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## Edna St. Vincent Millay

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[In the following essay Hart surveys Millay's life and career.]

Despite a publishing career that spanned three decades and a canon that ranges from lyrics to verse plays and political commentary, Edna St. Vincent Millay is probably best known for her early works, particularly "Renascence" (1912), *A Few Figs from Thistles* (1920), and *Second April* (1921). The first, a 214-line poem revealing a mystical view of the universe, God, and death, caused a sensation as the work of a girl just turned twenty. The second, a sassy celebration of feminism and free love, caught the mood of Greenwich Village life in the racy postwar period of the 1920's. *Second April* showed a more honest approach to the already favorite Millay themes of death, love, and nature. Millay's admirers also commend *Aria da Capo* (1920), a verse play on the foolishness of war, and certain of her sonnets, especially "Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare" (1923) and the sequences, "Epitaph for the Race of Man" (1934) and "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" (1923).

Edna St. Vincent Millay, the first of the three daughters of Cora Buzzelle Millay and Henry Tolman Millay, was born in Rockland, Maine, on 22 February 1892. In 1900 Cora Millay divorced her husband, an educator with a fondness for poker playing, and settled with her girls in Camden, Maine, providing for her family by nursing. It is little wonder that the poet retained a life-long devotion to the woman who encouraged in all her daughters self-reliance and a love for music and books. The musical talent of Vincent (as she was known in the family) was so obvious that a local teacher gave her piano lessons, hoping to prepare her for a musical career. After a few years the plan was abandoned, but music remained a source of pleasure, a subject for poetry, and undoubtedly the basis for her unfailing sense of poetic rhythm.

It was Millay's early interest in literature that became dominant and soon, augmented by her responsiveness to Nature, found expression in original compositions. At the age of fourteen she has a poem, "Forest Trees," published in *St. Nicholas* magazine, a popular children's periodical that printed a number of her juvenile works. At Camden High School she wrote for and eventually became editor of the school magazine. At her graduation in 1909 she recited an original poem, showing a third side of her early interest in the arts: dramatic performance.

In 1912, at her mother's urging, Millay submitted a long poem, which she entitled "Renaissance," in a contest designed to select pieces for an anthology called *The Lyric Year*. Ferdinand Earle, one of the judges, was delighted with the entry from E. Vincent Millay (as she then called herself), persuaded her to change the title to "Renascence," and fully expected the poem to win first prize. Other judges were not in agreement, and the poem ranked only fourth in the final tally. Nevertheless, when *The Lyric Year* was published in November 1912, "Renascence" received immediate critical acclaim. Two of the earliest to write their congratulations, poets Witter Bynner and Arthur Davison Ficke, became close friends.

The poem, in traditional tetrameter couplets, chronicles the poet's spiritual and emotional development. The enclosed childlike perspective of the opening, "All I could see from where I stood/ Was three long mountains and a wood," soon gives way to the persistence of the inquiring mind, "And reaching up my hand to try,/I screamed to feel it touch the sky." Extending this penetration, the young narrator feels the pressures of a sympathetic response to all humanity, driving her to death underground. A youthful will to live and the reviving power of nature in the image of rain, however, recall the transformed individual, who can now cry, "God, I can push the grass apart/And lay my finger on thy heart!" The heightened spiritual awareness gained by the imaginative experience is shown in the final stanza, which is starkly contrasting in perspective to the first: "The soul can split the sky in two,/And let the face of God shine through."

Many critics were impressed by the poem's youthful freshness, by its strong emotional impact, and by what Harriet Monroe called its "sense of infinity." Caroline B. Dow of the National Training School of the YWCA heard Millay read "Renescence" in Camden and helped her secure a scholarship to Vassar.

Millay, already in her twenties when she entered Vassar in 1914, after a semester's additional preparation at Barnard College, was very much involved in campus life as well as her studies. She published poems and plays in the Vassar *Miscellany*; acted regularly in school dramas, playing the lead in her own *The Princess Marries the Page* (published in 1932); and composed lyrics for a 1915 Founder's Day marching song. Her studies were concentrated on literature, drama, and both classic and modern languages. Critical biographer Norman Bittin notes, "Her education reinforced the influence of the classics upon her and insured that she would be a learned poet, one more like a Milton, Shelley, or Tennyson than a Whitman or Vachel Lindsay." Indeed, though her poetry would always be termed "American" in favor, her images and allusions were often based on the classics, while her rhythms and sentiments were forever inviting comparison to established poets from John Donne to A.E. Housman.

