

Book Review

***Annotating Modernism: Marginalia and Pedagogy from Virginia Woolf to the Confessional Poets*, by**

Amanda Golden, London and New York, Routledge, 2020, \$160 (hardcover), \$48.95 (ebook). ISBN:

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Annotating Modernism: Marginalia and Pedagogy from Virginia Woolf to the Confessional Poets by Amanda Golden contributes to modernist studies by investigating how contemporary poet-teachers engaged with modernist texts privately and publicly through marginalia in books and teaching notes. While the study itself is not explicitly feminist in its theoretical framework or analyses, it becomes a feminist modernist project in its larger aims of expanding what we talk about with regard to formulations of modernism in the second half of the twentieth century. Primarily, the book's focus is on material history, reception, and culture and how readers shape modernism and the contemporary landscape in writing and teaching. Of special note: of the three body chapters, the book centers women writers in two of them, namely Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, and the dedication of space to these figures enables a feminist re-centering of modernist and contemporary texts, voices, strategies, and practices. As a whole, the book delivers an engrossing presentation of the legacies and constructions of modernism in the long twentieth century, establishing networks of influence.¹

The gems of *Annotating Modernism* are the details from archives and the fascinating genealogy constructed from T. S. Eliot, James Joyce, and Ezra Pound to Plath and John Berryman. This study navigates between Amy Hungerford's suggestion that "the second half of the twentieth century sees not

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a departure from modernism's aesthetic but its triumph in the institution of the university and in the literary culture more generally"² and the argument made by David James and Urmila Seshagiri that "the logic of periodization" allows us "a rubric for reading contemporary literature's relationship to modernism but also generates a retrospective understanding of modernism as a moment as well as a movement."³ Similarly, Golden marks what Christopher Bush calls "the field's dominant tendency to valorize historical context against . . . aesthetic autonomy" while imagining "new conceptions of history" in connection with context⁴ and, I would add, periodization.

In chapter one, "Reading Modernist Texts: Sylvia Plath's Library and Teaching Notes," we learn that Plath repurposed what she learned as a student and instructor.⁵ The repurposing and revisioning influenced the poetry and prose on which Plath's reputation is built, and this chapter gauges Plath's relationship with modernism as it was being institutionalized at Smith College in the late 1950s. For example, it is instructive to know that Plath annotated both *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses* (1922) as a critical reader, writer, and college instructor because we might revisit her feminist work with heightened attention to modernist influences, as Golden does when she considers "the Jewish question" and Joyce's and Plath's treatments of Jewish identity in *Ulysses* and Plath's own "Daddy" (1962) and "Lady Lazarus" (1962). Archival photographs are reproduced for the delight of readers of this study of material culture and literary history, and a dozen images of Plath's annotations of modernist texts abound, accompanied by discussions of the same. Among the texts foregrounded as instances of Plath's engagement with modernism are Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* ([1916], with treatments of historical and political modernist contexts as they relate to Irish history); Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle* ([1931], in which Plath records her reactions to Eliot's and I. A. Richards's theories of poetics and poetry and in which she pays particular attention to the themes of paralysis and death-in-life in work by Eliot and Henry James); D. H. Lawrence's "The Horse Dealer's Daughter" ([1922], in which she annotated the "life in death" theme) and *The Man Who Died* ([1929], to which Golden suggests *The Bell Jar* [1963]

responds or is influenced by via a Plath annotation); and *The Waste Land* (which, as Plath taught it, brought together all the themes she had been teaching, namely “death-in-life” that she uses interchangeably with “life-in-death,” and connecting it to Eliot's “The Hollow Men” (1925) and Joyce's *Dubliners* [1914]). In reading modernist texts, Plath highlighted the theme of living death as one that resonates: she identifies it in her *The Waste Land* annotations and, as Golden argues, such a theme may well have informed her most famous work, such as *The Bell Jar* and “Lady Lazarus.”⁶

