

Eréndira María Díaz Valencia 306728864  
Edna St Vincent Millay  
Historia Literaria VII

## Edna St Vincent Millay

Born in Rockland, Maine, in 1892, Edna St. Vincent Millay grew up in that city and in nearby Camden. In childhood she began to write verse and some of it was published in *St. Nicholas*, then the goal of juvenile talent. As time went by, most of her career was a successful one as she became a respected American poet. Not only a poet, she also wrote drama including *Aria da capo*, *The Lamp and the Bell*, a the libretto composed for an opera, *The King's Henchman* and *The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize in 1923.

Similar to her contemporary Robert Frost, she is a very skilful sonnet writer of the twentieth century, and also, just like Frost, she manages to combine both modernist attitudes with traditional verse forms so as to produce a very characteristic poetry. She was also known for her riveting readings and performances, her progressive political stances, frank portrayal of both hetero and homosexuality, but especially for her embodiment and description of new kinds of female experience and expression. "Edna St. Vincent Millay," notes her biographer Nancy Milford, "became the herald of the New Woman."

It was by a struck of fortune that Millay became a poet. Her mother stumbled with an announcement of a poetry contest sponsored by *The Lyric Year*, a proposed annual anthology. Millay submitted some poems, among them her "Renascence." Ferdinand Earle, the editor, liked the poem so well that he announced beforehand to "E. Vincent Millay," as she used to sign her work at first, the poet to be the winning one. Nonetheless, as the rest of the judges disagreed, "Renascence" won no prize, but it received great praise when *The Lyric Year* appeared in November, 1912. Later on, Caroline B. Dow, a school director who heard Millay recite her poetry and play her own compositions for piano, decided that the talented young woman should attend college. So, Millay attended several courses at Barnard College in 1913 and later enrolled in Vassar with Dow paying her expenses.

Ten years after her death, the most important figures of the Modernism T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, and W.H. Auden had gained such recognition and importance that Millay's poetry and other women of her generation became considerably ignored. In comparison to other female writers, Millay's poems, particularly her sonnets, can often seem simplistic in comparison with

those of Mina Loy or Gertrude Stein. Yet this may be so because the way in which a sonnet may get to fulfill some specific needs and take advantage of others for a woman writing, “Why does a woman poet in this century elect to write sonnets?...What model of the relation between generic restraints and expressive freedom is suggested by the sonnet?”(2) Debra Fried enquires. To go deeper in this aspect, let us have a look at two sonnets, “I Know I Am But Summer To Your Heart,” and “Time Does Not Bring Relief: You All Have Lied.”

Therefore, it is convenient to bear in mind the formal characteristics of a sonnet. The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* notes,

Sonnet (from It. sonetto, a little sound or song) .A 14-line poem normally in hendecasyllables (in It. ) , iambic pentameter (in Eng. ) , or alexandrines (in Fr.) whose rhyme scheme has, in practice, varied widely despite the traditional assumption that the S. is a fixed form. The three most widely recognized versions of the S., with their traditional rhyme schemes, are the It. or Petrarchan (octave: abbaabba; sestet: cdecde or cdcdcd or a similar combination that avoids the closing couplet), the Spenserian abab bc bc cdcd ee) , and the Eng. or Shakespearean (abab cdcd efef gg).

Then, although both consist of fourteen lines, “I Am But Summer to Your Heart” has the form of an English sonnet (ABAB CDCD EFFE GG) whereas “Time Does Not bring Relief” that of a Petrarchan (ABBABBCDEF FDE). Jean Gould, Millay’s biographer notes that, “[Millay] found security in classical form: the sonnet was the golden scepter with which she ruled her poetic passions.” Notwithstanding she is using classical forms, she expresses a woman’s point of view; by using vocabulary of the nineteenth century and a very meticulous diction, she refashions the sonnet, and like Frost, for instance, she also manages to stand among two different ages. Furthermore, she interweaves women’s experience with classical myth, traditional literature and even nature.

