

**A Dirge Without Music:  
Death in the Poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay**

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“Death” is perhaps the only word that can simultaneously strike strong emotions of fear, longing, curiosity, sadness, and hope into human hearts—even surpassing love. And, along with love, death has become one of the predominant themes of human endeavors. Scientists have studied near-death experiences and attempted to determine the weight of the human soul, religious leaders have tried to figure out how to cheat death through gaining the best afterlife, and artists have undertaken to effectively and beautifully express those complex emotions about death.

Edna St. Vincent Millay was one such artist. Born in 1822 to an independent mother devoted to providing artistic outlets for her daughters, Millay grew up steeped in both hardship and poetic tradition. At a time when many poets abandoned traditional forms for modern free verse, Millay became a master of sonnets and ballads. Deeply disturbed by the idea of death and dying, she used an emphasis on form and wordplay in her extremely biographical poems as a mechanism for handling emotions she found too unsettling to confront directly. As Adrienne Rich so eloquently explained about her own work, “...formalism was part of the strategy—like asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle materials I couldn’t pick up barehanded” (Rich 22). Using formal diction and structure, lighthearted rhythms and rhymes, or poetic tradition mixed with what could be called either denial or professional optimism, Edna St. Vincent Millay created in her poetry a safe space to explore thoughts and emotions about death. In this exploration, she often divided death into three manageable spheres—her own triumphant death, the sad but survivable death of love, or the bitter death of a loved one.

In recent years, the critical response to Millay’s poetry has become increasingly gender-based. In “Edna St. Vincent Millay and the Language of Vulnerability,” Jane Stanbrough argues that Millay’s famous “flippancy” and formalism work to hide the essential pain and vulnerability

she feels as a woman. She works through selected poems from across Millay's career, from the second collection *A Few Figs from Thistles* to the posthumous *Mine the Harvest*. In *Figs* she explains the vulnerable, disappointed child hidden beneath the lilting verses of "Grown-up," a simple and lighthearted poem about the unexpected boredom of adult life. Stanbrough shows how this lightheartedness hides a darker meaning: "growing into adult domesticity for this woman has been a process of subduing the will and shrinking the soul... "domestic as a plate" is an image that fits woman into her conventional place at rest on a shelf and out of the way" (Stanbrough 214). Moving on from *Figs*, Stanbrough addresses the sonnet sequence *Fatal Interview*, a series of poems about the lifespan of a torrid love affair. "Throughout the sonnets, the narrator exposes her emotional vulnerability to assault, humiliation, abuse, abandonment, annihilation" (Stanbrough 226). Stanbrough consistently likens the affair to sexual abuse that the speaker is incapable of escaping on her own, and the sonnet form itself as a symbol of her constraint.

The sonnet, her best form, is a fit vehicle to convey her deepest feelings of woman's victimization. Through it, Millay imaginatively reenacts her constant struggle against boundaries. The wish for freedom is always qualified by the sense of restriction; couplets and quatrains suit her sensibilities. (Stanbrough 227)

This balance between restriction and freedom, according to Stanbrough, is a uniquely feminine approach to poetry; Millay's use of the male form of the sonnet is a surrender to and expression of helplessness under male-dominated society.

On the other side of the same gendered coin, Debra Fried argues against Stanbrough's position in "Andromeda Unbound: Gender and Genre in Millay's Sonnets." Fried claims that Millay does not choose her formal style to hide or to reenact her feminine vulnerabilities, but to