The Vassar years, with their feminine collegiality, also had an effect on Millay's outlook, either stimulating or solidifying a healthy regard for the friendship of women and the active feminist principles that were evident in her alter poetry. A spirited female independence, to be labeled "flippant" in *A Few Figs from Thistles*, displayed itself also, particularly in Millay's bridling at rigid dormitory rules. This is hardly shocking, coming from a woman in her mid-twenties.

In 1917, not long after her graduation, Millay's first volume of poetry, *Renescence and Other Poems*, was published by Mitchell Kennerley. In addition to the title poem, twenty-two others, many published earlier in periodicals, were included. Critics again responded warmly to "Renescence." The other long poem, "Interim," a blank-verse monologue delivered by a young narrator who has just lost his love, fails to convey the emotional honesty of "Renescence." The dramatic framework, whether it was a device suggested by her reading of Robert Browning and other poets of her own background in theater, was used more effectively by Millay in other works. Her fresh-eyed view of nature, always a Millay strength, is captured in the childlike experience of "Afternoon on a Hill," but it is regrettably cliched in the often-quoted line, "O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!," of the sentimental "God's World." Its "gaunt crag" and "black bluff" epitomize the artificial poetic diction of which her detractors were often to accuse her.

The last six poems in *Renescence and Other Poems* are sonnets. Though they are not remarkable, they do show indications of the uniquely feminine perspective that was to elicit praise for the best. Sonnet five, in the Shakespearean mode, projects the possible reaction of a young woman if she were to learn of her lover's death while she was in a public place. The realistic detail of the closing lines which should give a sharp sense of the mundane trivia preventing a genuine expression of grief, instead made some readers infer indifference:

I should but watch the station lights rush by  
With a more careful interest on my face,  
Or raise my eyes and read with greater care  
Where to store furs and how to treat  
the hair

The final sonnet, "Bluebeard," is of interest because she quite suitably transposes the image of Bluebeard's room to that of a feminine bastion, a place of privacy which must be abandoned when profaned by male intrusion. It shows also the prominence of fairy tales as a source of her literary inspiration.

The appearance of this first volume made Millay a presence in the literary world, but it brought her no financial rewards. Millay returned to New York City, hoping to make a living through acting. She and her sister Norma moved to Greenwich Village, home of the Provincetown Players.

In the Village spirits were high and free. It was a new kind of intellectual awakening for Millay, quite different from the formalized education of Vassar. Women's rights and free love were an accepted part of the living code, and the determination to experience life to the full was heightened by the reality of World War I, with its daily records of young lives lost. Millay had long ago shown an independence of spirit which suited her admirably to Village life. The fact that she was an attractive, slender redhead was certainly an added advantage, and the young woman who was so recently surrounded by loving female friendships soon had a line of male suitors vying for her attention. Floyd Dell was the first of the lovers Millay was to have in the Village.

In 1918 Millay finally met Arthur Davison Ficke, with whom she had corresponded since his first congratulations on the publication of "Renescence." Ficke, an accomplished sonneteer, had obviously influenced Millay's experimentation with the form. Through their correspondence, she had come to think of the married man as her spiritual mentor. While he was in New York on his way to a military posting in France, however, they had an intense three-day affair. The emotional experience found direct expression in love letters and sonnets written to Ficke (such as "Into the golden vessel of great song") and indirectly in much of her other work. Though they were to remain lifelong friends, the ardor cooled.

The romances and all-night parties made a gay life, but the Village years were ones of poverty for Millay. She made no money from her acting and had to work hard to sell a few poems. One of her chief sources of revenue at this time was *Ainslee's*, a magazine with no literary pretensions. Since she was paid by the line, poetry did not bring a very great return, so she began turning out prose, along with some light poetry, under the pseudonym of Nancy Boyd. These pieces were later collected in *Distressing Dialogues* by "Nancy Boyd," with a coy preface by Edna St. Vincent Millay, in 1924.

In 1920 Millay met Edmund Wilson, who was later, unsuccessfully, to propose marriage to the poet. He was an editor at *Vanity Fair*, a magazine appealing to much more sophisticated tastes than *Ainslee's*. With his influence, Millay began to have most of her work published in that periodical. This brought much-needed capital to the young woman, still involved in the exciting, nonpaying world of

theater: acting, writing, and directing. The *Vanity Fair* exposure also gave rise to the popularity the poet was to maintain for many years.