In a very direct way, in the first poem she echoes Shakespeare’s sonnet 18, “Shall I compare thee to a Summer’s day?”. “I know I am but Summer to your heart,” (1) the poetic voice replies, and continues “And not the full four season’s of the year”(2). As the sonnet develops, instead of following the development of the first idea (that the poetic voice is but a passing thing) we get an enlarged

description of all those things it is not, “No gracious weight of golden fruits ...nor any wise and wintry thing...[I do not] carry still the high sweet breast of Spring” (2,5,6,8). Yet this indirect definition of the things she does still have turns out to be a very classical resource. A clear example of this can be found in the first lines of Ben Jonson’s “To Penhurst,”

Thou art not, Penshurst, built to envious show,  
Of touch or marble; nor canst boast a row  
Of polished pillars, or a roof of gold;  
Thou hast no lantern, whereof tales are told,  
Or stair, or courts; but stand’st an ancient pile,  
And, these grudged at, art revered the while.

Nonetheless, the manner in which this negative assertion is used gives a different texture to the poem. Antitheton<sup>1</sup> is the rethoric name for the use of negative assertions in order to define what something is stating what it is not. Millay’s use of it is not as complex as it is in Jonson’s. When I say complex I am referring to the fact that she does not use ellipsis and so many prepositional phrases and subordinating clauses as Jonson. This gives the poetic voice a tone of defeat. The antitheton seems to serve not only to define her present state, but to make up the series of reasons why the poetic voice appears to have lost its inner Spring, its inner life. Inner life mirrored in the passing of the seasons, “... as Summer goes,/ I must be gone” (9-10). Nonetheless, this loss appears to be something voluntary and cyclical done by the poetic voice, “I must be gone, steal forth with silent drums,/ That you may hail anew the bird and rose” (10-11). It is here, where the *volta* of the sonnet is; the first eight lines deal with the extended portrayal of the reasons the poetic voice has found to leave once again during Summer. This along with the almost homogeneous iambic feet, gives the sonnet an explicative tone; we note the poetic voice is sorry to leave, yet it may seem that it is not willing to make an effort to stay.

The sonnet, and presumably the affair it commemorates, ends with a sickening sense of loss and voluntary abandonment that follows from the harvest on Summer of unripe golden fruits. What the sonnet might be describing is an illicit and transient affair, but as we expect from Shakespearean

---

<sup>1</sup>Antitheton: A proof or composition constructed of contraries. It is closely related to and sometimes confused with the figure of speech that juxtaposes opposing terms, “antithesis.” However, it is more properly considered a figure of thought. (Silva Rethorica)

sonnets, the transient is often, "transformed into something permanent, and the agent of this permanence is the poem itself" (Fried 16). Millay's final vision of the couple fleeing "forever" borrows from this expectation while giving it a bohemian twist. We can consider very revisionary of Millay to give the female, half of the couple, some room to admit that she too knows desire and has a sexual will and it is often inconsistent (Millay gives us simply "a woman and a man," no longer a "poet and disdainful mistress;" no burning lover and no dark lady), and Millay's sonnets often testify that women, too, know the lust that the Renaissance sonnet traditionally allowed only men to feel. But it would be too simplistic to say that through its act of bestowing on the woman desires as those felt by the man the poem bestows on the woman poet the capacity to write sonnets as traditionally emotionally charged of those written by a man. The woman's desire cannot echo in the sonnet with the same force as his desire for, "it is a room that has been designed to amplify his tones and to silence hers" (Fried 16). To put these issues forward, we could say that Millay treats the sonnet as if it were a chamber where the echo allows is to listen to the voices this "improperly" (in the sense of not traditional) proper sonnet has been appropriated and revised.

On the other hand, "Time Does Not Bring Relief; You All Have Lied" is a Petrarchan sonnet, and we can confirm this by looking at its rhyme pattern: ABBAAABB CDEFFDE. Because it presents a two-part division, two different sequences of thought are mixed in. And opposed to the English sonnet, that the volta, here, is developed in a sestet rather than in only a couplet offers more space to explore more deeply the sonnet's conclusion.. The *Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* also notes that,

Normally, too, a definite pause is made in thought development at the end of the eighth line, serving to increase the independent unity or an octave that has already progressed with the greatest economy in rhyme sounds... The sestet, on the other hand, with its element of unpredictability, its usually more intense rhyme activity (three rhymes in six lines coming after two in eight) and the structural interdependence of the tercets, implies an acceleration in thought and feeling, a mood more urgent and animated.