subvert such traditionally masculine forms as the sonnet for her own purposes. Rather than asking why Millay, as a modern woman, chose to use the traditional and masculine form of the sonnet, Fried claims that critics “have tended to assume that we know just how and why a poet like Millay must use circumscribed, traditional poetic forms: to rein in her strong, unruly feelings” (Fried 229). She takes issue with Stanbrough’s assertion that such reining in is a feminine approach to poetry: “what poetic ‘sensibility,’ we may ask, is not in some degree suited to the strictures of poetic form?” (Fried 230). Fried constructs Millay’s use of sonnet, rather, as a claiming of a form traditionally denied to women; in an analysis of Wordsworth’s “Nuns Fret Not At Their Convent’s Narrow Room,” she finds that the masculine Romantic view of the sonnet is one of escape from “the weight of too much liberty” in life and in creative expression. This escape is not one shared by women, who “confined by their sex in a scanty plot...cannot enjoy quite this brand of Wordsworthian solace in putting on the corset of strict lyric form.” The excess of liberty is the liberty to write great epic works; a liberty the female poet is denied. “The woman may be his [the bard’s] muse, but she can never follow him up the graded ladder of poetic modes” (Fried 233-234). Fried then connects poetic freedom with sexual freedom, another liberty traditionally afforded to men but denied to women, and compares the sonnet to Millay’s famous assertion that “[her] candle burns at both ends.” The sonnet uses itself up, neatly but forcibly spending all its energies—using its limited space to the fullest, with nothing wasted. The sonnet form, then, mimics Millay’s identity as a “New Woman,” free to live so that all her passions are used to the fullest (Fried 235-236)

However, these and other gender-based views are, while reasonable, not the best approach to Millay’s work; she was, after all, a person with more influences on her work than merely her gender, and her struggle with death is one of the largest of those influences. As J.D.

McClatchy states, “The engine that drove her poetry--as it may have propelled her life, through love affairs and addictions--was death. Her fear of it haunted her desperate apostrophes to the romantic moment, and chilled her appraisals of loss” (McClatchy). From a very early age, Vincent (as she was known to close friends and family) was troubled by death. As an adult, she remembered the moment when, as a small child, she first realized that death could claim someone she loved:

“I laid my cheek softly down upon the cool [piano] keys and wept. For it had come into my mind with dreadful violence as she bent above me and placed her fingers upon the keys...that my mother could die; and I wanted to save her from that, for I knew she would not like it; and I knew that I could not” (Milford 25).

This early revelation, that death could and would take away her loved ones, remained the subject of the bitterest of Millay’s poems on death. Her approach to her own death, however, appears consistently disbelieving, as if she was constantly searching for a way around her own mortality, whether through literary immortality or some more miraculous occurrence.

One of Millay’s first and best-known poems, “Renascence,” is also one of the first to explore her feelings on her own death. Probably begun in 1911 and finished in 1912, at a time when Millay had finished high school and had not found a job or a way to attend college, it addressed her feelings of being bound and smothered to death in her small Maine town in the form of a children’s simple counting rhyme. Gorham Munson believes that the scene she sets here is the scenery of Mount Battie and Penobscot Bay (Munson 266).

All I could see from where I stood  
Was three long mountains and a wood.  
I turned and looked another way

And saw three islands in a bay.

...

Over these things I could not see

These were the things that bounded me.

The problem of her confinement is introduced in a simple, rigid form—rhymed couplets in iambic pentameter, a form she rarely breaks in all 214 lines. In the course of the poem, Millay's speaker—a stand-in for Millay herself—is suffocated by the smallness of her immediate surroundings and the infinite size and of the universe outside—"Immensity made manifold"—and the relentless death and pain suffered by all of humanity. "...Hurt and pain create compassion, but in fact it is the blended elements of godhead, omniscience plus love, justice, and pity...that prove too much for the 'finite Me'" (Brittin 30). The torture continues until she finds no escape but death:

Into the earth I sank till I

Full six feet under ground did lie,

And sank no more—there is no weight

Can follow here, however great.

She chooses her own death. Munson's hiking companions wonder at the suffocation ("you just can't feel claustrophobic on this mountain top," says the poet) and the physical possibility of the sinking ("the spine of this mountain is an exceptionally hard rock...I can't give license to a poet to sink through rock as hard as this" declares the scientist). The impossibilities implied by her landscape speak to the unbearableness of Millay/speaker's situation, being both bound by New England life but all too free in her infinite compassion. The death she finds pleasant as a cessation of pain does not, however, satisfy her for long: upon missing the beauty of

the natural world over her grave, breaks out of the earth in a cathartic rush of rain. She escapes her own death, even escaping the idea of death in the last stanza, in which she asserts the supernatural power of the soul and the heart.

The world stands out on either side  
 No wider than the heart is wide;  
 Above the world is stretched the sky,—  
 No higher than the soul is high.

The autobiographical nature of Millay's work is clear in "Renascence," and cannot be ignored in the rest of her work. "The self in her work," Suzanne Clark explains, "is an actress performing, at once embodiment and interpretation. There is no separation of artist and person" (Clark 5).

