

GOLDEN, Amanda. 2020. *Annotating Modernism: Marginalia and Pedagogy from Virginia Woolf to the Confessional Poets*. New York: Routledge. Pp. 260. ISBN 9781472410764, Hardback \$160.00. ISBN 9781032236186, Paperback \$48.95. ISBN 9781315567235, eBook \$48.95.

A confession: when reviewing a book, I annotate like a demon, scribbling in the margins of a review copy, agreeing, disagreeing, asking questions, underlining and asterisking passages, and, for poorly indexed books, creating long, topical lists of page references on the front and back inside covers. Inevitably, reviewing Amanda Golden's *Annotating Modernism: Marginalia and Pedagogy from Virginia Woolf to the Confessional Poets* provoked an intense awareness of my process of marking up a book: experiential evidence supporting her core argument that modernism "is not a discrete literary period, but a discourse that is the result of institutionally situated processes" (1), including strategies of textual interpretation fostered by academia. Annotating Golden's book as I read it made me ask not only why I was annotating, but how. If annotation is a genre, as she emphasizes, then it must be governed by conventions, and studying those conventions would expose ways of thinking that I learned from my teachers — whether close reading practices or theoretical orientations — and also crucial differences arising from a particular historical-cultural moment (questions I may ask now about a text that I would not have asked ten years ago). My annotations are also shaped by my goals — they would differ depending on if I were reviewing, or preparing to teach, or simply learning from a book. My annotations also reflect my personal style, including pen color and marks added for emphasis, such as asterisks or serial exclamation points. Golden attends to all of these elements, constructing her argument from meticulous observation of, and illuminating connections between, annotations inscribed by mid-twentieth-century poets in books — often teaching copies — of modernist poetry, fiction, and criticism.

As Golden duly acknowledges, readers have been marking up texts since the invention of writing, though marginalia as material artifacts of reader response have only recently, within the last thirty years or so, become a locus for sustained academic study. Yet she also emphasizes that modernist texts, due to their difficulty and, to cite Ezra Pound, their often calculatedly piecemeal, "rag-bag" construction, deliberately invite annotation; signature modernist works, such as *The Waste Land*, *The Cantos*, or *Ulysses*, due to their allusiveness, disjunctive juxtapositions (such as Eliot's rapid shifts from quotation to quotation), and elliptical, associative structures provoke

readers to annotate, whether to identify extra-textual references, keep track of recurring patterns, or bring forward connections that the writers omit. Likewise, academic reading practices, such as New Critical close reading and the European equivalent, *explication de texte*, arose in response to modernist writings from the first half of the twentieth century. Centering her book on annotations by Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and Anne Sexton enables Golden to chart the progress of modernism and discover how these writers adopted and adapted it, not only in their poetry, but also in their teaching. Although some scholars would classify these poets as postmodern, Golden does not countenance postmodernism as a mode worthy of attention, let alone as a distinct literary period; the word appears only among her Works Cited titles, never as a term she herself adopts. Instead, she sees modernism at midcentury as a fluid, on-going discourse, a dialogic exchange between writers and the institutions that educated them, especially for poets who taught, however briefly, in American universities, and thus grappled with modernism in both their pedagogy and their published work:

Poets in particular provide the focus of this book because, as they returned to universities to teach writing and literature, they created troves of materials that blend close reading and research with images and ideas they admired. In doing so, they expanded the role of the “poet-critic” or “poet-teacher”, teaching across genres and reading widely in criticism. Moving outward from the locations where postwar poets studied and taught modernist texts, this book also considers the ways that the contents of poets’ annotated books and teaching notes respond to larger cultural, historical, and political trajectories.

(3–4)

Chapter by chapter, Golden demonstrates how these poets built upon, yet also significantly changed, the modernism they inherited, whether from precursor poets or from New Critics.

Each chapter ends with a brief section focusing on one or two creative works by the poets, but scholars who consult *Annotating Modernism* for detailed discussion of — and new insights about — a poet’s oeuvre may be disappointed. Although Golden operates from a deep familiarity with the lives, career trajectories, and poetic proclivities of Plath, Berryman, and Sexton, she nonetheless crafts each chapter not as an argument *per se* about each poet’s writing, but instead to serve her overall emphasis on modernism as an evolving, malleable discourse: she demonstrates how the midcentury poets, more in their responses as teachers or editors of

the modernists than in their poetry, revise the parameters of academic modernism that they inherited from teachers and scholars of modernism, especially the New Critical assumption that a poet's work should be read apart from his or her life, or from political and historical contexts. Golden's chapters on individual poets are also not "influence studies", although she does, for example, track Plath's musings on the modernist concept of "death-in-life / life-in-death" through Plath's annotations on and teaching of T. S. Eliot and W. B. Yeats and subsequent adaptation of the theme — the hard-won, life-affirming trajectories from suicide to renewal — in *The Bell Jar* and "Lady Lazarus". Instead of framing Eliot and Yeats as influences on Plath's writing, however, Golden mines Plath's marginalia to show how she "became a student of the criticism of her moment and a teacher who tested its boundaries, engaging the cultural and political implications of texts in ways that anticipated the directions she would pursue in her poetry and prose" (29). Refreshingly, Golden turns the spotlight away from biographical readings of the three Confessional poets, seeing them instead as consciously and creatively working with and against modernist practices — including the strictures of New Critical close reading — in their writing and teaching.

