Who was Mary Barnard? First and foremost, Mary Barnard considered herself a professional poet and she devoted her life to perfecting that art. Physically tall and slim, Pound called her a “gazelle.” She was resolutely independent, deliberate in thought and speech, witty, kind but at the same time intolerant of anything or anyone who was insincere or artificial. Pound’s daughter Mary de Rachewiltz said Barnard shared the attributes of Athena Minerva: “She was bold, handsome, with brains and character[...]. A complex and accomplished personality hid under that imperturbably calm of her corpus[...].” (Speech 3 July 2003). During the last twenty years of her life, I had the privilege of knowing Mary Barnard as a friend, genuine and honest to the core.

Today, Mary Barnard’s reputation in the literary world rests mainly on her slim book *Sappho: A New Translation* (1958), widely regarded as the best modern translation of the fragments of the Greek poet Sappho. I would like to expand this image of slimness by introducing the quite substantial body of Mary Barnard’s literary work as a whole, emphasizing her poetry, widely published in the 1930’s, yet largely overlooked in contemporary critical scholarship. Before her death in 2001, at age 91, she asked me to
be her literary executor, which subsequently gave me the privilege of reading her impressive collection of letters, journals, and unpublished manuscripts.

Tracing the path of Barnard’s interests and literary works throughout her life is like following a thread through the twisty paths of a labyrinth. In fact, labyrinths and mazes intrigued Barnard. She chose the labyrinth for the design of her bookplate; she placed her teapot on a ceramic trivet in the form of a maze. I can’t think of a more appropriate symbol for Barnard, for her curious intellect tirelessly explored various paths, driven by a desire to get to the source, to the bottom of things, to strip away superficialities and falseness. In her searches, she calmly dealt with barriers, regarding them as challenges to her creativity. Her poem “Soft Chains” points out the peril in seeking the easy way out. The poem may remind you of some of the poems in the Sappho translations, with their simple language, balanced lines, and memorable images. (It appeared on a bus poster in the New York Transit System in the late 1980’s.)

SOFT CHAINS

Soft chains are most
difficult to break:
affection, ease.

the spirit, wide-eyed,
limp-muscled, nestles
on its side

and waits

Collected Poems 84
Like most writers, Mary Barnard’s first path into the labyrinth of her life began with early life experiences. Born December 6, 1909 in Vancouver, Washington, a rugged frontier community across the Columbia River from Portland, Oregon, she was the only child of Samuel and Bertha Barnard. From an early age she was immersed in two major scenes of her locale - the vast coastal beaches and the dense forests of Oregon and Washington.

During summers at Ocean Park, a small resort community located on the unbroken 28-mile expanse of Long Beach, she was content to roam, often alone, reciting poems into the breakers. In contrast to usual images of the Northwest as a place of lush growth, this beach is, “like the purist of Imagist poems, stripped down and devoid of ornament, all the more intense for the lack of human presences” (Sarah Barnsley). These images of sea and sand occur with frequency in many of her poems that were published during the 1930’s, such as “Lai”, “Ondine”, “Shoreline” and “Wine Ship.” Here are a few lines from “Wine Ship:”

In this forlorn meeting of sea and land
mirth is lost over the stormy water
and the sand
lies suddenly cold under the hand.  

The second major scene of her childhood involved the saw mills located in the dense forests not far from her home. Often accompanying her father, a timber broker, on his frequent trips over bumpy logging roads, she observed and recorded the stark images
of broken logging trestles and plank roads, as well as the vivid details of the local landscape, described in “Cool Country.” “Roots” is a description of one of those trips:

ROOTS

Rain on the windshield,
roads spongy with sawdust
have meant in the end
a love of place that grows into the body.
Blood should be clear amber under tree bark.

Lacking that, there are the roads extending like root tendrils under the angles of mountains, rain sharpening on the windshield at evening.