Her second volume of poetry, *A Few Figs from Thistles*, was published by Frank Shay in 1920. The arch tone of this collection did not please reviewers. It did, however, clearly reflect the impression the fast life and fleeting loves had made on the young woman always receptive to emotional experiences. The feelings may have been shallow, as seen in these lines from "To the Not Impossible Him"-

The fabric of my faithful love  
No power shall dim or ravel  
Whilst I stay here,-but oh, my dear,  
If I should ever travel!

-but the saucy kick at convention seen in this poem and others, such as the "First Fig" with its memorable "My candle burns at both ends," appealed to the postwar generation. Here too was the voice of feminism: women as well as men could be casual in their treatment of sexual love, go on with life when it was over, and look forward to the next affair. Writing much later in his *Lives of the Poets* (1961), Louis Untermeyer most clearly identified the reason for popularity of Millay's poetry during this period: "Plain and rhetorical, traditional in form and unorthodox in spirit, it satisfied the reader's dual desire for familiarity and surprise."

Millay finished *Aria da Capo*, a one-act verse play, for the 1919-1920 Provincetown Players season. It proved to be the outstanding success of the year for them. Starkly dramatic in its concept and construction, the play begins with the stock harlequin characters Columbine and Pierrot exchanging inanities and satirizing current trends:

PIERROT. Don't stand so near me!  
I am become a socialist. I love  
Humanity; but i hate people. Columbine,  
Put on your mittens, child; your hands are cold.

The light mood abruptly ends when Cothurnus, the masque of Tragedy, chases the Harlequins from the stage and forces the shepherds Thyrsis and Corydon to play their scene. The two friends play a game, building a wall between them with the stage props constructed of colored crepe paper, apparently cutting Corydon off from a stream. They begin to take the game seriously, their jealousy over possession deepening when Corydon finds a bowl of jewels (confetti) on his side. Before long the two have murdered each other with their carefully guarded possessions: Thyrsis poisons Corydon with tainted water from the stream and Corydon strangles Thyrsis with a string of the precious stones. Cothurnus gives a command to cut the scene, hastily putting a table over the bodies of the slain shepherds and kicking the protruding limbs beneath it. When the Harlequins protest that they cannot continue their scene with bodies under the table, Cothurnus advises them just to pull down the table cover so that the shepherds are out of sight. They do so and resume their chatter. This harsh climax delivers a powerful statement about the folly of war and the callous disregard for human life.

The year of especially hard work brought the additional reward of a \$100 prize from *Poetry* magazine for "The Bean-Stalk," which was to appear in her next published collection, *Second April* (1921). Overwork and an active life also brought illness and nervous exhaustion. At the beginning of 1921, however, she was able to sail for Europe, thanks to *Vanity Fair* editor Frank Crowninshield, who paid her a regular wage for pieces she would send from there. In the two years she spent abroad Nancy Boyd articles comprise her chief bread-and-butter writing.

*Second April*, which came out in 1921, includes much of the same kind of poetry seen in earlier collections. There is the juvenile piece "Journey" with its youthful celebration of nature: "The world is mine: blue hill, still silver lake." The clear, childlike spirit that was such a true voice for Millay is also joyfully exercised in the prizewinning "The Bean-Stalk":

Ho, Giant! This is I!  
I have built me a bean-stalk into your sky!  
La,-but its lovely, up so hight!

In the same collection, the striking if simplistic image of "The Blue-Flag in the Bog" gives voice again to Millay's love of nature and elevates it as the only thing that makes heaven bearable to a child destroyed by a holocaust.

Even in the familiar themes, there is a pervading sense of disenchantment in the volume. "Spring" asks, "To what purpose, April, do you return again?/Beauty is not enough." "Lament" gives a poignant sense of a family's loss of the dead father through skillful use of concrete objects:

There'll be in his pockets  
Things he used to put there,  
Keyes and pennies  
Covered with tobacco.

Many readers were reminded of Housman's *A Shropshire Lad*. A more personal record of loss, the moving sequence "Memorial to D.C.," for Vassar friend Dorothy Coleman, culminates in a precise image: "Once the ivory box is broke,/Beats the golden bird no more."

Norman Brittin suggests that Millay's disenchantment with New York City is evident in the collection, especially in "Ode to Silence," a technically accomplished poem on the search for peace, containing the classical allusions and poetic diction which some readers praised and others deplored. Padraic Colum called it "nothing more than a literary exercise." Undoubtedly it reflected the mental state of the poet just before leaving for Europe.