In chapter two, “John Berryman Annotating Modernism,” Golden explores how Berryman's reading and teaching of modernism influenced *The Dream Songs*, explaining that Berryman scholars, up until this point, have not yet considered Berryman's annotated books alongside his teaching notes, which this chapter anticipates. Encapsulating her thesis, Golden asserts, “For if Berryman developed a humanities pedagogy that was Poundian in its comprehensiveness, annotating his copies of Pound's *Cantos* and writing an introduction for Pound's *Selected Poems* informed Berryman's teaching of modernism in humanities courses and emulation of modernist techniques in *The Dream Songs*. In doing so, he adapted the lyric in order to address both modernism and the midcentury literary and cultural climate.”⁷ Trained as a Shakespeare scholar, Berryman, however, demonstrated an interest in modernism, acquiring books by Pound, Yeats, and other modernists. Additionally, Berryman dedicated himself to textual editing and scholarship; one of his career goals entailed producing a definitive edition of *King Lear*⁸, and this interest furthers Golden's goal of making a case for the importance of Berryman's annotations, as he himself was particularly keen to understand the histories and materiality of literature. For example, as Berryman closely read and annotated Pound and, in turn, wrote about and taught his work, modernism is reissued in the second half of the twentieth century by an influential poet, scholar, and professor. In one of the images of this chapter, we see Berryman annotating Pound, specifically lines that invoke Eliot's “The Hollow Men.” Eliot influenced Pound in these lines, just as Pound's modernism would influence Berryman, Golden maintains. Also part of this chapter, Golden delivers a snapshot of Berryman's

teaching notes and lectures at the University of Cincinnati and the University of Minnesota and traces how he approached texts such as *The Waste Land*, *Ulysses*, and Anne Frank's *Diary of a Young Girl* (1947) from a cultural studies perspective.

“Annotating Herself: Anne Sexton's Teaching Notes,” chapter three, departs from the construction of a line of modernist influence on contemporary writers and, instead treats Sexton's “Anne on Anne” course (about Sexton's own poetry) at Colgate University in 1972. As both what Golden dubs a “common reader” (after Woolf) and “a literary *voyeur*,” Sexton was not formally trained in modernist literature as Plath and Berryman were.⁹ And yet Sexton read modernist authors voraciously and enthusiastically. These writers inspired Sexton, and her annotations of various books become “extensions of emotion and voice, like poems themselves.”¹⁰ In annotating her own work for the course that she was teaching, we have indications of Sexton considering what her poems mean and how she approached them in the classroom. In fact, we learn from her teaching notes that Sexton began one mini-lecture with the history of the English epistolary novel (i.e. Samuel Richardson's *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* [1740] and Henry Fielding's *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* [1749]) before transitioning to her own poetry.¹¹ Despite Sexton's declaration—“I had never read Williams or Elliott [sic] or Pound or Whitman or Dickenson [sic]”¹²—Golden points out that “the casualness with which she listed names (and references to writers elsewhere) reminds us that she knows more than she lets on.”¹³ While Sexton refrains from alluding to other sources of inspiration outside of herself in her teaching notes, she often participated in close reading strategies while annotating her own work (such as “Her Kind” [1960]) in a manner that bespeaks the influence of New Criticism.

The book closes with a short coda dedicated to Ted Hughes and his year spent teaching at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst; the focus mostly is on his interpretation of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866), accompanied by images and a brief discussion of Hughes's approach to Molière's *The School for Wives* (1662). Of note, at the very end of the book, are two appendices, dedicated to

establishing a chronology of Plath's teaching year at Smith and the poems that Sexton taught during her semester at Colgate. *Annotating Modernism* prompts us to consider how we might track and map modernist and contemporary influence in the United States during the 1950s (via Plath, Hughes, and Berryman), the 1960s (via Plath and Berryman), and the 1970s (via Sexton). Ultimately, we are treated to a sweeping study that spans poets and archives from the second half of the twentieth century, as it searches for, presents, and animates the imprints and reformulations of modernism and contemporary literature.

Notes

1 With respect to networks of influence and connection, Bonnie Kime Scott's visual networks, "A Tangled Mesh of Modernists" and "A Triple Web of Attachments" come to mind. Scott, *Refiguring Modernism*, xxiii, xxv.

2 Hungerford, "On the Period Formerly Known as Contemporary," 418.

3 James and Seshagiri, "Metamodernism," 88.

4 Bush, "Context," 76.

5 Golden, *Annotating Modernism*, 29.

6 *Ibid.*, 41, 68–72.

7 *Ibid.*, 93.

8 *Ibid.*, 95.

9 *Ibid.*, 133.

10 *Ibid.*, 143.

11 *Ibid.*, 149–50.

12 Sexton quoted in Golden, 150.

13 Ibid., 150.

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