In categorizing modernism as a literary period and mode of writing that fosters annotation, Golden suggests that it is, paradoxically, both self-amplifying and self-reflexive — and, even, perhaps, self-perpetuating, if we accept her implicit assumption that modernism has not yet come to a close; by this logic, *Annotating Modernism* itself modifies and extends the dialectic. In her "Introduction", Golden emphasizes how these characteristics define major modernists' annotations as evidenced in their comments on each other's work, on their own work (as in Eliot's notes to *The Waste Land*) and in the margins of books from their own libraries. The modernists featured in the "Introduction" — Eliot, Pound, E. M. Forster, James Joyce, and Woolf — are all self-conscious enough annotators that, Golden convincingly argues, their marginalia should be considered as extensions of their writing practice and as efforts to assimilate both "the impact of modernism" and "modernity's incomprehensible realities" (10). Her examples from Eliot, Pound, and Joyce all set the stage for how, in subsequent chapters, she tracks midcentury writers' engagement with their work. Her introductory discussion of Woolf, however, encompasses only two pages, which is odd, considering that Woolf is the only writer named in the book's full title — and Woolf only resurfaces once more, and only glancingly, as a model for Sexton's approach to reading books.

In contrast, Joyce, along with Eliot, features prominently in the Plath chapter, and Pound in the Berryman chapter; in these core chapters, as well as the Sexton chapter, Golden scrutinizes annotations, letters, even the acquisition and arrangement of book collections, as material evidence of how each writer incorporated modernist approaches to interpretation in their reading and teaching, yet also broke New Critical taboos and reframed modernist texts: a concern for Golden because she recognizes how such taboos unfairly limited the scope of modernist poetry and fiction. She therefore celebrates the midcentury poets as participants in what are still on-going efforts to historicize canonical modernist work. Making astute links between Plath's student marginalia on *Ulysses* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and teaching notes for *Dubliners*, for example, Golden shows how Plath's interest in "the Jewish question" pushes back against New Critical skepticism of political and historical engagement with texts, and also anticipates her complex musings on Jewish identity in "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus", where, Golden argues, she "updates Joyce's creative project [. . .] developing personae whose Jewish identity remains unclear" (35). Likewise, Golden draws connections between Berryman's scholarly and editorial relationship with Pound's work, and his inclusive, Poundian approach to pedagogy, in which he took a radically interdisciplinary approach to teaching humanities survey courses: "a midcentury version of what critics might now characterize as a cultural studies approach" (111). Her extension of these insights to her very brief, four-page discussion of *The Dream Songs*, however, is not as convincing as her scrutiny of Berryman's teaching. The similarities she finds between *The Cantos* and *The Dream Songs*, such as their serial publication and Berryman's adoption of Pound's habit of nicknaming other writers (calling Eliot "Possum") aren't enough to frame Berryman's writing as Poundian, let alone to prove that he adapted Pound's strategies to midcentury cultural and historical contexts, which is a shame, given that Berryman — unlike, say, Charles Olson, another midcentury poet-scholar — is not usually counted among the poetic disciples of Pound.

In the Sexton chapter, on the other hand, Golden brings the poetry center stage, through spotlighting "Anne on Anne", a course Sexton taught on her own poetry at Colgate University in 1972. Expanding the chapter to consider how Sexton's auto-didacticism and anxiety about her intellectual credentials contributed both to her teaching and approach to her writing, Golden marshals a broad range of material evidence: "the books Sexton owned, her copies of her own poetry volumes, her poem drafts, notes she prepared for lectures, her correspondence, and the small pieces of paper she

collected, which included quotations that she hung above her desk, kept on her person, and reproduced in letters” (129). Due to Sexton’s bold choice of subject matter for her course, Golden integrates discussion of the poetry throughout the chapter, rather than reserve it for a concluding section, as in the Plath and Berryman chapters. Nonetheless, she convincingly prioritizes her overall argument about modernism as a work-in-progress and demonstrates how Sexton, as a teacher, necessarily breaks the New Critical prohibition about assuming the poet is a poem’s speaker even as Sexton maintains a pose of modernist impersonality by taking an objective, analytical stance toward her own work, encouraging students to perform close readings of individual poems and even drafts of poems, and validating ambiguity as a critical, pedagogical, and poetic principle; Sexton, therefore, aims to gain credibility for her poetry as worthy of being read through a New Critical perspective, while also flaunting how she has deviated from it in crafting poems where she speaks as herself.

Overall, the book’s greatest strength is the contribution Golden herself makes to modernist discourse. Like the poets she analyses, she works with conventions of academic modernism by practicing careful close reading; yet she also builds on, and extends, modernism by applying that close reading to unconventional texts: marginalia, teaching materials, and poets’ arrangement of, and relationship to, their book collections. Grounding her study on scrupulous archival detective work — such as making connections, in the Plath chapter, between material held in three different institutions (Smith College, the Lilly Library at Indiana University, and the Ted Hughes archive at Emory University) — she argues for the dialogic, discursive nature of modernism, proves that argument through the detailed, well-contextualized links she traces between writers and marginalia, and simultaneously adds her own critical voice to the dialectic. In her conclusion, Golden ups the ante by analyzing Hughes’s teaching notes in books that Plath had already taught and annotated, drawing distinctions between the two poets’ teaching styles and attitudes toward institutionalized modernism. Although brief in comparison to her earlier chapters, the book’s close evolves into (dare I say it?) a deft postmodernist *pas de trois*, with Golden critically commenting on Hughes’s marginal comments on Plath’s marginal comments on *Crime and Punishment*, a self-reflexive, borderline modernist text — a performance that prompted this reviewer to scrawl in the margins: well done!!!

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