use of "t's" in the continuing references to mythology (Tiger, Cassia Tree, Toad of Time) cannot overcome. In the last line there is a sense of finality of sound as well as image: "All now are lunar dust."

The "forty versions" (*Assault on Mount Helicon* 283) that each of the Sappho poems went through as Barnard worked on her translations comprised an intense period of technical experimentation, and by that process, Barnard says

[13] See, for example, Henry Lanz's *The Physical Basis of Rime*, in which he states: "Accented vowels, musical tone-clusters, are the chief factor in rime: the return to the same vowel at the end of a rhythmical series makes a musical phrase of that series. The consonants and the unaccented vowels are of secondary importance; they may or may not be identical." (103)

she "more or less found [her] own line," (Helle 192) with its principle of balance and variation which she uses to unique poetic effect in her later poems.

Two poems, both superficially domestic scenes, will illustrate her recent application of this principle. "Real Estate" describes encroaching suburbia, where

> . . . The fields
> that lately pastured mules
> have now become "homesites"
> with "riverviews" . . . (*Collected Poems* 80)

But, just as the "for sale" sign is concealed by tall grasses and "rank flowering weeds," the simple pastoral quality of the poem conceals several layers of meaning. On the surface it is a poem about urban sprawl, encroaching materialism, and changing values; for obviously, a homesite with a riverview is too valuable to be left to mules. (Although mules might have grazed down the tall grasses that obscure the "for sale" sign on the property.) Thus, even the idyllic surface of the field is not what it seems. Already the absence of mules has changed the meaning of the landscape.

The other insidious change is even more concealed: the ". . . wires laid underground," carrying electrical and communications cable, have paved the way for anticipated development. The pastoral beauty of the scene, ". . . rich in clover, lupine, / vetch—rank flowering weeds / fragrant and peaceful, rustling" carries the seeds of its own destruction; the underground wires are like detonation cables connecting the explosive to a remote switch waiting to be flipped.

As usual, we are carefully placed in time. In this case the current "late May" is juxtaposed against earlier seasons when mules roamed the pastures

that are now advertised as homesites to promote a particular vision of the future. Thus, the present is viewed against the past and a possible future, in a manner that stresses the reality of continuous change, rather than one ephemeral moment.

The lines of "Real Estate" are short, but all enjambed so that pauses occur at varied intervals determined by the sense of the poem. Most of the lines are dimetrical, easily divided into short phrases separated by brief pauses in phrasing too insignificant to be called caesuras:

> In late May / the grasses
> are so tall / their plumy
> waving tops / conceal
> a sign saying / FOR SALE

Almost all the lines contain three beats which vary in placement even as the pauses vary. This has the double effect of speeding up the sense of the poem while slowing down its sound. Since the pauses come in the middle of a line the reader hurries on to the next line to complete each phrase, and then finds another leisurely pause at which to contemplate the completed image before beginning the next enjambed phrase. The few spondees in the poem are carefully placed for emphasis on key facts and images: "late May," "FOR SALE," "homesites."

In "Ceremony" the lines are even shorter than in "Real Estate," consisting mostly of three or four words each. The poem begins like anthropological notes on a religious ceremony that makes use of polished coconut shell cups to hold a sacred drink. It exhibits the same simplicity and respect for the ceremony it describes as seem to be inherent in that ceremony. We are told bare facts about it, with no sociological interpretation or

theological analysis; the description of the treatment of the cups is its own analysis:

> . . . they were
>
> never placed upon
> the floor itself,
> but on bark cloth
>
> laid before priest
> or server; never
> where one might by
>
> stepping over
> desecrate them. (*Collected Poems* 67)

The very brief lines give the appearance of fragments, but the fragments have been carefully collected and placed to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its scholarly notes on some primitive religious ceremony.

The final stanza of this poem gives it both weight and mirth as Barnard concludes

> I like to think of these cups,
> mornings, picking up
> the beer cans on the lawn.

Although still brief, these lines contain significantly more words and syllables than those in the previous stanzas. The tone of the poem has changed from scholarly dispassion to personal disclosure, and the poet allows herself to relax into six and seven syllable lines in response to the cultural shift from sacred cups of polished coconut shell to aluminum beer cans.