"Renascence" was the first poem to catapult Millay to stardom, winning fourth place in the anthology *The Lyric Year* in 1912. That year, she also attracted the attention of Caroline B. Dow, who helped raise money for her to go to school at Vassar College. Millay's life at Vassar was full of ups and downs, as her insolence and flirtatiousness alternately made friends and enemies with the rest of the student body, most of whom were four years her juniors. After graduation, her first collection, *Renascence and Other Poems*, was published, followed by the book that truly secured her fame: *A Few Figs from Thistles*. *Figs* was composed of light verse, full of flippant fun and sexual freedom, culled from another more serious collection to come later—*Second April*.

Millay's publisher shied away from publishing *Second April* because of the heavy theme of death present throughout the poems. In 1918, one of Millay's Vassar classmates (and possible lovers) Dorothy Coleman, had died suddenly and tragically in the flu epidemic. Whatever

Millay's feelings had been for the girl, Coleman was among her admirers and her diaries "revealed a secret and tumultuous passion" for Millay (Epstein 96). The death of such a devoted follower spurred Millay to write more eloquently than ever on this most dark and interesting of themes. Macmillan specifically asked for "Memorial to D.C.," five poems written for Coleman, to be cut from the book, but Millay refused. "Death moved through these poems like a morbid fever," and the publishers reacted with a horror foreign to the Roman and Elizabethan poets in whom Millay had found inspiration (Milford 188-189). "Memorial to D.C." is far from the only poem in *Second April* to take hold of death with its asbestos gloves—the very first poem, "Spring," begins the book with the topic of death, set in the season of rebirth. This poem belongs in the bitterest of Millay's three categories: death of the beloved. Clark explains, "death and grief is a frequent subject in Millay's poems. But it is her own death she fears?...death is associated in her text with the pain of losing someone else" (Clark 9-10).

"Spring" marks a new turn in Millay's poetry: "[the poem] contains no unnecessary words, presents its images directly and visually, and is written in free verse" (Kaiser 30). The poem's eighteen lines diminish on the page until the seventeenth line is only one word long, echoing the deepening despair of the poem as Millay's speaker retreats ever further away from the outside world. Millay begins by directly addressing the month: "To what purpose, April, do you return again?" ("Spring" line 1) The classic apostrophe to spring and the formality of the question, serve to contrast and temper its rudeness, as the question is essentially "what the hell are you doing here?" This first line alerts us that something is not right in Millay's world—of course April should come again. Why would she not want it to?

The next statement is even blunter: "Beauty is not enough" (2). "The poem's aesthetic refusal to admit any of the more traditional poetic embellishments is echoed and reinforced" by

this line; "...no beauty, whether it results from the nature of spring itself or from the formal aesthetics of poetry," can ease whatever pain she is in (Kaiser 30). She continues to berate the spring month, declaring that it cannot "quiet" her anymore. The word "quiet" here suggests an image of a parent mollifying a child with a distraction rather than direct comfort, but April is not bribing Millay with candy, but with "the redness of little leaves opening stickily" (3-4). The words "little" and "stickily" seem innocent and childlike in their simplicity, and the sticky leaves are reminiscent of sticky candies, or the small sticky hands of young children.

This beautiful line is a momentary distraction, like sticky candies, from the rising despair, until Millay abruptly continues with "I know what I know." (5) She does not reveal what it is she knows for the next few lines, as she again describes the spring growth, this time without the pleasure of the red leaf image: "the sun is hot" and the crocuses are "spikes," as she coldly "observes" them, with none of the rapturous attention she gave the little leaves (6-7). She states that the earth smells "good," without detailing how (8). Then, coldly and ironically, she says "it is apparent that there is no death." (9) The word "apparent" brings up the old saying about appearances being deceiving, which she supports by asking, sarcastically, what this appearance signifies (10). The first line may have been blunt, but through these lines the poem descends into greater bitterness about the knowledge of death, and thence into bitterness about life. "Life in itself/ Is nothing," Millay declares, then diverts this raw outcry into metaphor: "An empty cup, a flight of uncarpeted stairs" (13-15). "It is not enough" that April, like the doomed Ophelia, "Comes like an idiot, babbling and strewing flowers" (17-18).