Now, when we see Millay's sonnet we notice that it does follow the rhyme scheme and the formal division, we can also note that the division between the octave and the sestet is not marked typographically nor ideologically. Line 8, where the sestet begins, is still part of the octave, "But last



a memory is similar to Frost's "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening." Yet, unlike in Frost's poem, Millay's sonnet, because of its very regular form, it gives it a tone of unsolvable paralysis; it does not feel as if the poetic voice will be able to keep on going as Frost's poetic voice does. "And so, stand stricken, so remembering him" (14) is the ending scene of the sonnet and yet we also note it is the beginning for it is because the poetic voice is still and remembering him that the sonnet was written. The cyclical elements along with the cyclical quality of the ending takes full advantage of the strictness of the sonnet form.

Here it seems that a small plot of forgetfulness has become this imprisoning site of apparent liberty. Here, Millay converts the poetic form of the sonnet into a place that prevents her from moving. The poet does not release the poetic voice either, but it tightens the chains of dull rhyme and repetitive rhythm that paralyse it even more. Furthermore, it is the poetic voice which crafts its own chains, "And so, stand stricken, so remembering him" (14). In this sonnet, Millay has created a very powerful image of poetic convention as a prison into which poetry seems willingly to doom itself, and part of this power comes from the identification of a constricting form with a willingly bound poetic voice in "Time Does Not Bring Relief: You All Have Lied!" and even in "I Know I Am But Summer To Your Heart". As this paper began pointing out, it was not until the growing spread of feminism eventually revived an interest in Millay's writings, and she regained recognition as a highly gifted writer, "one who created many fine poems and spoke her mind freely in the best American tradition, upholding freedom and individualism; championing radical, idealistic humanist tenets; and holding broad sympathies and a deep reverence for life" (Fried 8). And ultimately it may seem that whether writing in an established lyric genre is an act of taking command or of being commanded is one upon which Millay's sonnets reflect.

I believe, then, that even when the echoes of dismissals of older poetic forms can evidence Millay's mastery on writing, she is also conceding to poetic forms or, maybe crippled as her poetic voices by emotional turmoil, leaning on them because it tends to make the poet seem as an unwitting victim of these two desires (to write, to express and to revise older classical forms) rather than as a working person in light of the act that the tradition itself is constantly troping on just this very debate. I have only suggested how a few of Millay's sonnets engage in and reflect upon the struggle between

poet and form as to which shall be master. Such engagement is a sign not only that Millay has mastered these inherited forms, but also that she has taken into account the full implications for the woman poet of the figure of poetic "mastery."

### Bibliography

Bradley, Scully. "The Emergence of Modern American Literature" and "Edna St Vincent Millay". *The American Tradition in Literature (Revised). Vol 2. From Withman to Present*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1962.

Fried, Debra. "Andromeda Unbound: Gender and Genre in Millay's Sonnets (Winner of the 1986 TCL Prize in Literary Criticism)". *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Spring, 1986), pp. 1-22. Web. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/441303> . Accessed: 16/04/2013.

Milford Nancy, quoted in "Edna St Vincent Millay". *Poetry Foundation*. Web. <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/bio/edna-st-vincent-millay>. Accessed: 17/04/2013.

"I Know I Am But Summer To Your Heart"

I know I am but summer to your heart,  
 And not the full four seasons of the year;  
 And you must welcome from another part  
 Such noble moods as are not mine, my dear.  
 No gracious weight of golden fruits to sell  
 Have I, nor any wise and wintry thing;  
 And I have loved you all too long and well  
 To carry still the high sweet breast of Spring.  
 Wherefore I say: O love, as summer goes,  
 I must be gone, steal forth with silent drums,  
 That you may hail anew the bird and rose  
 When I come back to you, as summer comes.  
 Else will you seek, at some not distant time,  
 Even your summer in another clime.

“Time Does Not Bring Relief: You All Have Lied”

Time does not bring relief; you all have lied  
 Who told me time would ease me of my pain!  
 I miss him in the weeping of the rain;  
 I want him at the shrinking of the tide;  
 The old snows melt from every mountain-side,  
 And last year's leaves are smoke in every lane;  
 But last year's bitter loving must remain  
 Heaped on my heart, and my old thoughts abide.  
 There are a hundred places where I fear  
 To go,—so with his memory they brim.  
 And entering with relief some quiet place  
 Where never fell his foot or shone his face  
 I say, “There is no memory of him here!”  
 And so stand stricken, so remembering him.