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"She *would* write about forest fires at a time like this!"
– Mary Barnard at the Lockwood Memorial Library,
University of Buffalo, September 1939

If we were take Ezra Pound's word for it, one might not think that his protégé Mary Barnard (1909–2001) had much interest in the social role of poetry. As Barnard recalled in her literary memoir, *Assault on Mount Helicon* (1984), Pound once chided her for "sitting up on the fifth floor at Minetta St. taking no interest in the world . . . and never going to see anybody" (276).[1] This was, of course, an exaggeration; if we consider the Barnard archive at the Beinecke library, there is ample evidence of a heady social, literary, and working metropolitan life that Barnard was fashioning among other late moderns in Manhattan, as I am exploring in my current book project.[2]

And yet Pound's castigation contains a grain of truth; shy in personality, Barnard also shied away from writing what she called poetry with "political implications" (*Assault* 123) At times it seemed as if Barnard had no hunger for a readership beyond the modernist mentors she so admired. "If I have my way, we'll circulate things privately," she told William Carlos Williams, shortly after returning to the northwest in 1951 to recover from a serious bout of illness that had hospitalized her in New York; "no reviews, no bookstore sales, no advertising" (Letter to Williams, undated)—his "good opinion" mattered more to her "than a dozen ecstatic reviews" (Letter to Williams, 22 Dec. 1959). For all the social renovation we might claim for Williams's poetry, he too at times espoused a kind of detached, art-for-art's-sake goal for his poetry. In 1932, four years before he was to meet with Barnard for the first time in a Greenwich Village Italian restaurant, he wrote to Kay Boyle that "poetry . . . is related to poetry

and not to socialism, communism or anything else that tries to swallow it" (Williams, *Selected Letters* 131).

But do these kinds of cultivated detachments from some of "the tangle or complex of the inrooted ideas of any period," to quote Pound's sense of "paideuma," mean that such poets take "no interest in the world"? I don't think so. By way of example, I would like to examine a previously unpublished poem that I am preparing for inclusion in a volume of Mary Barnard's *Complete Poems*. On the surface, Barnard's "Fire" may not seem socially engaged or to have political interests. Yet a reading of the poem's various drafts, in dialogue with Barnard's own accounts of her early days as the first Poetry Curator of the Lockwood Memorial Library at Buffalo where "[a]ll the books that come into review are about the state of the world," shows a poet actively thinking through the social possibilities of poetry in light of the dramatic events unfolding in Europe in September 1939 (Letter to her parents, 25 Oct. 1939).[3]

The poem in question exists in three drafts. Here is what I am taking to be the final version—the shortest version—that not only reflects the kind of Imagist paring-down Barnard was perfecting at the time under the guidance of Pound and Williams (see Barnsley), but is also what I am assuming to be the most finished since Barnard's notebooks indicate that it was sent to the *New Yorker* on 20 April 1940:

Fire

The sea breaking flat
Where smoke makes a bitter darkness—
Cold, finishes with a fine sound

The beach and its rock benches.
A cougar pads on the sand.
A child cries, and the deer
Are near them under dropping ash.

All other smells are blotted in nostrils
Burned by hell's black noon wind.

They shall lie down together.[4]

At first glance, this spare poem does not seem to offer much by way of social commentary; indeed, if we did not know that it was sent to the *New Yorker* in the spring of 1940, one would be hard pushed to locate this poem in time and place other than to say it is in free verse, bears the influence of Imagism and includes an animal native to the Americas. There are no geographical locators other than the generic "The sea," "The beach" and "the sand"; there is no central persona on whom to focus other than three living beings distanced from us either by the indefinite article ("A cougar," "A child") or by being located at one remove from the scene (via "the deer / Are near them"—not with them, in the first instance; or via the metonymy of "nostrils," unassigned to any particular being); and there is no clear temporality in which to imagine the beach picture offered—stanza one presents a "bitter darkness," stanza four speaks symbolically of "hell's black *noon* wind" (italics mine) and the final one-line stanza suggests nightfall in the collective lying-down, we suppose, of the cougar, the child, and the deer to sleep.