Her path became more complicated when she entered Reed College in 1927 to embark on a liberal arts education which was, for her, not merely an enriching experience, but the germinating context for the blossoming of her intellectual and creative interests. Her rhymed verses were well received when she arrived at Reed, but her creative writing professor Lloyd Reynolds, encouraging her to “loosen up,” introduced her to the poetry of H.D., Eliot, and Pound. Reading Pound’s Personae won her over to free verse when she realized Pound’s verse contained some of the strict elements of Greek metric, which she and three other students elected to study at Reed. With her characteristic wit, Mary recounted her transition from rhymed verse to free verse in a letter to William Stafford: “An incident in the Reed Commons when one of my
friends sang one of my poems to an awful ballad tune converted me to free verse forever. Ironically she always regretted that I did switch and never knew how much she had to do with it.” (Letter, probably 1978).

Graduating in 1932, at the time of the Great Depression and employed as a case worker for the Emergency Relief Administration in Vancouver, she took it upon herself to use her liberal arts education and her independent spirit to forge ahead with what she loved do most – write poetry. The spark that had been lit by reading Pound’s poetry, burst into flame when Barnard, looking up Pound’s Rapallo address in the Vancouver library, sent him six of her poems, asking for “advice or assistance.” (Assault 52) The answer to Barnard’s letter arrived in the form of a scrawled postcard from Pound, with praise for the poem “Lethe” and some brief remarks: “Nice gal, likely to marry and give up writing or what Oh?” (Assault, 52-3). Thus began a remarkable correspondence and friendship that lasted for 38 years, until Pound’s death in 1972.

There was no doubt that Ezra Pound was Mary Barnard’s most important single literary influence. The older poet spared his young apprentice no slack in proscribing hard work and discipline in the study of Greek, writing sapphics, and translating, always admonishing her to hone and prune. At the same time, he generously opened literary doors for the isolated young poet of the West, advising her to write to poets such as Marianne Moore and William Carlos Williams, as well as recommending her to publishers like Harriet Monroe and James Laughlin. In 1935, Barnard came to national attention when “Shoreline” was published in Poetry, which awarded her the distinguished Levinson Prize.
By 1936, Mary Barnard, eager to “shake off the barnacles” of the Pacific Northwest, with prize money in hand, traveled by herself via train to New Orleans and then by ship to New York. Her literary memoir *Assault on Mt. Helicon* is full of many letters and entertaining stories about this “awkward young woman with sawdust in her hair” (94), as Barnard described herself, struggling to support herself while finding herself immersed in the New York literary world of the 1930’s. She was invited to spend two summers at Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, New York, where she met more poets and writers, such as Muriel Rukeyser, Henry Roth, Babette Deutsch, Malcom Cowley, and May Sarton, Always maintaining an apolitical position, she felt she didn’t fit in, partly because of her Northwest origin and partly “because in the ‘30’s, to be in the swim you had to be political, and left-wing, if not a card-carrying communist, or [...]a Trotskyist.” (Letter to Stafford 19 Oct. 1978).

Nevertheless, her list of published poems in major periodicals, such as *The Saturday Review of Literature, The New Yorker, Harper’s Bazaar,* and *New Republic,* as well as in the major poetry magazines, continued to grow. By age thirty, in addition to winning the Levinson Award, she had published her first collection of thirty-one poems called “Cool Country” in the New Directions book, *Five Young American Poets 1940,* the only female, along with John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, W. R. Moses, and George Marion O’Donnell.

Surprisingly enough, the next publication of a Barnard collection of poems did not appear until twelve years later, when twelve of her poems were published by the Reed College Graphics Workshop in a modest, privately circulated pamphlet called *A Few Poems.* It may seem puzzling that such an accomplished poet had no further collections
published until 1979, twenty-seven years later, when her Collected Poems appeared, but Mary Barnard was heading down other paths of the labyrinth, which would eventually lead her back, revitalized, to writing poetry.

In May 1939, Mary Barnard finally met in person her mentor Ezra Pound at a café in New York City. Realizing she badly needed a job in order to stay in New York, Pound impulsively took her with him to visit Iris Barry, the Curator of Film at the brand new MOMA. This fortunate connection resulted in Barnard’s appointment as the first-ever curator of the Poetry Collection of the Lockwood Library at the University of Buffalo, where she laid the foundation for the first archive set up to collect books, letters and working manuscripts of twentieth century American poets. She met poets, searched book stalls in New York City for letters and old poetry magazines, and even sorted through papers in Williams’s attic to establish his archive.