She does not tell us specifically *what* she thinks about the beer cans or the coconut shells; the shape and tone of the poem offers one clue, and the following paragraph from her essay "To Make the God's Laugh" in *The*

Mythmakers provides another:

> Fermented beverages . . . can only have been discovered accidentally. The various methods of brewing were afterwards adapted to ceremonial uses, sometimes even restricted to ceremonial use. When the whole tribe drinks to a point of stupefaction on New Year's Eve, religious reasons may be given for the debauch, but they should not delude us into thinking that all the drinkers are drinking out of a sense of duty, to make magic. Most of them are drinking for the same reason people have always drunk. Their tradition only tells them when to get drunk. (53)

The beer drinkers, too have a tradition that tells them when to get drunk (Friday and Saturday nights, perhaps), and they are drinking for the same reason that their ancestors did: for the pleasure of it. Barnard is not passing judgment on these latter day drinkers; she is placing them into an ancient and universal tradition, and, perhaps, making note of the changes in the ceremony associated with it.

The importance of Barnard's line must be determined not only by its roots in Greek meter, but also by its place in the development of contemporary poetry. Like her immediate forebears and contemporaries in the free verse movement, Barnard strives, in part, to broaden the range of poetic subject matter and to find a more natural diction for her verse. (Steele 292) For Barnard, the first goal was assisted by the accident of her grounding in the Pacific northwest, the second goal was the object of her quest for the ". . . spare but musical . . . sound of the speaking voice" that attracted her to Sappho in the first place. Translating that voice into English helped Barnard understand how, in her own words,

> a poem in English could be only three or four lines long, and that lines could still be metrical and yet consist of only a few syllables. (personal correspondence, May 14, 1992)

Within the confines of her own metric, the balanced line, Barnard has aided modern poetry's quest after the third goal of the free verse movement: the discovery of a new metric. In his study of modern poetry's revolt against meter, Timothy Steele mourns the failure of most free verse to do just that:

> An assessment of free verse may now be called for. The medium has been around for a little over a century. Its original practitioners hoped to broaden poetry's range of subject matter, to make the diction of verse more natural, and to discover a new metric. The last of these hopes has been conclusively disappointed. (292)

Steele had earlier insisted that "metrical systems, like languages themselves, come into being gradually . . . because they suit, to varying degrees, patterns of speech" (288). Barnard's metric, developed gradually over the course of her seventy year journey in poetry-making, is the result of her conscious sensitivity to this relationship between metrics and speech. She would be the first to disclaim its suitability for all poets; but it has served her well, and therefore, has served well the purpose of poetry in our time.

Like Timothy Steele, James Anderson Winn has pointed out contemporary poetry's need for the discipline of form. This should not be confused with a return to rhyme and traditional metrics; it is, rather,

> . . . the need for formal innovation, for new principles of construction which can help poets shape, order, and control the expression which is their high calling. (Winn 346)

Barnard, who began her quest for formal innovation over seventy years ago, made the "balance and variety" of her poetic line an instrumental principle in the evolution of her own response to that high calling.

Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

In 1937, after returning to Vancouver from her first trip to New York, Mary Barnard embarked on a quite different adventure: her first (and only) back country hiking trip, an expedition into the Canadian Rockies with two other young women. They followed the Frazer River north to British Columbia and then, as she describes in her memoir:

> [we] hiked out from there into the steepest mountains I had ever seen: there was only enough slope on one side to allow an overhang on the other. When we sat down on a trail to rest, we had to prop ourselves to keep from sliding to the bottom . . . One night we slept on a narrow foot-bridge, head to toe, because the only other level ground had once served as a horse corral. . . . It was an experience that produced a number of poems eventually. (*Assault on Mount Helicon* 111-112)

One of the poems inspired by the experience is "Fable from the Cayoosh Country,[14]" published in her 1940 collection, *Cool Country,* which I discussed in Chapter 3. Another could be "Height Is the Distance Down," which appeared in the pamphlet *A Few Poems* published in 1952.[15] (*A Few Poems* contains a dozen of the poems Barnard had written between 1940 and 1952.) Despite the fact they may spring from similar experiences, their

[14] see my discussion of "Fable from the Cayoosh Country" in chapter two of this study

[15] Actually, Barnard says '"Height is the Distance Down" is not a recollection from the hiking trip. . . . In "Height" the image came from a climb high above timberline on Mount St. Helens before she blew her top off. Much higher than we got in British Columbia." (personal correspondence, May 10, 1992)

differences are more remarkable than their similarities. "Height Is the Distance Down" is less a travel poem than "Fable from the Cayoosh Country," and it is far from a fable. It is, on the surface, a meditation on the experience of intimacy with a mountain.

The possibility that Barnard was farther in time from the experience when she wrote it may account for its more general approach. It could be any mountain on any continent; what matters more than location (which is emphasized in "Fable from the Cayoosh Country" by the title) is the effect of climbing at great height.