And yet, like so many of Barnard's late Imagist work of this period, there is something compelling about this poem, which, like the sea it presents, utilizes a peculiar flatness or coldness of tone to achieve a "fine" effect of the immediate present. The poem does not historicize; it is almost entirely in the present tense, gesturing both towards the Poundian "emotional and intellectual complex in an instant of time" (Pound 200) and towards us as readers, inviting us into a highly sensory scene in the present moment—the visual present of "smoke makes a bitter darkness" where a "cougar pads on the sand"; the aural present of the sea, which "finishes [its breaking] with a fine sound" as "A child cries"; and the bodily present where "All other smells are blotted in nostrils," a darkness experienced as "bitter" and "Cold."

Reading closer, this immediate present enacts some unsettling estrangements. "The sea breaking flat" is an odd image, for we associate breaking water with anything but flatness. So, too, the treatment of the smoke; the uneasy grammar of the first stanza (and its lack of a central finite verb) makes it possible to read "smoke" as the referent for that which is "Cold." And again, this is unsettling, since one would usually associate smoke with the fire of the poem's title and thus warmth. Then there is the disconcerting grammar and

punctuation as the poem moves from stanza one to stanza two. Did Barnard mean to write "Cold, finishes with a fine sound" as a kind of sensory summary of the first two lines, as indicated by the two dashes? Is it the smoke that "finishes with a fine sound" as its sizzle and burn peter out? If so, where is the end-stop in a poem that otherwise makes full and frequent use of them, brings each image to a firm and complete end? Or, knowing Barnard as formidable a practitioner of exactitude as one of her other New York modernist mentors, Marianne Moore, do we simply accept what is on the page and parse it thus: the sea breaks, is cold, and it "finishes with a fine sound / The beach and its rock benches"? This reading makes the verbless "The beach and its rock benches" make sense within the poem; they are not the subject (of the next stanza) but the *object* (of the first stanza), the object of the sea that is breaking and finishes its breaking over them. It is as "fine" and as subtle a gesture of a "flat" sea as the "fine sound" that it generates.

These estrangements come to a head in a final line that invites us to read this poem as a late Imagist war poem. "They shall lie down *together*" (italics mine) is not what we would expect a cougar, a child, and deer to do. Cut loose from the poem by the stanza break, the line cuts loose from expectation. It is a terrifically simple yet moving line; it implies both a taking-cover (from the particular—the "dropping ash"; and from the symbolic—from "hell's black noon wind") but also a unity of spirit (not just in the coming "together" but in the use of the only personal pronoun of the poem, "They," which counters the distancing effect of the indefinite articles attached to the child and the cougar earlier). "Shall," in particular, stands out. Not only does it shift the temporality of the poem from the immediate present to the future, its tonality is one of certainty and assertion—defiance even. Beyond the imagistic description, the speaker forwards a course of action for the child, the cougar, and the deer in the face of inexplicable destruction. There is a sense of an end to things expressed by the idea of a sea that "finishes," the extinction of "all other smells" except "dropping ash," the heavy use of end-stops in a small amount of space. The poem could almost be a fable.[5]

As a scholar committed to close reading of poetry in dialogue with the archive, the kinds of letters Barnard was writing to her parents at

the time of production are crucial and their consideration substantiates a case for reading "Fire" as a late Imagist war poem, particularly one through which American anxieties about World War II are filtered. Newly arrived in Buffalo to take up her post as Poetry Curator, Barnard's dutiful accounts of her settling-in are distinctly unsettling. Her letters home combine reports of the mundanities of preparing for a new job and setting up home with reports of her learning about events unfolding in Europe—reminding us, possibly, of the combination of the "flat" tone of "Fire" juxtaposed with images that suggest great disturbance. On Labor Day 1939 she told her parents that "Saturday I was even more upset about the war situation, but went downtown + shopped—got my glasses adjusted, my watch-crystal fixed." After additional purchases of a blue pottery baking dish, a tablecloth, an apron, bookends "the black tin kind libraries use," Barnard continued:

> I came home + cooked myself a nice dinner. . . . Next morning Mrs. Porter told me the war was on before I'd even had had my breakfast, + the whole of the rest of the day was a nightmare. It seems a year since then. All I did was wash clothes + hair + press + clean house + think + think + think. I could hear the radios going all the time, with men talking, but not what they said. The most awful jazz music came as a relief whenever I got a whiff of it, the other got on my nerves so. Today I feel possibly a little better—you gradually get used to even the worst shock, of course. . . . It was tough going, trying to wax enthusiastic about my new job [in letters], in the face of the week-end's events. Besides, half the job is no more. We won't be able to carry on with the English part of it at all. I suppose we will with the American.[6]

