

**Feminine Revolt and Self-Expression:
A Study of Selected Poems by
Edna St. Vincent Millay**

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In the 1920s, Edna St. Vincent Millay was America's most read, most beloved poet. Critical biographer, Elizabeth Atkins gives some indication of Millay's nationally "intoxicating effect on people" in describing the reception of her second collection "A Few Figs from Thistles":

To say it becomes popular conveys but a faint idea of the truth. Millay became, in effect, the unrivalled embodiment of sex appeal, the It-girl of the hour, the Miss America of the 1920s. It seemed there was hardly a literate young person in all the speaking English World who was not soon repeating [her verses] (qtd in Miller 1).

In fact, Millay exercised a great personal and literary influence among the New York Literati and Greenwich Village regarded her 'with awe' even before her arrival there. As a matter of fact, in an era where literary criticism has been dominated by avant-garde formalism, Millay's passionate sonnets were widely admired and imitated by writers of all kind.

But, as Atkin's comment suggests, Millay stood for more than lyricism and sentiment. She represented New Womanhood and the assertive sexuality that gave focus to culture's diffuse ambivalence about contemporary social change. Her verses intoned the full expression of what emancipated young woman of the 1920s had to say: every attitude of her social and sexual revolt against the proprieties of an older generation was caught and crystallized her freedom with lovers; real or imaginary, her defense of the idea of the sexual equality for woman and their right to be promiscuous and without obligation regarding love relationships. In short, her poetry can be considered an exercise in the release of feminine emotions (Gregory 267-269).

In Greenwich Village, Millay served to anchor the Bohemian identity in Free Love, the pursuit of authentic intimate relations without interference from artificial constraints, legal or social, or their psychological residue, jealousy. Accordingly, the most representative themes in her poetry are bittersweet love, sorrow, the inevitability of change, erotic desires, loss, separation and search for identity. Millay's new attitude and ideas were not mere hedonism; the personal transformation upon which this ideal depended was seen explicitly as part of wider cultural, social, and political changes. In a succinct and conscious description, the novelist John Dos Passos wrote the following account of the artistic community of Greenwich Village after World War I-- which was the period of Millay's greatest poetic prominence:

American Bohemia was in revolt against Main Street, against the power of money, against Victorian morals. Freedom was the theme...The businessman could never understand. It was part of a world-wide revolt of artists and thinkers against a society where most of the rewards went to people skillful in the manipulation of money...when artists and writers found it hard to make themselves rich in industrial society, they repudiated the whole business. Greenwich Village was their refuge, the free commune of Montemarte on American soil. (Hamilton 2)

Millay appears in the Greenwich Village as the poetic voice of eternal youth, feminine revolt and liberation. Her early poems, according to Hamilton, are "the essence of the younger generation" for they answer this generation's demand to be free. Free for what? No one knows, but they "drove faster, drank more and made love oftener"(qtd in Gregory 268).

For many woman writers who had to negotiate the cultural paradigm of the new woman in the beginning of the twentieth century,

Millay was a powerful model for reconciling the competing demand of a simultaneously 'public, iconic, and literary femininity'(Millar 3). Furthermore, the nature of her position in bohemia masks her subcultural affiliation uniquely accessible as a discrete determining force in her work. Generally speaking, Millay's poems do not mourn absent love but rejoices in love's impermanence. In A Few Figs from Thistles, Millay presents herself as a flippant leader of flaming youth flaunting her right to be sexually promiscuous. She assumes, according to August Bonnie Tymorski, the persona of "an idealized emancipated woman" who insists on rejecting traditional female roles and on shocking her elders (qtd in Nierman and Patton 1).

In this volume, she describes female sexuality in a way that gained her much attention, as she puts forward the idea that woman has every right to sexual pleasure and no obligation to fidelity. Hence, her declarations

I shall forget you presently, my dear
 So make most of this, your little day.