The mere knowledge of mortality is crushingly depressing to Millay in "Spring," so much so that even the rebirth of the entire hemisphere cannot comfort her, but she consistently forces this emotion into poetic forms that take a step back from raw bitterness. She couches her rude

demand of April in formal language. The lovely image of the little leaves follows the first blunt statement that “beauty is not enough” (2). The horrifying realization that death exists even in the midst of a beautiful spring is concealed in sarcasm and the equally horrifying assertion that life is nothing is immediately tempered with illustrative but distancing metaphors, holding her terror and sorrow at bay with what Louis Untermeyer calls “a dignity, almost an austerity of emotion” (Untermeyer 119). Millay does a delicate dance with her subject and with her emotions, acknowledging the depth of her sadness and horror in a safely distancing way.

Millay approaches the death of love in *Second April* with a different tone, but not from a different distance—while she treats this death more lightly, even flippantly, she still carefully steps back from the emotion of her poems through poetic allusions, forms, images, and sarcasms. By the time the collection was published, she had been sorely disappointed in love at least once—James Lawyer, a handsome, adoring, and married man, had rejected Millay in favor of the wife he had betrayed, only to then begin a relationship with Millay’s younger sister Kathleen. In 1921, when *Second April* was finally published, Millay was already well acquainted with heartbreak and able to cope with the death of love. And as was so often the case, she coped through writing. Take for example the ninth poem of *Second April*, “Passer Mortuus Est” (translated, “The Bird is Dead”). The title begins the process of allusion, recalling Catullus’ famous verse about his mistress and her pet bird. In the first stanza, Millay continues the pattern of frank statement followed by an apt but tempering image or metaphor that she established in “Spring.” She directly states, “Death devours all lovely things,” then proceeds into a discussion of “Lesbia and her sparrow” (“Passer” lines 1-2). This extends the allusion of the title, while establishing the swinging, light, and fun rhythm of the whole poem: a three-and-a-half foot line of trochees, followed by a three foot line, continuing through three quatrains. This allusion,

rhythm, and playful a-b-c-b rhyme scheme utterly absorbs the horror of the first line, far more so than the image and formality in “Spring” absorb its horror of death. This absorption of potentially terrible images continues through the rest of the poem. “Every bed is narrow” is a particularly coy reference to the grave (14). The fourth stanza reveals the true subject of the poem, and the reason for the lightness: the poem is not about physical death, but the metaphorical death of a love affair. “Coolly, cleverly, [Millay] slays with a Catullan sleight of hand her own naïve romanticism,” comforting herself with the control she has over this particular death (Frank 183). The light tone continues with playful teasing, as she calls her former lover “my erstwhile dear” and “my no longer cherished,” and she pleads for the remembrance of good times (9-10). “Need we say it was not love,” that is, meaningless, or not worthwhile, “now that love is perished?” (11-12).

A more serious example of Millay’s attitude toward dead love is found in the twenty-first poem of *Second April*, a very short verse entitled “Ebb.” In seven brief lines, arranged in an irregular and subtle rhyme scheme, Millay compares her heart “since your love died” to a drying tide pool (“Ebb” lines 1-2). Her diction in “Ebb” is more informal than in either “Passer Mortuus Est” or “Spring.” She only uses simple, common words, none of which are more than two syllables long, and straightforward sentence structure with little formality. The distance provided from the painful subject of heartbreak is provided, instead, by the very aptness of the simile. The complex feelings of sadness, loneliness, insignificance, and lassitude caused by the end of a relationship are all encapsulated neatly in the image of the small, salty, tepid tide pool “drying inward from the edge” (7-8). Having processed the emotion to the point of such encapsulation, no further soul-searching is necessary.

Millay's third approach differs greatly from the first two both in tone and in the method of distancing herself from death. In her own death, she is triumphant; the distance she provides for herself is one of denial, rather than structure or tone. This approach always harkens back to the dramatic rebirth of "Renaissance," especially in "The Blue-Flag in the Bog," but she takes a slightly different tack in "The Poet and His Book."