As in the unlikely comradery of the cougar, the child, and the deer in "Fire," Barnard's response was to go and be with people in Buffalo and wait it out. She went to the movies and saw Clifford Odets's *Golden Boy* to take her mind off things, but there was really no escaping events. "One of the characters," Barnard wrote, "remarked that every time he read the news from Europe he felt so bad he had to go out + go to a double-feature. Loud laughter behind me, + a sympathetic murmur from the whole audience. This was a double-feature, + I guess it's what we were all doing" (Letter to her parents, Labor Day 1939). The day was not eased by fierce daytime temperatures, which were "another thing that made yesterday a bad

day" for "it was very hot—the hottest, or just about the hottest since I came. That added to the nightmarish effect" (Letter, Labor Day 1939). The following day the heat had cooled and the day was "cloudy + intermittently stormy, but cooler + I felt better" and Barnard got on with her new life at the library and getting to know the northeastern environs in a trip to neighboring Niagara Falls (Letter, Labor Day 1939). Soon, and pertinently to this essay, Barnard's letters of this period tell of both her reaction to the early days of war and the poems she was writing, with one particular letter providing curious insight into the origins of "Fire." On 15 September 1939 a Buffalo faculty member came into the library, fresh from visiting relatives in England. Barnard wrote:

> [W]hat she had to say of the war preparations + the whole English outlook simply raised the hair on my head. Literally. She was fitted for a gas mask along with everybody else. Her brother had ordered a bomb-proof shelter 3 months before + hadn't got it yet. I made some minor changes in the poems I sent, but very minor. Did I tell you Jane liked them very much? She liked the second especially, but thought the first had a better chance of selling . . . + urged that I send them off right away. The minor changes are in line with her comments as well as my own considerations. I told her I could just hear some of my contemporaries saying: "She <u>would</u> write about forest fires at a time like this!" (Letter to her parents, 15 September 1939, underlining Barnard's)

Four days later, typing on a Royal portable typewriter that she had acquired for "50 dollars, or just under," Barnard told her parents about work routines which involved picking out books for review (and the grading system she was asked to use—"Everything is rated as high, low, or middle brow, and A, B, or C"), sorting manuscript donations and receiving the occasional high-profile visitor (Letter, 19 Sept. 1939). On this particular day, when Wyndham Lewis happened to be visiting ("Of course I was introduced as a protégé of Pound, and he asked if I had ever been to Rapallo, but that was about all the conversation"), Barnard crucially elaborates: "[o]f course what I meant about the poems about the forest fires was that they were not about forest fires" (Letter, 19 Sept. 1939). Partly recalling an actual forest fire where "[t]he green tops [of Douglas fir] . . . explode with a sound almost like a cannon shot" (*Assault* 9) that, as the daughter of a sawmill owner, she experienced in early childhood, the poem begins

with a similar kind of waking to the "nightmare" that Barnard reported on Labor Day 1939:

> I woke into that strange world,
> Stranger than nightmare, that you wake into
> Aged five, when the night persons
> Stirring in the night break sleep

The ferocious heat that took Barnard to a double-feature, and which cooled into intermittent storms that punctuated a cloudy next day, perhaps formed the basis of another considered version of "Forest Fire." This draft begins:

> Clouds turned the light to lizard, and the first fire
> Sprang out of the cloud. The pot simmering,
> The metal red on the forge, and the fire
> Like a squirrel running the length of the branch
> Nibbled the leaves. The branch blazed coral, curled,
> Cracked, and dropped into ash. No one saw
> Where flame at the creek edge swept the grass with a gold sickle,
> Paused, drew a deep breath in the dark, and leapt.[7]

As evidenced by the expansive lines, this draft is perhaps the earliest version of "Fire," one through which we see Barnard "think + think + think" in her Buffalo room when she heard the news that war had broken out that nightmarish hot day in September. As well as images curiously inflected with a sense of home and labor ("The pot simmering, / The metal red on the forge" recalls both Barnard's memory of a rural childhood past, but also her account of hearing the news just before breakfast and processing it as she tried to "wash clothes + hair + press + clean house"), there are expansions on each line of "Fire" which, unsurprisingly, clarify some of the poem's eventual ambiguity. It indeed reads like a full account of a settlement's desperate retreat from an engulfing forest fire, to "seek the sea beaches in bitter darkness / Where the cougar pads on the sand, and the deer / Is near him under the gentle sifting of the hot ash" ("Forest Fire" ["Clouds"]). Something of a forest fire's rapid spread is captured not just in image but in the acceleration of alliterative play as the poem proceeds in the first stanza cited above. "Wildfire," Barnard writes in the final lines of the poem, is that responsible for