 Oh, think not I am faithful to a vow!
 Faithless am I save to love's self love

 I would desert you-think not but I would
 I seek another as I thought you first
 and finally
 So wanton, light and false, my love, are you,
 I am most faithless when I am most true.¹

These lines help to "resolve hampering attitudes of the period" regarding female sexuality and Millay's position as a lover and to "restore genuine and frank feeling" to a genteel literary environment"(Nierman 11). More significant is that Millay's love poetry helps to reverse long established traditions regarding the male-female lover and the roles they play in love game since Petrarch. The lovers are no longer the

representative of the 'Courtly Love' values and tradition, where the male lover is abject, sad and miserable waiting for any sign of acceptance from his disdainful beloved; Millay's lovers play their roles on equal footing. They are outspoken and frank regarding sexual prerogatives and indulge in love-making without any regard for moral or social considerations. Unlike the traditional female addressee in love poetry which draws upon the Carpediem motif such as "To His Coy Mistress" by Andrew Marvell, the speaker of Millay "I Being Born a Woman and Distressed" could never be accused of sexual coyness. She is outspoken in declaring her erotic desires and refuses the association of sexual power with youth and beauty. As Stacy Carson Hubbard points, the woman in the sonnet portrays "the body's ruin as its badge of sexual authority and the sign that it has been well used."(104) Moreover, in contrast to the virginal addressee in the traditional Carpediem poem who is urged upon to a change of state, Millay's female is a woman with a past that has taught her the ephemerality of all things, and who challenges death, declaring "thou famished grave, I will not fill thee yet," and spends her energies "burning her candle at both ends, eating up her life and love before they manage to eat her" (Kaiser 1). As in all her love poetry, the female in "I Being..." plays all the available roles in the sexual context simultaneously: she is at once 'zestful,' 'frenzied,' 'seductress,' and 'staggering victim;' 'silent beloved' and scornful mistress 'distressed,' 'urged and undone,' yet capable of enjoying her moment.

The same argument is valid in "Well, I have lost you." The female speaker in this sonnet refuses to respond to an emotional breakup stereotypically by crying and defaming and accusing her ex-lover of unfaithfulness. Instead, she coldly admits to having lost her lover fairly and speculates that their relationship might have been prolonged but only by force, or by loving less or strategically. But even then, they would not

be able to have their past joy. The result is a determination to drink deeply of love while it lasts and not to hold grudges after that for she is "...shall have only to say well of [him]" However, the title "Well, I have lost you" tells of a non-erasable grief on the part of the rational speaker who submits to sexual desire despite her cool calculated treatment of it. (Eckhardt 1)

In addition to dissociating sex from commitment in "I Being," and celebrating a bohemian way of life in "Well, I have....," Millay transforms in "Love is not Blind" a moment of anxiety over her lover's lack of beauty into an attack on patriarchal notions of beauty and love. In the process, Millay discovers the constructed nature of physical beauty, while recognizing that she "can not fully escape the patriarchal structure that prizes its own construction" (Sychterz 3). Reminiscent of Shakespeare's sonnet '130' "My Mistress's Eyes are Nothing Like the Sun," Millay's "Love is not Blind" criticizes the Petrarchan tradition of love poetry. Both sonnets reverse the values of the Platonic idealization of love-object regarding her/his physical qualities by listing physical "imperfections" which put them below the overstated standards of Petrarchan beauty ideal:

I know the imperfections of your face
The eyes too wide apart, the brow too high
For beauty.

However, the final couplet in Shakespeare's sonnet and Millay's sonnet title "Love is not Blind" which reverses the cliché "Love is Blind" help to falsify the traditional Petrarchan similes, bring the transcendent beauty standards back to earth and evacuate them of any meaning. To sum up, these sonnets are characterized, Eckhardt points out, by "an iconoclastic rejection of the common sense regarding so called "romantic interpersonal relationships."(1)

Millay's sonnets embody another aspect of the period she was living in that is the bohemian identity which presented her with enormous social and psychological pressures. The prevalence of the images of dissolution, loss, death and separation in her erotic poem, suggests her failure "to adjust to the frenzied life of which she was outwardly the symbol"(Sharon Mayer Libra, qtd in Nierman 16). In connection with this, Edmund Wilson sheds light on the type of wildly agitated life Millay was living; "We [suitors] swarmed to Edna's apartment, devoured her time and force, and finally...had rendered her life intolerable"(qtd in Miller 4). However, it must be said that Edna herself participated actively in the construction of her own persona and significantly shaped the very subcultural ideals to which it answered. Her sonnets are an attempt to manage a public and unconventional female sexuality. In this capacity, she was most New and Modern Woman. Yet her lyricism and the traditional poetic forms she uses represent a rejection of modernist creeds as enunciated by T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Unlike them, her poetry is not puzzling and makes no demands on the reader (Amy Clampitt qtd in Nierman 2). Moreover, in contradistinction to Eliot's concept of impersonality in poetic writing, Millay's poetry remains intensely personal-an aspect which translates her strong belief that the personal is the poetic (Gilbert 31).