Perhaps the most highly praised qualities of the collection are the maturing outlook of the poet who cries out for continued life through his work in "The Poet and His Book" and the deft musicality of such lines as "Suns that shine by night,/Mountains made from valleys' from this poem and "There will be rose and rhododendron/When you are dead and under ground" from "Elegy Before Death."

Early in 1921, at the beginning of her stay in Europe, Millay finished the five-act verse play *The Lamp and the Bell*, commissioned for the fiftieth anniversary of Vassar's Alumnae Association. It was published by Shay in the same year. The germ of its story is the Grimm brothers' tale "Snow white and Rose Red," but the play is fleshed out as an Elizabethan drama. At a medieval Italian court the two main characters, Bianca (Snow White) and the robust Beatrice (Rose Red), became sisters when their parents marry. Like the fairy-tale characters, the sisters are devoted to each other and remain so after Bianca's ambitious mother Octavia contrives to have Bianca's warm vulnerability draw King Mario away from Beatrice, with whom he is falling in love. The noble Beatrice never reveals her feelings for Mario to Bianca, and when her father, King Lorenzo, dies, she ably manages his kingdom. After a period of five years, in which Bianca has given birth to two children, Beatrice is attacked by brigands while out hunting. Mario, also hunting in the area, rushes to help but is killed by Beatrice, who mistakes him for one of her attackers. Injured herself, she is taken to her castle to recuperate and is soon visited by Bianca, who wonders why she has not come to comfort her. Beatrice confesses she accidentally killed Mario, and Bianca leaves, now doubly stricken.

In a dramatically charged, if contrived, final act, Bianca is dying and Beatrice has been imprisoned by the arch villain Guido, who has been responsible for much of the duplicity. He agrees to let her go to Bianca, who has sent for her, only after she agrees to surrender herself to him. The sisters are reunited just seconds before Bianca dies. Continuity of their attachment is assured when Beatrice takes Bianca's two daughters (echoes of themselves as children). In the final scene Beatrice's wise fool Fidelio seeks out the mourning queen to tell her that Guido has been murdered by Francesca, the woman he had scorned.

This summary gives no suggestion of the multitude of characters—ladies and lords of the court, servants, pantomime players—that provided a suitable number of parts for the alumnae extravaganza. Probably only for such an occasion could the poet feel free enough to play with the themes of female platonic love as well as feminism so freely. Though the poet herself did not take the work seriously, the drama shows how she could take an essential human truth (the firm friendship of young girls) and make it her own. Unlike the Grimms' heroines, whose adventures in the story are symbolic introductions to sexual love, after which they take their destined places as wives, Millay's protagonists insist that platonic devotion is a genuine feminine trait that does not end when one reaches marriageable age.

Though more-recent commentators, such as Brittin, have deplored the stereotypes and contrivances and though Millay herself thought the play would surely suffer in obvious comparison to Elizabethan works, Mark Van Doren, writing in 1921, found the drama delightful, predicting it would be "best remembered as a delicate riot of gay asides and impeccable metaphors, Elizabethan to the bottom yet not in the least derivative; it bubbles pure poetry."

In contrast to *The Lamp and the Bell*, the other verse play that was published in the same year, *Two Slaterns and a King*, is an easily dismissed farce in regular four-foot couplets that Millay had both written and produced at Vassar. Borrowing again from fairy tales, she used the theme of the king seeking a suitable bride. He desires the tidiest woman in the kingdom, but because of an odd series of accidents that will occur in daily life, he mistakenly chooses Slut instead of Tidy. Millay's European travels took her to France, England, Albania, Italy, Austria, and Hungary. These were years of adventure and discovery, undoubtedly, but they were also lonely ones for the poet. Both of her younger sisters married, and Arthur Davison Ficke, whose marriage was breaking up, had already formed a close relationship with Gladys Brown. It is not surprising that Millay accepted a long-distance marriage proposal from poet Witter Bynner, Ficke's closest friend. There is some question about the seriousness of the initial proposal. In any case, after a short period of time, both agreed that the match would not work. By the spring of 1922, Millay was able to bring her mother to Europe, boosting the spirits of both women.

Despite her ill health and concentration on the Nancy Boyd pieces in 1922, Millay did publish some poetry in that year, including a pamphlet of her poem *The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver*. Her efforts were crowned with a Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1923.