"Twisting the green twig into bright wire"—the "twig" of her lines brightened by the compacted alliteration assigned to images of light where the "The branch blazed coral, curled, / Cracked" ("Forest Fire" ["Clouds"]). The line becomes a "wire" of communication, as does the rest of Barnard's poem. Perhaps this is the particular draft that Barnard wrote on the day she heard news from England which had had "simply raised the hair on my head"? For while there's no call for social cohesion in a time of devastation, as in the arresting last line of "Fire," there is an imagining of the physical terror of modern warfare in the images of "bleeding light," "splotches of bloody light," and "Hell's noon wind; seeding the earth / With the warmth of engines" ("Forest Fire" ["Clouds"]).

Williams's response to the suite of poems she sent him in September 1939 was rather delayed, but it testifies to the sense that, in the face of war, the modernist project to write "[p]oetry . . . related to poetry" (Williams, *Selected Letters* 131) continued apace:

> You want to explain too much. Let them go to hell. Make designs and dedicate them to yourself. They will be more transparent than you imagine. . . . Write you, write it intricately, as intricately and as finely, to the last detail of a thin line. I won't say make them, the poems, deliberately incomprehensible but I mean something like that while, at the same time, you labor to make them lucid within themselves, as poems. Spend every possible effort to make them explicitly lucid as designs of what you intend—but don't, oh don't ever explain. Take FOREST FIRE. I don't know how you are going to do it but you've got to leave out the line beginning "Aged five ." and the one that follows. (qtd. in Barnard, *Assault* 178, space between "five" and the full stop Barnard's)

That same year Barnard's first collection, *Cool Country*, was published as part of New Directions' *Five Young American Poets*. "Fire," curiously, was not in it, but in the preface that James Laughlin had insisted she write, Barnard articulated a measured desire to write poetry that is both intensely "lucid" and "transparent":

> Poets, in their particular field, work with words—not only the meanings of words, but the sounds of words, and this to me is extremely important. Beyond those 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 patterns, the poetry may as well be journalism. . . . Very few of the

> poems collected here have been written during the past two years, when I have had little opportunity for writing; but I feel that my aims have been sharpened rather than changed, as the world changed. ("A Note on Poetry")

In what ways did Mary Barnard's poetry share in the renovation of society? In this instance, it was certainly more concerned with social conditions than Pound gave her credit for; "Fire" is not a poem that takes "no interest in the world." It puts that world into a poem that, while offering no specific remedies, counsels compassion for living beings. And perhaps this is what poetry does best. It's up to us, as poetry scholars, to consider what those "different things" are that "poetry may do," to explain what such poets "don't ever explain," as I hope I have done here.

NOTES

For permission to reprint from Barnard's unpublished materials, I would like to thank Elizabeth J. Bell, literary executor to Mary Barnard's literary estate, under copyright by Barnardworks.

1. A northwesterner by birth and upbringing, Barnard relocated to New York at Pound's encouragement in 1936. After her stint at Buffalo, she returned to New York in 1943 where she took up long-term residence in an apartment on Minetta Street in Greenwich Village.
2. Provisionally entitled *The 'New' New York Poets: Late Modernism in Manhattan*, this group biography concertinas out of my *Mary Barnard, American Imagist* (2013), fleshing out the dynamic yet little-known milieu of Mary Barnard's mid-century New York by considering a loose network of late modernist poets including Reuel Denney, Babette Deutsch, May Swenson and T. C. Wilson.
3. "If civilization isn't saved," Barnard's letter continued, "it won't be because enough isn't written on the subject."
4. This version carries Barnard's home address at Winspear Avenue in Buffalo in the top left corner.
5. As Elizabeth J. Bell notes in her record for this poem, "Fire" became a prose fable of the same name published in 1948 as part of a sequence *Three Fables*; see also Barnard, *Assault* 179.
6. The last line refers to the cultural purpose of the Lockwood Memorial Library at Buffalo to collect work (published and unpublished) by British and American poets.
7. This version of "Forest Fire" carries Barnard's address at the Lockwood Memorial Library in the top left corner.

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