Millay here seeks to ground herself in long-established poetic tradition, living on through her work and her readers. She begins by bludgeoning Death itself with an insulting dog metaphor—"Down, you mongrel, Death! / Back into your kennel!" ("Poet" line 1) She tames Death for herself, turning it into a pet that whines and scratches at the door and begs for bones. She continues with a lighthearted description of the kind of physical death that so troubles her when discussing the death of a loved one. "When shall I be dead?" she asks, "when my flesh is withered...my lungs be failing/ To inhale the breath/ Others are exhaling?" (9-20). She denies this, claiming that her true death will come "When this book, unread, / rots to earth obscurely" (27-28). The strong, swinging rhythm and rhyme of each eight-line stanza also add to the lightheartedness and confidence of "The Poet and His Book."

However, some of Millay's usual desperation does seep through this jaunty swagger. While for the first four stanzas she proudly proclaims her literary immortality as simple fact, in the next ten she actually begs her readers to "Read me, do not let me die!" (48). Individually addressing children reading books unearthed secretly in attics, young lovers making vows, farmers following the seasons, shepherds, sailors, scholars, weary or merry travelers, and wives leading lives of quiet desperation, she implores each group to help give her the immortality she so desperately desires. She nestles another image of gruesome physical decay in these ten begging stanzas—veins as weeds and "hollowed sockets" watching roots grow down and worms wriggle

up in spring (49-56). Her physical death contrasts with these images of new growth, and with the sexual imagery of the next stanza, where she resumes begging “boys and girls that lie/ whispering in the hedges” (57-58). The proximity of these images implies that just as her body contributes to the fertility of the land, her poems, mixed with the pledges of these lovers, contribute to the fertility of the human race. The manner in which she implores such readers to mix her in with their day to day lives also suggests a desire to go on living in a mundane, physical sense after death, even if only vicariously.

The final stanza of “The Poet and His Book” assumes the success of her pleas, as she taunts a sexton for the impermanence of his trade compared to hers—“Many a rose shall ravel,/ Many a metal wreath shall rust” while her songs abide (116-117). The proliferation of exclamation points through this stanza in particular, as well as the poem throughout, suggests Millay’s enthusiastic determination to make her aim of poetic immortality come true. This determination is itself a protection against the fear and dread associated with the anticipation of one’s own mortality. She fervently wishes to believe her own assertion that “...Only the body can be brought to earth; but the spirit, the essential ‘I,’ will survive” (Brittin 45). Though desperate, Millay protects and distances herself from this particular anxiety, not completely through tricks of language or tone, but through determining to never die.

Between *Second April* in 1921 and *The Buck in the Snow* in 1928, Millay spent time in Europe, published *The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems*, became the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize, married Eugen Jan Boissevain, and experienced the beginning of her slide into bad health. Millay and Boissevain fell in love over a game of charades in April 1923, and were married in July. Millay had been ill since before her return from Europe in January, and directly after the wedding Boissevain drove her to New York Hospital to have a complicated intestinal

problem fixed and her appendix removed. Marriage was the only way they could be sure to be together while she was incapacitated. This almost motherly care from her husband was to be representative of the rest of their life together. Boissevain managed their household, leaving Millay to her poetry, because as he said “it is so obvious that Vincent is more important than I am” (Brittin 23). Just before the appendectomy, she said to her good friend Arthur Ficke “If I die now, I shall be immortal” (Milford 254-255).

She survived the surgery, but Millay’s awareness of her own mortality grows more evident in *The Buck in the Snow*; as Untermeyer put it, “never has Miss Millay plucked so insistently on the autumnal string” (“Song” 57). The image of triumphal self-death most common in her earlier work is replaced by a more thoughtful approach, occasionally reaching an objectivity also rare in her deeply personal and emotional work. This thoughtfulness, or “presence of mind,” caused at least one reviewer to declare *The Buck in the Snow* “the emergence of a significant poet” (Parks 121). In the title poem, Millay approaches death with less formal protection; her lines are longer and looser, “no longer confined to tight couplets or casual quatrains” (“Song” 58). But at the same time she maintains distance from her subject, even a greater distance than in other, more formal poems: it is not she or a loved one, or even another human being, who is dying; her speaker/self watches from a distance as a buck deer dies. This twelve line poem, arranged in three uneven stanzas of five, one, and six lines, is marked by a sense of reflection, reserve, and wonder.