Back in New York at a party in the spring of 1923, Millay was paired with Eugen Boissevain, a man she had met at previous Village gatherings, as lovers in a game of charades. Boissevain was a forty-three-year-old businessman and widower. Though the two had shown no interest in each other before, a strong attraction developed on that single night, and the two were married on 18 July 1923. If her public was surprised that the free spirit had succumbed to marriage, it could have not quarrel with the whirlwind way she went about it. Immediately after the wedding, Boissevain took his wife to the hospital for intestinal surgery. This fatherly solicitude was to be a trademark of their marriage, as Boissevain relieved Millay from the burden of everyday details. He was also an ardent feminist and had a high regard for the significance of Millay's writing.

*The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems* was prepared during her convalescence and was published in 1923 by Harper and Brothers, with whom Millay was to form a lasting business association. If readers were looking for a marked maturity or some fresh insights as a result of her European travel, they must have been disappointed, for most of the poems in the collection explored themes already closely associated with the writer. John Gould Fletcher summarily dismissed the title poems as "the unforgettable rhythm of Mother Goose, the verbal utterance of a primer—all used to deal out an idea which is wishy-washy to the point of intellectual feebleness...." The poem is the sentimental story of a little boy's mother, who dies on Christmas Eve, but not before weaving on "the harp with a woman's head" an appropriate legacy:

And piled up beside her  
And toppling to the skies,  
Were the cloathes of a king's son  
Just my size

The poem has been seen as an allegory of the rich cultural gifts Cora Millay had given her children, even when necessities were difficult to obtain. That may be the case, but the poem can also be seen as one of the more successful of the instances in which Millay used the child's voice. The simple quatrains, reminiscent of nursery rhymes, convey the child's sense of wonder, alerting the reader to the imminence of magic, and delivering the essential emotional truths possible only through the folk medium. In the third of the thirty stanzas, Millay introduces the unusual harp, and any child who knows "Jack and the Beanstalk" is aware that special magic is going to be worked. Likewise, while the conclusion may seem maudlin, it has the charm of the concluding image of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Little Match Girl."

The volume also shows the poet's continuing willingness to experiment with form while pursuing favorite themes, as in "never May the Fruit Be Plucked," a statement about the inevitable staleness of love, delivered in free verse, with a characteristic image in its conclusion: "The winter of love is a cellar of empty bins,/In an orchard soft with rot." Those who found a mature, more-informed tone to the poems on the loss of love and the unwillingness to accept death were surprised to find poems such as "The Betrothal," in which a woman coldly agrees to marry a man she does not love: "I might as well be easing you/As lie alone in bed." This tone is more appropriate to *A Few Figs from Thistles*.

Also in this collection are some of Millay's best-known sonnets. The seventeen-part series, "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree," gives a revealing picture of a woman returning to her estranged husband only to east his death. Not only are the woman's memories and actions sharply focused, but the poems are filled with detailed pictures of homely New England farm life.

By far Millay's best-known sonnet is that which begins "Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare." Millay had already received praise for her search for beauty in nature and in human beings, but here she transcends the simply personal, elevating beauty through the mathematical conceit. Mere mortals must forego the sight of beauty and hope at most for the sound of the feminized ideal: "Fortunate they/Who, though once only and then but far away,/Have heard her massive sandal set on stone." The Petrarchan octave gains auditory power from enjambment, as in "let geese/Gabble and hiss...." The sestet with its startling representation of Euclid's vision as "light anatomized" is executed with a *cdcccd* rhyme pattern, with the final "stone" throwing emphasis back on "Euclid alone" at the end of the eleventh line. Oscar Cargill testified to its continuing power when he wrote in 1941 that this was a poem one could return to and find something fresh.

The years that followed were busy ones, even though no major new work was published. Millay did a midwestern reading tour in 1924, finding to her disappointment that audiences knew only the poems from *A Few Figs from Thistles*. In the same year, showing an increasing public involvement in social issues, she read her poem "The Pioneer" at a National Women's Party celebration in Washington, D.C., to mark the anniversary of the Seneca Falls Equal Rights meeting. Shortly after, Millay and her husband set out on a lengthy tour which took them to three Orient, India, and France. Upon returning, they purchased a rambling old farm, which they named Steepletop, in Austerlitz, New York. It was a retreat from the city and home for the rest of their lives. Yet another peak in this eventful period was the first academic recognition of her poetry when Tufts University granted her an honorary Litt. D. degree in 1925.