Millay's early collections contain some of the best known articulation of the bohemian ethos. During her childhood, Millay has been through difficult times. The familial instability, the absence of her father-Millay's mother divorced him for financial irresponsibility- and the constant absence of her mother-an overnight nurse-help together to create the woman we realize in Millay. She was brought up to be self-sufficient and independent. Robert L. Gale saw her as a prominent member of the 'Lost Generation' who rebelled against the rules and constraints put by the

older generation (2). She laments the absence of her father in "The Suicide" where she curses life, contemplates the destiny of man, and expresses a wish to get rid of this weary, boring life:

Curse thee, Life. I will live with thee no more!
 Thou hast mocked me, starved me, beat my body sore.

 With me, whence fear and faith alike are flown
 Lonely I come, and I depart alone
 And know not where nor unto whom I go.

Millay's "Sonnets from an Ungrafted Tree" beckons the reader to consider marriage, gender, and identity within the context of a household that is crumbling under the weight of a failed marriage and the patriarch's death. The woman returns to the house as a stranger "Loving [her husband] not at all." This fact highlights a seemingly irreconcilable fissure between them. Moreover, besides shedding light on this wound in their relationship, the poem is also about the woman's confinement in "his house" and the possibility of her constructing a new identity after his death. She returns out of duty and not love.

There is no dialogue between the husband and wife, only patches of their past and present. When her husband dies, her obligation to him dissolved, and the possibility of a new identity and selfhood emerges. As Sandra M. Gilbert points out, Millay in this sonnet sequence analyses the courage and relates the experience of "The New England Woman," and offers the authority of the female experience (qtd in Callen 3). The poem explores the privation of a failed marriage from the point of view of a disillusioned wife who left her husband but hearing he is ill:

Come back into this house again
 And watched beside his bed until he dies
 Loving him not at all.

To sum up, the poem can be seen as a "symbolic murder of [Millay's] father." His absence developed in her a distrust of men, uncertainty of sexual roles, and excessive attachment to her mother."(Walter S. Minot in Neirman, p.19)

As a symbol of Free Love, Millay offers in "Recurdo" an image simultaneously suggestive of bohemian anti-productivity and a dynamic of pure circulation:

We were very tired, we were very merry-
 We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry
 And you ate an apple and I ate a pear
 From a dozen of each we had bought somewhere
 And the sky went wan, and the wind came cold,
 And the sun rose dripping, bucketful of gold.

These lines are typically bohemian for merriness is the effect of tiredness not vice versa. As the stanza shows, the way to a bohemian temperament is through a constant emotional expenditure. Once merry, the bohemian engages in more tiring behavior which leads back to the merriness of subsequent activities. The speaker and her companion carelessly buy fruit somewhere and give it away along with their money to an immigrant woman whose tearful gratitude only serves to highlight their own transcendence of material need. "You ate an apple and I ate a pear" shows their indifference to the crude hoarding of things in their materialistic society and neatly designates their basic difference and the 'pagan' nature of their relationship. Again, money for such a pair has only the utility of gaining them access to further circulation, this time on the subway.

'Recurdo' is overwhelmingly successful as a classic bohemian idyll. In "MacDongal Street," Millay figures a more explicitly sexualized female speaker. As with 'Recurdo,' the poem opens with a bohemian

rhythm of pure circulation, but unlike it, the poem places its speaker at the mercy of a defining urban context:

As I went walking up and down to take the evening air
(Sweet to meet upon the street, why must I be so shy?)