Buffalo never agreed with Barnard. During her four years there, from 1939 to 1943, the beginning of the Second World War was a constant dark backdrop, and in the foreground was always the terrible weather of blustery, snowy Buffalo. Life outside of work offered no stimulus at all! Her poem “Encounter in Buffalo” communicates her homesickness. After a few years at the library, the rows of dusty bookshelves full of excellent, but unread, works of outstanding poets, now forgotten, had a depressing influence on Barnard. In 1943, suffering an illness, Mary Barnard left Buffalo, briefly returning to Vancouver.

The road to Buffalo may have seemed a dead end, but it gave her pause to think seriously about her own writing, and forced her, like a traveler taking an unfortunate turn in a maze, to try a different route. As soon as she could, she returned to New York City,
determined to devote herself to writing fiction. With Diarmuid Russell as her literary agent (he was also Eudora Welty’s), several short stories were published, like “The Cat” in Today’s Woman, later re-worked as a radio play. Others were published in Harper’s Bazaar and Kenyon Review, but her other prose works, including a mystery, a novella, and a verse-play with Greek chorus were never published.

During this fiction-writing decade, Barnard found a job that suited her well. She became Carl Van Doren’s research assistant for his Pulitzer Prize-winning Autobiographical Writings of Benjamin Franklin. Mary was quite content spending many fruitful hours digging for sources in the New York Public Library, perfecting her research skills which she would use later for her own books, and working closely with Van Doren, even enjoying tasty lunches cooked by his daily help. Once Van Doren teased her about a namesake, a distant relation of Benjamin Franklin who also was called Mary Barnard. This remark would lay dormant until it led her down another path thirty years later, when she would write a book about her family history, Nantucket Genesis: The Tale of My Tribe (Breitenbush 1988), consisting of verse interspersed with family documents and genealogical proof that she is related to Ezra Pound. Her job with Van Doren came to an end in 1950, when he suddenly died.

In 1951, just over forty years old, disaster struck in the form of two near-fatal viruses, forcing Mary Barnard to return to Vancouver for a long period of bedridden boredom. In her typically resilient manner, she decided to make the best of it,

to move it somehow from the loss column to the profit column[…]. There are other ways of dealing with a stone wall [or she could have said a labyrinth] besides trying
to climb over it or bash a hole in it or dig a tunnel under it. One can follow it to find out where it leads. Mine led me to Greek (Assault 280).

She read Homer, but it was the arrival of a gift, a book by Quasimodo called Lirice Greci, which opened an important door for her:

I found here in Sappho’s Greek, as revealed to me now through the medium [or translation] of the Italian, the discovery of the style I had been groping toward, or perhaps merely hungering for, when I ceased to write poetry a number of years before. It was spare but musical, and had, besides, the sound of the speaking voice making a simple but emotionally loaded statement [underlinings are mine]” (Assault 281-2).

After countless revisions of each fragment, (“great pillow-work” she said), Sappho: A New Translation was finished by the spring of 1953, and finally published in 1958. Her clear, elegant poetic translation of the fragments of Sappho’s poetry was exactly what the American modernists, as well as the Greeks, were aiming for.

Mary Barnard’s Sappho translation has been in continuous print, selling well over 100,000 copies, notable statistics for a book of poetry

This close study of Sappho’s Greek influenced Barnard’s poetry. She described her poems as becoming “more terse”, with shorter lines, and fewer words (Helle, 190-1), almost as if they too were fragments. “Late Roman” is an example of this pared down verse, with the added treat of some Barnard wit, where her plucky nature bursts forth at the end of this seemingly modest poem:

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

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

The unabashed capital letters ME at the end of the poem, in addition to spelling the word “me”, are also the initials for “Mary Ethel,” as Barnard was known in her younger days.