The act of climbing the mountain brings it to life; and in the poem it is described as an active, although untrustworthy beast: ". . . a gesture of earth," "disturber of the unseen," "provoker of the gusts, " with its "resisting shoulder unopposed lurch[ing] / west. . . ." (*Collected Poems* 52) "Its discolored snowfields overhang half the world" like a shaggy mane hanging in some creature's eyes. In the face of this visceral mountain, the human climbing it feels powerless. She is a "blood-weighted body" being sucked, spun and swung about as she is "struggling against destruction" from the gusts which threaten to blow her over the narrow trail.

The short middle stanza is a wrenchingly accurate description of vertigo, clinical despite the poetry:

> On a knife rim edge-up into whirlpools of sky,
> feet are no anchor. Gravity sucks at the mind
> spinning the blood-weighted body head downward.

A preponderance of multi-syllabic words and stresses weigh down its third line like the gravity it describes; and the combination of "b" and "d" sounds work to slow it down. Coming as they do at the end of five important words, the d's force dramatic pauses between each: "blood-weighted body

head downward." The final word, "downward," beginning and ending with that repeated "d" lends a sense of speed, as if the line itself is beginning the downward spiral it describes. The total effect is one of imaginary action seen in slow motion which makes it more realistic, and all the more frightening because it is on the verge of becoming reality.

Near the end of the poem "the wind fails" and the unsuspecting climber suddenly loses her balance and "lurches west" toward the abyss with its "innocent still air, as steep, as deep." The climber is continually off balance, and the struggle to climb is complicated by these capricious winds as well as the steep ascent and the vertigo they induce.

The inverted definition of height in the title of the poem is a subtle preparation for the question asked in the first two lines: "What difference what mountain / it is?" Most of us would define height as "the distance up;" and from that perspective it is enough to know the mountain's shape from the ground. Any mountain can become "a known profile / on the day's horizon" much as Mount Hood has been for Mary Barnard. Those of us who dwell below its peak may think we know a mountain, but this poem is ample proof of that illusion. What we can know from the base has little to do with the reality of climbing any mountain. Only the struggle is the same from one slope to another.

The title of Barnard's memoir suggests that this poem can also be read as an extended metaphor for the poet's work. The phrase *Assault on Mount Helicon* is taken from one of Pound's letters to Mary Barnard in which he responded to her comment that she disliked doing the translation he had recommended to her as an exercise in poetic development by noting: "You hate translation??? What of it?? Expect to be carried up Mt. Helicon in an

easy chair?" (*Assault on Mount Helicon* 56) Just as the memoir is a detailed record of Barnard's personal assault on Mount Helicon, the poem can be read as a meditation on its similarity to any assault on any mountain: "What difference what mountain / it is?" Strenuous work of any kind (intellectual, physical, creative, and/or spiritual) requires the same ongoing labor described in this poem, and has its own inherent dangers and pitfalls.

Intellectual knowledge of poetry is different from the actual effort of composing just as the knowledge of geography differs from the climbing experience, when the mountain takes on life and becomes "a gesture of earth / swinging us above falling spaces, above / a map of the world." On a mountain trail, a geographic map of the world below is irrelevant, and may lead to the poem's rhetorical question: "What's geography?"

While "Height Is the Distance Down" is a free verse poem, it is not without metrical discipline. Its lines can be scanned as trimetrical phrases, each phrase containing at least one beat, and most lines containing a total of five beats. The few four-beat lines are followed by six-beat lines which balance them; and all three stanzas conclude with six-beat lines. The final stanza, for example, scans like this:

> The mountain / that had become / a known profile
> on the day's horizon / is a gesture / of earth
> swinging us / above falling spaces, / above
> a map of the world. / Disturber / of the unseen,
> provoker / of the gusts / in which we bend
> struggling / against destruction / gaping eastward.
> The wind fails. / The breath held. / The illusion of death.
> The resisting shoulder / unopposed / lurches
> west / in innocent still air, / as steep, as deep.

The internal rhyme is unobtrusive, but fundamental to the melody of the poem. In the line that includes "The breath held. The illusion of death"

Barnard insures subtlety by placing the rhyming words at opposite ends of their phrases. But, at the end of the poem, where artistic and emotional closure are desired, she reverts to satisfying iambs and perfect rhyme: "as steep, as deep." Note too, in the stressed syllables above, how frequently the same vowel tone carries the beat in a line: o's in the first line of the stanza, e's in the last, for example. In other lines there is a heavier texture of assonance created by an internal *a-b* tonic rhyme scheme:

struggling against destruction gaping eastward.

Most importantly, none of these fine details of craftsmanship overwhelm the simplicity of the poem itself. Spoken aloud, it has the authenticity of a particular, articulate voice sharing the wisdom imparted by a significant experience. "What difference what mountain / it is?" could have been overheard on a city bus. Barnard has a talent for recognizing the music in ordinary speech and giving it back to us as poetry that is still recognizable as the speaking voice she loves.