The events in the poem are overwhelmingly defined by its setting, the Street. The chaos, which at first seems to emanate from the lovesick mind of the speaker to the object of her desire, is on closer inspection, an objective chaos of the street itself: dirty children, squatting women, babies, cats, rotting fruit, filth; MacDongal Street is rank with sensuality. It is, precisely, an overflowing market of female sexuality, represented by the speaker. Yet, there is a distance between the women of the MacDongal Street and the privileged bohemian speaker. Unlike them, she is shy and "susceptible to nervous breakdown" and moves in an agitated horror of contamination. Furthermore, the child is the speaker's most direct link to the Street. Though dirty and Latin, she is clearly the speaker's sexual surrogate. Identifying herself with the child, the speaker conceives of their relationship as a kind of a fantasy of sexual freedom without sexual consequences. For the bohemian speaker, the woman of MacDongal Street raises the specter that taking to the street, parading her desire, writing Free Love poetry, being the very national icon of Free Love-will reduce her to the level of "Pink nets and wet shells trodden under heel"(Miller 4).

The management of Free Love spills over not only in Millay's love poetry, but also in her nature poetry which has an important place in her larger New Womanly strategy, as the poetry of an explicitly interpersonal content. While Millay's love poems focus predominantly on the outward shape of love, the nature poems enact several of its psychological dimensions (Miller 5-6).

Millay's Love poems trace themes of sexual desire, ephemeral passion and amorous adventure for its own sake. They issue from a voice which is sometimes suffering, sometimes suffering and heartless- yet as the contemporary feminist, Jan Montifiore, points out, Millay's lover voice "was always suggestive of a perfectly self-possessed speaker"(qtd in Nierman 20). Even those poems that thematized despair and loss imparted the sense of love and its sorrows as a personal experience for the woman speaker, an enhancement of her individuality, rather than an event generated out of her interaction with a significant male other. That is why when Millay writes of her lovers; she gave them so little individuality that it was, Wilson remarks, impossible to tell which man she was writing about (ibid., 8).

As the embodiment of Free Love and New Womanhood, Millay was bound to display not only sexual tough-mindedness, but also psychological characteristics conventionally considered essential to femininity.

Millay's nature poetry frequently stages the threatened loss of self conventionally associated with "Woman in Love." In her interest of achieving a tenable persona as a free lover and new woman, Millay divorces the ideas which she and the bohemian ideology strive to equate: love may be good or bad but it is an experience that reinforces the individual identity. "Assault" is a nature poem with a specifically sexualized or, more accurately gendered framework. The speaker depicts herself as a vulnerable woman in a desolate place in fear of being 'raped' by nature:

I had forgotten how the frogs must sound
 After a year of silence, else I think
 I should not so have ventured forth alone
 At dusk upon this unfrequented road.

.....
 I am waylaid by beauty. Who will walk
 Between me and the crying of frogs?
 Oh, savage Beauty, suffer me to pass,
 That am a timid woman, on her way
 From one house to another.

Here the speaker's responses to the acute physical imperilment present in nature diverge from the expected and demonstrate the singular acuteness of her sensibility. The specifically womanly fear the speaker experiences in passing through 'savage Beauty' from 'one house to another' testifies simultaneously to her artistry and her femininity- with the remarkable outcome that artistry and femininity come to seem mutually interdependent

In "Journey," Nature provides a framework for what emerges as the unconventional psychological dynamics of Free Love. It is a study in threatened dissolution and reintegration. In the first lines, the speaker travels down a road, symbolic of her life, and yearns to enter the natural idyll to either side of her:

.....I am so tired, so tired
 Of passing pleasant places! All my life,
 Following Care along the dusty road

'Care here is suggestive of death; yet the speaker's strong erotic desire, evident in "Only My Heart Responds," succeeds in evoking alike response in the passive landscape. The elements of the final landscape have the quality of myth, of literary landscape:

Yet, Oh, my path is sweet on either side

 But far, oh, far as passionate eye can reach
 And long, oh, long as rapturous eye can cling
 The world is mine; blue hill, still silver lake
 Broad field, bright flower, and the long white road.

By way of negotiating the problematic sexuality of the Free Lover, 'Journey' achieves the ultimate bohemian idea: the fusion of art and love. What is significant here is the fact that the poem resonates at key points with male transcendentalism: the mastering 'eye' is strongly reminiscent of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the 'road' with which the speaker is all along associated, puts her squarely in the tradition of Walt Whitman. Here the eye from which the aesthetic mastery emanates represents not a masculine transcendence, but a female "passion" as the very essence of poetic sensibility (Miller 7-8).