In 1926 Millay was able to combine her three major talents and chief interest-poetry, drama, and music-in the libretto for *The King's Henchman*, an opera by Deems Taylor. The story recounts the tragic undoing of a tenth-century liegeman who betrays his lord's trust by marrying the woman he was sent to bring to the king, were she found acceptable. The libretto presented Millay with the kind of challenges she liked best: creating an authentic archaic flavor in the language while charging it with a genuine music and the freshness of wit, and conveying the heroic ideal of male friendship while delivering a sharp portrayal of a spirited female chafing at the confines of a male-dominated society. She succeeded, and the opera, performed by the Metropolitan Opera, was well received.

Ever sensitive to the problems of the human condition, Millay's demand for justice and equality increasingly took the form of social protest. She wrote to withdraw her name of social protest. She wrote to withdraw her name from the League of American Penwomen in 1927 because they had expelled poet Elinor Wylie, who had broken the rules of convention by living with a married man. She marched with protestors in Boston in defense of Sacco and Vanzetti and was arrested. She has an interview on their behalf with the governor of Massachusetts, but it was to no avail.

"Justice Denied in Massachusetts," the poem Millay wrote to raise public feeling against the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti, was included in her 1928 collection, *The Buck in the Snow and Other Poems*. It and the title poem employ nature images to cry against death, and both contain a bitter, poignant note in their suggestion that mankind itself is an accomplice to this waste, the first by suggesting we are willing to sit and wait for death, allowing the good earth to go to waste around us, and the second by the unstated presence of the hunter who has brought the buck to the ground. Some reviewers, such as Babette Deutsch and Louis Untermeyer, saw the collection as more of the same railing against death, but others, including Max Eastman, found more resonance in the lyrics. Though deploring the somber tone, Untermeyer was pleased by the experimentation with line, as can be seen in the final stanza of "The Anguish":

The anguish of the world is on my tongue;  
My bowl is filled to the brim with it; there is more  
than I can eat.  
Happy are the toothless old and the toothless young,  
That cannot rend this meat.

The poet insists that death, especially senseless death, must be fought against, and comfort and sense must be found in life. She found them, characteristically, in nature, the bobolink "Chuckling under the rain," and in the sublime order of music, as in the admirable Shakespearean sonnet "On Hearing a Symphony of Beethoven." In addition to her customary deft handling of form, the poet charged the poet with the intensity of the enraptured listener-"Sweet sounds, oh, beautiful music, do not cease!"-and was able to convey as well the dramatic moment of the concert itself, as other transfixed listeners for the moment bear no trace of their everyday pettiness.

Edd Winfield Parks, writing in the January-March 1930 issue of *Sewanee Review*, noted the emerging of a philosophy and considered the work a benchmark, predicting that she could not keep up the lyric intensity with the passing years.

Millay's next collection, published in 1931, was a bold undertaking. *Fatal Interview*, taking its title from a Donne line, is a sequence of fifty-two sonnets telling the story of a love affair. Recent evidence has indicated that an affair Millay had at this time with George Dillon, the much younger man with whom she was to translate Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*, was the inspiration for this tale of love won and lost. The first sonnet contains an allusion to Selene and Endymion, though they are not named until the final one. Love is elevated by these classical references, but the poet blends them with the voice of the modern woman, who offers love openly and with the freshness of a child. Love runs its inevitable course, echoed by the cyclical pattern of nature.

the sustained theme and its blending of classicism and sensibility gave a more reflective and universal quality to the work than in other Millay love poems, but this quality did not please all contemporary readers. Many missed the strong, purely personal note; others believed, with Allen Tate, that she had failed to probe the symbols she used as frame. But whether they saw the collection as a rejuvenation of the sonnet form or as a clever exercise in its manipulation, reviewers praised her technical performance. Sharp images the musical language abound, and both can be found in the single opening line of sonnet eleven: "Not in a silver casket cool with pearls." The same poem, an artfully constructed single sentence, displays also the poet's dramatic sureness of voice, as the guileless narrator offers love: "I bring you, calling out as children do:/'Look what I have!-And these are all for you.'"

The final sonnet of *Fatal Interview*, which Tate in his review judged her best poem to that time, is richly evocative, bringing together the picture of endless sleeping Endymion and a love-distracted Selene, devastatingly portrayed through fragmented images of the moon seen through clouds and reflected on the sea.