Superficially, "Height Is the Distance Down" is an adventure poem. At least, it was probably inspired by a trip. But on the level of metaphor, it describes the adventure of her life's "assault on Mount Helicon." Another stimulating aspect of that poetic adventure may well be the intellectual one into which Sappho originally lured her: the origins of myth. It thus seems appropriate to conclude this study with an analysis of one of the specific poems inspired by that adventure.

"The Pleiades" is included in *Collected Poems,* in the section where the bulk of Barnard's mythological themes are gathered. Later, she incorporated it into her book-length essay in verse, *Time and the White Tigress*. In the former it stands alone as a lyrical meditation on the varieties

and similarities of personification assigned to the constellation by different cultures and ages; the latter places it at the center of a discussion of the effect of the imperfect lunar calendar (the title of the section in which it appears is "Time Slips a Cog") on the myths that developed from it.

She first explains early man's focus on the night sky;

> Out of the east the days march in single file,
> all without name or number. From dawn to dark
> today looks much like yesterday or tomorrow.
> The night sky differs, marked by the moon's quick changes
> from new to full to dark and back to new.
> Nights will be named before days. . . . (*Time and the White Tigress* 15)

and then goes on to discuss his observation that the vernal and autumnal equinoxes ("These moons seemed always to linger, held at the full / longer than others . . . (16)) were marked by the rising of the Pleiades:

> The Pleiades, stars of the Bull constellation
> joyously danced the New Year in,
> dancing at dawn with the full moon of spring,
> dancing at dusk with the full moon of autumn.
>
> *Their* legends, too, are beyond counting. (17)

The poem that follows this introduction is both instructive and narrative, combining a wealth of variations on the Pleiades myth with a simple story line: seven stars (or star maidens) descend singing from the spring sky at dusk, to the shore of a lake. They bathe, wash their clothes, and then ascend, their song fading away with the moon at dawn.

Barnard refers to several of the constellation's personifications: "a choir of seven / shining voices" (as they are in Australian aborigine, Kiowa and Wyandot Indian mythology); "a flock of wild swans" (from the Greek story of the Pleiades pursuit by Orion, and the Chinese story of the Swan Maiden); "seven / stars reflected among the reeds;" and "daughters of the

moon." (In Thai tradition, the Pleiades are seven sisters called the Krittikas. The birthday of the god, Karrtikeya, to whom the Krittikas were foster mothers, is celebrated during the month when the Krittikas rise with the full moon and follow it across the night sky, not setting until the dawn.)[16]

When the Pleiades come down from the sky, singing, "to bathe or wash their summer dresses" Barnard is knitting together the Thai story of the Krittikas with other star maiden stories. She says in *The Mythmakers:* "When seven unidentified star girls are said to visit the earth once a year to bathe or wash their summer dresses, I hear an echo of the Pleiades myth" (130). Their "rainbow colors" and "feather mantles" also suggests a Cherokee star myth in which seven brothers are transformed into stars by the moon, and commanded to do a feather dance over the council house for ten days each year. In the Cherokee feather dance done in honor of the Pleiades, each dancer holds in his hand seven eagle feathers of different colors (122-123).

Later in the same essay Barnard mentions "the California Indian story of the seven girls who rose into the sky on eagle-down ropes, to remain there as the Pleiades" (131). In her poem this is suggested by the "feather / mantles they can lift in sea winds // raised by their singing, and so rise / flying, soaring. . . ." Barnard has braided together unique elements from various stories to create a story that, despite its anthropological complexity, remains simple. In a sort of lyrical shorthand, the poem illustrates the interconnections among the myths that Barnard discusses in her scholarly essays on the same theme.

[16] Barnard's essays, "Grandfather Pleiades" pp. 90-96, and "The Dancing Stars" pp. 119-132, in her book, *The Mythmakers* , contain these and many other details of her wide-ranging study of Pleiades stories, and serve well as footnotes to this poem.

The melody of this lyric is both subtle and natural, making extensive use of internal rhyme, assonance, and repetition in the creation of a speaking voice of formal beauty without affectation. In the first sentence, the assonance of "choir" and "voices" creates two balanced phrases ('They are heard as a choir', and 'of seven shining voices') that measure out the line. At the same time, the 's' alliteration that occurs throughout the poem is begun with the "seven / shining voices" that "descend / like a flock of wild swans to the water. The less obvious repetition of 'w' sounds at the end of the first stanza is nevertheless important, for it is picked up and developed in the first line of the second stanza, thus tying it together with the introductory stanza in sound as well as image.