She begins by addressing the “white sky, over the hemlocks bowed with snow,” elegantly setting the scene in shades of black and white. She continues with a question for the sky, “saw you not,” a formal inversion characteristic of Millay’s deliberately poetic, distancing diction, and also a quiet demand for the acknowledgement of death of the “antlered buck.” “I saw them,” she says, then repeats “I saw them suddenly go,” asserting her own knowledge. This is a link back to

the all-compassionate Millay of “Renascence,” who knows and feels for all the world’s suffering—but now, Millay demands that the rest of the universe also feel her suffering and bewilderment over death. The abrupt beginning of the next line, “tails up,” mimics the sudden alertness of the startled deer, while the alliteration of “long leaps lovely and slow” imitates the motion of the running deer. Millay sets the next line apart from the two long stanzas, making it stand out sharply: “now lies he here, his wild blood scalding the snow.” Another poetic inversion here also slows the pace of the poem with four stressed syllables in a row, preparing for the shocking image of the deer’s blood against the white snow. The interruption of the single line offset from the two stanzas also mimics the interruption of death onto the peaceful scene of the two deer leaping through the orchard, a death likely caused by a human hunter—an invader, interrupting and ending the quiet, beautiful, and natural life of the deer which Millay set up in the first stanza. With such a set-up, this sudden death seems all the more unjust.

Despite the shock of the hunter’s intrusion, the narrator/Millay herself could also be seen as a human trespasser, imposing her thoughts and feelings onto the deer and its death. In the very next line, Millay departs from pure description to say “how strange a thing is death” with distant wonder, as if at a phenomenon that would never affect her. Considering the ever more pressing concerns of Millay’s own mortality, this cool assessment is both remarkable and, yet, somehow unsurprising: we could expect a note of hysteria and fear to sound loudly in this poem, but it’s also sensible to expect a calmer approach towards something she surely felt was drawing nigh. The strangeness she draws attention to lies in the fall of the swift and beautiful deer—death “bringing to his knees, bringing to his antlers/ The buck in the snow.” The mention of his blood as “wild” in line seven, added to this description of the “strangeness” of death as the cessation of movement provides an idea of death taming the once-free buck. She then ponders

the strangeness of life, “a mile away by now...looking out attentive from the eyes of the doe.” It is strange that the buck has been tamed and stilled by death, but it is also strange that life, in the form of the buck’s mate, goes on after the death of her loved one. But the life itself is not harmed by the buck’s untimely end; it merely runs to save itself, keeping an “attentive” eye out for the threat of its own death. The doe is pure natural instinct, and in the wonder Millay feels toward its continuing life, we can deduce a sort of jealousy: human beings have to feel grief that deer can escape. The doe can continue living after her mate is gone, while Millay is not sure that she or her loved ones can.

Four quatrains of Millay’s bitterest thoughts on death, “Dirge without Music” begins with a harsh-sounding statement: “I am not resigned to the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground.” The repeated “sh,” “r,” “d” and “g” sounds give the line a harsh, grating resonance, and the sentence is long and difficult to read quickly. This is followed by the quicker, dismissive “so it is, and so it will be,” a reminder that death is natural and inevitable. Millay admits that even “the wise and the lovely” go “into the darkness,” even admitting, in poetic and flowery style, that “crowned with lilies and laurel they go,” an admission filled with long, flowing “l” sounds. But this flow is suddenly interrupted with a clipped “but I am not resigned.” This refusal of resignation marks nearly all of Millay’s poems about the deaths of others, even down to the death of the deer in “The Buck in the Snow”—to one who is conscious of her own mortality and those of her beloveds, death is strange and sinister, taking one and leaving the other.

The next stanza begins with another almost dismissive line: “lovers and thinkers, into the earth with you,” but the description of the dying as “lovers and thinkers,” such importantly human attributes, refutes this flippancy. Millay’s sound and tone again grow bitter in the next line as well, “be one with the dull, the indiscriminate dust,” with the abundance of sharp “d,” “s,”

and “t” sounds. The harsh, spitting, bitter consonants continue in the next lines, filled with “f” and “s” sounds: “a fragment of what you felt, of what you knew,/ a formula, a phrase remains,— but the best is lost.” Unlike the first stanza, Millay ends here with the less striking, approximate rhyme of “dust” and “lost,” leaving the same feeling of unfinished business left by death itself.