Embedded in this frenzy poetic activity is Millay's involvement in the politics of her time. In fact, Millay was particularly well positioned to have an impact on the politics of the early twentieth century America because she was seen as a prototype of the "modern woman," especially in her assertion of the right to and need for female self-determination of body, mind and voice. Virtually, almost all the critical discussion of Millay's poetry tended to treat her not merely as an individual writer but as an exemplary instance of the 'woman as a poet' as John Crowe Ransom puts it (In Newcomb 261-264). Thus, her turn in the late twenties towards poetry as an expression and potentially a form of political commitment was not merely an individual choice, but implied the potential for a broader scope for female poets at large.

The immediate external catalyst of Millay's politicization was the Sacco-Vanzetti case.² Wilson, like many others, believed that the case "revealed the whole anatomy of American life, with all its classes and professions...and raised almost every fundamental question of our political and social system"(Nunzio Pernicone et al 3).

Edna, was among the American intellectuals who were powerfully moved by the case. "Justice Denied in Massachusetts" scornfully exploited the contrast between its title and its traditional conceptual

structure of the allegorical landscape, where a miscarriage of justice has blighted the soil and clouded the sun for good. The forces of "quack and weed" had choked the land's rich inheritance of social justice. Land itself was sweet and bountiful, but cancerous weeds came to suffocate the American vision of an ideal democracy and freedom.

In "Wine from These Grapes," Millay extends the theme of a morally blighted culture that she begins in "Justice Denied." The speaker is destined to tread the grapes of injustice "morning, and noon and night till I die," and to die with the stain of the grapes upon her. The poem signifies loss of innocence and negates any hope of renewal. The last stanza alludes to Christ's entombment and denies the possibility of redemption and rebirth. The stanza then shifts to an inversion of Carpediem trope, with the betrayal of justice standing in as usurper both of sexual innocence and death's rightful claim:

Stained with these grapes I shall lie down to die
 Three women come to wash me clean
 Shall not erase this stain
 Nor leave me lying purely
 Awaiting the black lover
 Death, fumbling to uncover
 My body in his bed
 Shall know, there has been one
 Before him.

Millay's later poetry no longer celebrates eager dawn or head long day, but is tuned to the beginning of evening. Never was she so intensely preoccupied with the images of death and desolation, with the water darkening, with the lonely self and the going down of the "sun that will not rise again" as in her collections *The Buck in the Snow* and *Second April* where she systematically 'uglifies nature,' thus "violating convention of expectations and provides a new interpretation of an old reality"(Nierman 15). These preoccupations give her more in common

with contemporary poets such as Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton than with the 1920s bohemians (ibid., 9). In "Blight," Millay admits that she is living in a place where "nothing lovely grew," and compares sorrow in "Sorrow" to 'a careless rain' which "Beat upon her heart" and makes life intolerable. In "Three Song of Shattering," she welcomes the coming of Spring: "Spring is here; and so it's Spring" but not "in the old way." She realizes "...Spring is gone/ And there comes no Summer to the like of you and me."

In fact, love is not excluded from the circle of despair Millay is living in for she declares in "Ashes of Life" that

Love has gone and left me and the days are all alike;
Eat I must, and sleep I will- and would that night were here.

Finally, Millay's poetry implies that love poetry from the male point of view has been "incomplete, unrealistic or absurd about the nature of love and especially the nature of woman as lover" (John Philips in Nierman 15). Her poems describe the phenomenon of the New Woman and the "peculiar position of the woman love poet as a public embodiment of femininity." She forged her poetics in the context of "the special license and contradictions of her subcultural role as a member of Greenwich Village Bohemia." She was among the first burst of women poets who wrote as a woman from the point of view of a woman, with the concerns of a woman. She is among those who had something to say about being female (Nierman 1-6).

NOTES

¹ Due to the scarcity of resources about the texts of Millay's poems, all the texts cited in this paper are taken from the internet. Below are some of the web locations:

www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/millay/online_poems.html.

www.sappho.com/poetry/e_millay.html.

www.everypoet.com/archive/poetry/edna_st_vincent_millay/contents.html.

² Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti are two Italian immigrants who came to America in the beginning of the twentieth century. They were unjustly and upon inadequate legal evidence condemned to death after a six-year trial. The justice of their condemnation was to provide a cause celebre in that period.

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Sychterz, Jeff. "Love is not Blind." *Modern American Poetry*, 1 Sep. 1999. Web. 21 Aug. 2008. <www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m-r/blind.htm>