By the time *Wine from These Grapes* appeared in 1934, Millay had suffered the death of her mother and was experiencing increasingly anxiety over the fate of mankind itself as global tensions escalated. These two events—one personal and one universal—dominated the contents of the volume. In light of their coincidence, it is not surprising to find a more objective viewpoint in her treatment of death. Not only was the poet mature in years, but she had traveled extensively and had obviously responded to the life she had viewed. The prevailing tone seems to be one of anger rather than the bitterness some contemporary readers sensed. In the controlled, predominantly Petrarchan sonnet sequence "Epitaph for the Race of Man," she achieved a sharp picture of history of living things, the best in man's nature, and the inexplicable certainty of his self-destruction. The style is rhetorical and contains some highly elaborated conceits, such as her comparison of man to a split diamond "set in brass on the swart thumb of Doom." Sonnet two, dealing with the dinosaur, is an equally astonishing but more effective picture that conveys the idea of the transiency of dominant life forms:

His consort held aside her heavy tail,  
And took the seed; and heard the seed confined  
Roar in her womb; and made a nest to hold  
A hatched-out conqueror ... but to no avail:  
The veined and fertile eggs are long since cold.

Reviewers such as Percy Hutchison and Harisold Lewis Cook praised the sequence, many considering it one of her best. Association with "Epitaph for the Race of Man" enriches the collection's more personal poems alluding to the death of her mother. In "Childhood Is the Kingdom Where Nobody Dies" Millay, always attuned to the child's perspective, successfully captures the child's voice in free verse. The use of cataloguing and extended line conveys the impatience of children who have to deal with adults who pay no attention to the important things: "To be grown up is to sit at the table with people who have died,/who neither listen nor speak." In the 1930's the whole world was filled with adults who would not listen but relentlessly prepared for war.

Millay spent 1935 working, both in New York with George Dillon and in Paris, on the translation of Baudelaire's *Flowers of Evil*, which was published in 1936. The chief feature of the translation was the retaining of Baudelaire's hexameter line. While the exercise must have appealed to the technician in Millay, the translation seemed to Allen Tate and Mary Colum a flabby English rendering that did not do credit to Baudelaire.

A more interesting project was underway in 1936, however: the controversial *Conversation at Midnight* (1937), the most experimental of Millay's works. The first copy of the work was destroyed in a hotel fire while the poet was vacationing in Florida, so it had to be completely redone. More than a hundred pages long, the work is the script of the after-dinner conversation of several acquaintances at the New York home of the independently wealthy Ricardo. The host is a liberal agnostic, and his guests include a stockbroker, a painter, a writer of short stories, a poet who is also a communist, a Roman Catholic priest, and a young advertiser. The opinions of these guests vary as much as their ages and professions. Although talk begins innocuously enough with hunting, it wanders inevitably to women and eventually to contemporary social issues, eliciting verbal attacks which very nearly lead to blows after the priest has left. At the end Ricardo pours them all a final drink, and they leave.

though written in play form, the work has no dramatic structure and remains an exchange of diverging ideas, albeit one in which there is increasing tension. Millay used a variety of poetic forms in the delivery. At times the characters speak in sonnets, and in the humorous discussion of women their accents are those of Ogden Nash.

Peter Monroe Jack and Basil Davenport applauded this distinctive break from her usual style, hailing the work as a faithful portrayal of the trouble period. Yet John Gilland Brunini, William Plomer, and John Peale Bishop were dismayed by the odd mix of line and rhythms and disappointed by the inconclusiveness of the argument.

In 1936 Millay suffered a back injury in an automobile accident. Added to her already frail health, it was to hamper her work for years. Her next collection of poetry, *Huntsman, What Quarry?*, did not appear until 1939. Its poems, composed over several years, included

the same range of themes and styles that characterized the earlier volumes. There are pieces about lost love with the old sass, such as "Pretty Love, I Must Outlive You," and those with a more tolerant understanding of brief love, as "Song for Young Lovers in a City." There are also death poems, notably the sequence "To Elinor Wylie," who had died in 1928, and, of course, nature poems. The title poem, about a dramatic encounter between a young maid and the huntsman she attempts to dissuade from the chase with the offer of a warm bed, has philosophical implications in contrasting the feminine and the masculine approaches to life.