She moves on to describe what of the dying is “the best” that is lost: “the answers quick and keen,” short and sharp like the answers themselves, “the honest look, the laughter, the love,” flowing with luxurious “l” sounds. Again, she cuts off the flow with a sharp statement: “they are gone.” She refines this statement with a platitude of comfort, “they are gone to feed the roses,” an image initially beautiful with the renewal and cycle of life, and then faintly horrifying with the implication of decay and decomposition. She then contrasts the decay with the image of the rose, “elegant and curled” and “fragrant.” This description is again cut off with the blunt “I know. But I do not approve,” which Millay furthers with the desperately pitiful “more precious was the light in your eyes than all the roses in the world.”

The next stanza begins with the marching repetition of “down, down, down into the darkness of the grave,” then names the marchers as “the beautiful, the tender, the kind...the intelligent, the witty, the brave,” all admirable attributes Millay often praises. She then cuts this list short with another repetition of “I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.”

The time between *The Buck in the Snow* and her final posthumous collections marked a dark time in Millay’s life. In 1930, her beloved mother died. She lost the entire manuscript of her play *Conversation at Midnight* in a hotel fire in 1936, and severely taxed her energy in re-writing it from memory. Before and during World War II, her writing descended into propaganda, first bemoaning mankind’s attraction to violence in *Huntsman, What Quarry?* and then urging the US to avenge wrongs done in Europe in *Make Bright the Arrows* and *The Murder of Lidice*, to

murderous criticism. Harold Orel called *Make Bright the Arrows* “perhaps the most disastrous book ever published by a major American poet” (Orel 166). In 1943 her youngest sister Kathleen died. Continuing to suffer from ill health and chronic pain, she became addicted to morphine; suffering from addiction and anxiety about the failing popularity of her work, in 1944 she suffered a breakdown and was unable to write for several years.

When she was finally able to concentrate enough to write again—after getting off morphine—she dictated many of her poems to Boissevain rather than write them down herself (Milford 488). One of her most famous sonnets was written in this fashion, “I will put Chaos into fourteen lines.” The delicately-handled rhyme scheme and adroitly arranged meter—not irregular enough to interrupt the poem’s flow, but enough to twist the reader’s attention to pay attention to such highlights as the chaotic “flood, fire, demon,” and the assertion that Chaos’s “arrogance, our awful servitude” are truly “past.” In a life filled with chaos, Millay herself admits in this poem that the structure of her writing is necessary to handle her personal demons—to “make [them] good.” Rosemary Sprague declares that “Millay believed that poetry must be honest, *and* intelligible”—both well-crafted and true to experience, “successfully verbalizing the inexpressible aspiration, hope, or dream...reality heightened and deepened, and all the more true” through being crafted and fitted into her favorite strict forms (Sprague 175).

The final blow came in August 1949 when Boissevain, her devoted husband and attentive caretaker, died of a stroke. In a letter to a friend, Millay relates that she was “plenty scared” to live without Boissevain, “Scared the way I used to be as a child, when I had to go to the dentist. In the days before they gave you novacaine” (Milford 505). She also replied to another friend, poignantly, “yes, it must seem impossible to you that he will not be coming down the hill to fetch the mail, this lovely autumn day. He never comes up the hill, either, anymore (MacDougal 358).

A little over one year later, in October 1950, Millay also died, falling down the stairs in her home in the middle of the night.

After her death, her sister Norma collected many of her unpublished poems for the posthumous *Mine the Harvest*. In the untitled poem beginning with “at least, my dear,” Millay consoles herself after the loss of a beloved—one of the many she had lost within a short time, friends, family, lovers, and her husband—with the unselfish gratitude that, by the beloved dying first, he did not have to watch her die. This idea is bluntly stated in the first two-line stanza: “At least, my dear,/ you did not have to live to see me die.”

She continues to explain why she needs this knowledge to survive his death: it is because she believes she hurt him in so many other ways, she is glad to have at least spared him this particular pain. The memories of her wrongdoings have her “sweating” and “blushing dark blood,” and she views these painful, uncontrollable thoughts as unruly sheep “that graze the forbidden hills, cropping the mind-bane” until she needs to cut for herself as a cane the bitter consolation of “the one disservice/ I never did you,—you never saw me die.”