Word choice and placement are vital to the sense and sound of the poem. For example, the iambic flow of the final stanza ("What girl or star sings now") means that a stress falls on "now," emphasizing the present moment rather than the act of singing, or the metaphor of singing "like a swan," both which would have occurred if the more common word order (What girl or star now sings) had been used. The emphasis on "now" also sets up a resonance that is satisfactorily echoed by the 'w' in "swan" and the diphthong in "yellow."

There is a complex juxtaposition between the relatively short, three and four-beat lines, and the longer phrases defined by punctuation. The ear, listening for the pauses that create meaning, hears smooth, five-beat phrases that recall iambic pentameter. For example, in the first stanza:

> They are heard as a choir of seven
> shining voices; they descend
> like a flock of wild swans to the water.

is heard as: They are heard as a choir of seven shining voices; // They descend like a flock of wild swans to the water.

Each of the first three stanzas, which introduce various incarnations of the Pleiades, is composed of a single, complete sentence. But the next sentence in the poem, which is a run-on description of their ascension, is three stanzas long. This contributes to the suggestion of long, slow, graceful action by the Pleiades (in their guise as girls, swans, or stars), and the gradual fading of their song from earth:

> . . . they wear feather
> mantles they can lift in sea winds
>
> raised by their singing, and so rise
> flying, soaring, until they fade
> as the moon dawns; their voices dwindle
>
> and die out in the North Woods, over
> Australian bush, from Spartan
> dancing grounds and African beaches.

The fading song is also hinted at by the fact that, after they "fade," not one of of the lines in this section of the poem ends with a stressed syllable. Each line fades musically, just as the song of the Pleiades fades.

The geographic places named recall the settings of different Pleiades myths that Barnard has incorporated in her poem: the Iroquois and Cherokee of the North American woodlands, the Australian aborigines' singing girls, the classical Greek myth, and the Moroccan dancing maidens, the Yellow River of the Chinese swan maiden folktale. Every word and image in this poem is weighted with scholarship; it is proof of Barnard's poetic accomplishment that "The Pleiades" still soars above the need for footnotes to succeed as a lyric poem.

Interestingly, the only one of the seven Pleiades named in the poem is Electra, the one called "dark-faced" by the Greeks. In her grief over the fall of Troy, which she predicted (and which had been founded by her son with Zeus, Dardaneus) (Avery 903), Electra hid her face. Thus, only six Pleiades are visible to the naked eye. But now "Electra's weeping over Troy is stilled;" an ominous statement to make about a god who cannot die, especially when it is immediately preceded by the fact that the Pleiades ". . . have returned to the sky / for the last time." Barnard's poem not only celebrates the richness of Pleiades mythology, it also mourns its death in the modern world. For, as the Pleiades leave the earth, their song dies out, even in the places of its origin.

Like "A Picture of the Moon," which immediately follows "The Pleiades" in the *Collected Poems*, this poem celebrates and mourns what we have lost to science as it eliminates humankind's need for mythological interpretations of natural phenomena. The loss of symbolic rituals which flow from those interpretations, celebrating and lending a sense of human control to mysteries such as the phases of the moon and the movement of the stars, is a tragedy. Our intuitive, poetic nature is diminished, even as rational, scientific knowledge fills the void; for, with the mysteries go the stories, eventually. Thus Barnard ends the poem with a question ("What girl or star sings now / like a swan on the Yellow River?") that echoes Prufrock's hopeless longing for the mermaids' song: "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each. // I do not think that they will sing to me." (ll. 124-125)

Barnard's question carries the necessity of a response that Prufrock's statement does not. And therein lies the optimism that is missing from Eliot's poem: her open ended question allows for more than one possible

answer. The poem itself is witness to the fact that at least one poet (it would be stretching things to say "girl") still sings the song of the Pleiades. Even if the Pleiades are no longer celebrated as singing or dancing stars reflected on China's Yellow River, the myth lives on as long as the poets sing of it.

By virtue of her enduring loyalty to the sound of human speech as it reverberates in metrical poetry, Mary Barnard has forged a unique path through the free verse movement. From her poetic vantage point one can see clearly all the way from its roots in Sappho and Homer, through the special influence of Pound and the Imagists, forward towards the original goal of free verse to create a new metric that would liberate poetry from the stale confines of nineteenth century sound and subject matter. But Barnard's most lasting gift to us all is her art, timeless in its loyalty to time and place; melodic, intellectual, and witty in its recognition of the power of language to sing, communicate, and stimulate; optimistic and democratic in its belief that poetry continues to move us all to dance and laugh and sing.

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