Robert Francis, recommending the collection as representative of the essential Millay, pointed to the dramatic quality of the poems—"the poet appearing in one part after another, effective in each"—as the key to success with readers. He missed, however, a consistent poetic vision. His comments surely were relevant for this volume and, indeed, provide a useful lens for viewing the entire body of Millay's work.

In the 1940's Millay could not maintain her former pacifism. The atrocities of Hitler's German forced her to take a different position, and she literally threw her talent into the war effort. She rightly subtitled *Make Bright the Arrows* "1940 Notebook," but this subtitle did not excuse the prostitution of her talent or make the contents any more palatable. It must have taken every bit of Millay's considerable reading skill to make, "If I address thee in archaic style—Words obsolete, words obsolescent" approximate anything like poetry when she read it at Carnegie Hall in 1941. The intense personal voice had been a most successful idiom for Millay in the past, but lovers of poetry had to agree with Babette Deutsch, whose review claimed, "when she turns to political themes, the gay impudence of her girlhood, the sensitive curiosity of her more mature work, are lost in the shriek of a helplessly angry woman."

*The Murder of Lidice*, a propaganda piece written for the Writers' War Board in 1942, is an overly sentimental ballad recounting the German destruction of the Czech village through the story of two village lovers planning to marry on that very day.

The strain of these years resulted in a nervous breakdown in 1944, and recovery was slow. Several friends died in the 1940's, most notably Arthur Davison Ficke in 1945. Eugen Boissevain, her mainstay, died in August, 1949. Though Millay never recovered emotionally or physically, she continued to write, planning another collection. Still at work, she died of a heart attack at Steepletop on 19 October 1950.

*Mine the Harvest*, published in 1954, seems a suitable concluding volume. The poet's voice often has the refreshing colloquial style that makes her letters so delightful to read, as in the untitled, "I woke in the night and heard the wind, and it blowing half a gale./Blizzard, by gum! I said to myself out loud, 'What an/elegant/Hissing and howling, what a roar!'"

There is much close observation of nature in this volume, and, if there are hints of the wonder seen already in "God's World," the observer is seasoned by experience of many years, surprised that the now-dead snake had shared her garden all summer, and wondering if the seed of love can thrive in her stony heart as the acorn has grown into a mighty oak in "Here in a Rocky Cup."

This reflective cast, of the individual looking for an affirmation of life and the strength to endure one's declining years, is evident in such diverse poems in the collection as the untitled one beginning "The courage that my mother had" and "Tristan," with the dying lover propped against the thriving oak.

Millay's old spirit does break into the collection. "How innocent we lie among/The righteous! ..." shows her feisty approval of taking love where it can be found. Her poetic philosophy is delightfully put forth in the sonnet "I will put Chaos into fourteen lines."

Contemporary reviewers thought *Mine the Harvest* too intellectualized the woman who had been their poet of sensibility, but it seems a most fitting conclusion to the work of a sensitive individual who had always used her pen to let people know just where she stood with life.

By the 1950's Millay's voice was no longer reflective of the spirit of the times, and John Ciardi, in an article written shortly after her death, suggested, "It was not as a craftsman nor as an influence, but as the creator of her own legend that she was most alive for us. Her success was a figure of passionate living." Yet in the same article he admits to being awakened in his youth to a "sudden sense of life" in her saucy lyrics, and concludes by wondering if her place in literature will be as the reflector of youthful discoveries to be outgrown with maturity.

Ciardi was probably right in identifying youth as the audience with which Millay would always have the greatest impact. The ecstasy of first love and initial sexual experience, accompanied by the bravado necessary to survive its ending, and the stubborn insistence on life seem vital to every new generation, and her poetry continues to attract young readers able to find their feelings matched in her words.

Millay, however, should also be recognized for breaking through the boundaries of conventional subject matter for women writes, while showing the range and the depth of the feminine character. She achieved success in dramatic, operatic, and lyric composition, and her best sonnets demonstrate a masterful handling of form.

Brittin, in his revised *Edna St. Vincent Millay*, blames modernist editors of anthologies for much of the neglect of the poet in the 1950's and 1960's. Neirman's 1977 bibliography of criticism and Brittin's 1982 revision, along with other recent works, give testimony to an increased interest in Millay's work, which may lead to the much-needed consideration of her mature work.

"Edna St. Vincent Millay," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography, Volume 45: American Poets, 1880-1945, First Series*, edited by Peter Quartermain, Gale Research Company, 1986, pp. 264-76.

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