Sappho was not only instrumental in helping Mary Barnard attain the writing style she was looking for; she also led Barnard down new paths of inquiry. In order to write an introduction on Sappho’s historical context, Barnard found her research didn’t at all agree with her reading of Sappho’s poems. Although she was now living mainly in Vancouver, her dissatisfaction with all the authorities led her to invest ten years doing research, much of the time in New York. The result was a book about the origin of myths, *The Mythmakers* (1966), her independent and common sense answer to popular Jungian theories. Barnard writes “There is not one word in it [The Mythmakers] about Sappho, but it was she who beckoned me into the maze” (Assault 297). Her poems, such as “The Pleiades”, “Picture of the Moon” and “E. P.: Martinsbrunn, 1961” reflected this research, containing references to shamans, masks, marble, and ghosts.
In 1979, Mary Barnard’s long awaited *Collected Poems* was enthusiastically published by James Anderson of Breitenbush Books in Portland, Oregon. It seemed almost a miracle to Barnard that he actually wanted to do this. The red labyrinth, the symbol she had chosen for her bookplate, which up to now had appeared discreetly only inside the cover of other authors’ books in her library, now appeared openly and boldly on the cover of her own book. The contents were arranged not chronologically, but in sections according to the different kinds of journeys she had taken: “I write in different veins” (Helle 189). Barnard admitted it was really a book of “selected poems,” not “collected poems,” because many published, as well as unpublished, poems, were not included.

In 1984, her seventy-fourth year, Mary Barnard was ready to look back on her journey as a writer finding her way through the maze of the established publishing world. Written as a cautionary tale to young aspiring writers, *Assault on Mt. Helicon: A Literary Memoir*, is “an irreplaceable document of a generation and its writers and its hope” (Merwin). Although the book was given a lukewarm review by Malcolm Cowley of the *New York Times Book Review*, (5.6.1984), who perhaps wished for more gossip, Kelley Dupuis, of the San Francisco Chronicle-Examiner came closer to the core of the matter when she wrote:

“If she [Barnard] never achieved the fame of an Anne Sexton or a Sylvia Plath, it might be because she cut her teeth on a tough aesthetic ideal more than on self-expression[...]. Her aim was probably more toward good poetry than to show the world how neurotic its author was.” (8.26.1984)
Barnard’s final major work resulted from her decision to revisit a former path, that of her extensive research for *The Mythmakers*. A companion book was planned that would explore how myth had been used to define the passage of time. When one of the chapters was submitted, but turned down, by the journal *Archaeoastronomy* because of her lack of scientific training, she once again chose a graceful and creative way to deal with this barrier. She awoke one morning, sat down at her typewriter and found her ideas for the new book flowed more naturally as poetry, and besides, in a poem, she said, she wouldn’t have to *prove* anything (Helle). The resulting book, *Time and the White Tigress* (1986), was awarded the Western States Book Award for Poetry in 1986, and received accolades in *Publishers Weekly*. Using the unusual form of the verse-essay, Barnard’s poetry goes easily back and forth between the scientific abstract and the warmly human.

In summary, I would like to read a tribute to Mary Barnard, written by the Pulitzer Prize winning Poet Laureate W. S. Merwin. It appears on the back cover of her book *Assault on Mt. Helicon*:

> “Mary Barnard’s writing is one of the inadequately acknowledged treasures of our time. Her poetry, her translations, her essays, are wrought with a purity of language, a clarity and balance of sense, and a play of wit, that we still, on occasion, can recognize and describe as classical….”

When Mary Barnard learned about these comments, she wrote:

Dear Wm. Merwin[…] I have a letter […]enclosing a tribute from you that is enough to bring tears to my eyes. Thank you![...]What moves me most, of course,
is that you praise my work as a whole [underline is mine] instead of simply saying, ‘This is a good book’” (Letter 9.18.83).

Looking at Mary Barnard’s “work as a whole,” illustrates how the many paths she followed inevitably converged and overlapped to form her body of poetry, which deserves recognition as an important part of American modernism. Her spare but musical lines, with their sound of the speaking voice, the crystalline images, the careful attention to meter to form a balanced line - all come together to form an emotional moment that grows with each reading of her poems. It has been pointed out that we are fortunate Mary Barnard curated her own life as carefully as she did the lives of the poets she archived at Buffalo (Barnsley). Those resources are available at Reed College and the Beineke Library of Yale University, where Mary herself had placed her letters from Pound, Williams, Moore, and others. I invite and encourage scholars to follow the path of the labyrinth through Mary Barnard’s archives, and to embark on a rewarding and worthwhile journey to a treasure which deserves to be brought to light – the poetry of Mary Barnard.
WORKS CITED


de Rachewiltz, Mary. “‘Athena cd/ have done with more sex appeal’” Ezra Pound Society Conference, Sun Valley, Idaho. 3 July 2003. Recorded speech.