In the next stanza, Millay veers off in a different direction, much like the wayward sheep-thoughts of the previous stanza. The first line here finds her looking through her belongings: “I find in my disorderly files among unfinished/ poems,” the awkward line break imitating the unfinished work and the messiness of her papers. Among these scraps, and “photographs of picnics on the rocks,” she finds “letters from you in your bold hand.” She does not mention the content of the letters; what matters about them is the writer and his handwriting, a sample of his personality left behind. She also finds, in “the pocket of a coat I could not bring myself to give away,” columbine seeds. The cycle of nature, which she so often celebrates in her poems about the death of love, is now thwarted in a poem on the death of a loved one: the seeds, symbols of

new life, are never planted. She continues with an expression of anguish at finding these reminders so unexpectedly: “a few more moments such as these and I shall have paid all.” The hurts she did to her beloved are revisited upon her, in the pain of loss.

She again changes tack in the next stanza, now almost resentfully praising her beloved’s love and forgiveness. She makes a false start in the first line, “not that you ever—” cutting that thought short to rephrase it or replace it with another: “O, love inflexible, O militant forgiveness,” as she describes her loved one, “I know/ you kept no books against me!” The exclamation point overemphasizes this point, as if even Millay is not sure that he was truly so generous. She then blames her feelings of inadequacy not on her lover but on herself: “In my own hand/ are written down the sum and the crude items of my inadequacy.” Again, we see the importance of handwriting—her own innate self catalogues the blame for her wrongdoings, something she claims her beloved never did.

Again in the fifth and last stanza we find Millay’s distracted state of mind, as her thoughts leave the catalogue of her wrongs to circle back again to the main idea of the poem. She explains again her need for comfort, describing her mind as “brawling” and needing “a little quiet,” for which she searches out, “recorded in my favour,/ one princely gift.” This gift of her continued existence is no longer, at the end of the poem, “at least:” it is now a “princely gift,” like the love and forgiveness the beloved gave to her. “The most I ever did for you was to outlive you,” she claims, acknowledging that she could have done more, yet she claims that, even so, her gift “is much.” It was the last and best thing she could have given, the only thing staving off the black despair over the loss of Millay’s most constant love.

The theme of death can be easily traced throughout Millay’s work, from the earliest instances of horror and longing in “Renaissance” all the way through some of the last poems she

wrote. Though this theme is easily traced, the concept of “theme” is more slippery; a great number of definitions abound for a term that seems at first so self-explanatory. One, that themes are connections between works of art and lived experience, shows that this death theme in Millay’s work can be used to connect her work to her life—“Spring” was written for Dorothy Coleman, “at least, my dear” for Eugen Boissevain—and to the reader’s own experience of the bitterness of grief and the cycles of living (Jost xix). Another “associates theme with myths as fundamental modes of thought,” the building blocks of emotional and symbolic thinking (Daemmrich 571). By arranging these foundations, and supporting them with sheer craft, Millay creates a space for her ideas inside the minds of her readers. The image of a broken heart as a drying tide pool can then be pondered, and our own ideas about love and loss rearranged to admit Millay’s. As Harold Bloom says, “themes and metaphors,” like the metaphor of the tide pool, “engender one another in all significant literary compositions.” This idea of theme as fundamental also dovetails neatly with Bloom’s idea that “literary *topoi*,” or places, as this word for “theme” originally meant, “can be regarded as places where we store information” (Bloom xi). Millay’s prominent theme of death thus becomes, simultaneously, a handy label on our mental file cabinets of ways to think about death, a way to rearrange these files to fit her own ideas, and, importantly, a connection between our experiences and her own.

Throughout this rearrangement and connection, Millay never quite takes off her “asbestos gloves” when dealing with death. Her most emotionally raw poems—like “Dirge Without Music”—are arranged in elegant and controlled form, holding the subject at bay, and her most stylistically raw poems—like “Spring”—are couched in metaphor and indirect statement. She balances “the needs of precise rhetoric against the truth of feelings, engendering

a kind of difficult poise” ideal for exploring the theme of death without overloading her—or our—emotions (Johnson 117).

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