("*madrasahs*" for *madāris*, for example), her narrative often muddy, and, above all, one reads her prose without much sense of excitement. It is all very dutiful and, like Lewis's book, too frequently suggests great distance and dehumanization rather than closeness to the experience of Islam in all its tremendous variety.

Unlike Lewis, however, she is interested in concrete aspects of Islamic religious life, and there she is worth reading. Her book's most valuable section is that in which she discusses the varieties of modern fundamentalism without the usual invidious focus on Islam. And rather than seeing it only as a negative phenomenon, she has an admirable gift for understanding fundamentalism from within, as adherence to a faith that is threatened by a strong secular authoritarianism. As an almost doctrinaire secularist myself, I nevertheless found myself swayed by her sympathetic and persuasive argument in this section, and wished that instead of being hobbled by a rigid chronological approach she had allowed herself to wander among aspects of the spiritual life of Islam that, as a former nun, she has obviously found congenial.

Of course one can learn about and understand Islam, but not in general and not, as far too many of our expert authors propose, in so unsituated a way. To understand anything about human history, it is necessary to see it from the point of view of those who made it, not to treat it as a packaged commodity or as an instrument of aggression. Why should the world of Islam be any different? I would therefore suggest that one should begin with some of the copious first-person accounts of Islam available in English that describe what it means to be a Muslim, as in Muhammad Asad's extraordinary book *The Road to Mecca* (a gripping account of how Leopold Weiss, 1900–92, born in Lvov, became a Muslim and Pakistan's U.N. representative), or in Malcolm X's account in his memoir, or in Taha Hussein's great autobiography, *The Stream of Days*. The whole idea would be to open up Islam's worlds as pertaining to the living, the experienced, the connected-to-us, rather than to shut it down, rigidly codifying it and stuffing it into a box labeled "Dangerous—do not disturb."

Above all, "we" cannot go on pretending that "we" live in a world of our own; certainly, as Americans, our government is deployed literally all over the globe—militarily, politically, economically. So why do we suppose that what we say and do is neutral, when in fact it is full of consequences for the rest of the human race? In our encounters with other cultures and religions, therefore, it would seem that the best way to proceed is *not* to think like governments or armies or corporations but rather to remember and act on the individual experiences that really shape our lives and those of others. To think humanistically and concretely rather than formulaically and abstractly, it is always best to read literature capable of dispelling the ideological fogs that so often obscure people from each other. Avoid the trots and the manuals, give a wide berth to security experts and formulators of the us-versus-them dogma, and, above all, look with the deepest suspicion on anyone who wants to tell you the real truth about Islam and terrorism, fundamentalism, militancy, fanaticism, etc. You'd have heard it all before, anyway, and even if you hadn't, you could predict its claims. Why not look for the expression of *different* kinds of human experience instead, and leave those great nonsubjects to the experts, their think tanks, government departments, and policy intellectuals, who get us into one unsuccessful and wasteful war after the other? ■

LAST THE NIGHT

The abiding genius of Edna St. Vincent Millay

By Cristina Nehring

Discussed in this essay:

Savage Beauty: the Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay, *by Nancy Milford. Random House, 2001. 550 pages. $29.95.*

What Lips My Lips Have Kissed: The Loves and Love Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay, *by Daniel Mark Epstein. Henry Holt and Company, 2001. 300 pages. $26.*

She was nineteen when she began—quickly, systematically, sexually, and metaphorically—to seduce the world of American poetry. Her rhythms were catchy; her voice, bold. Thomas Hardy called her the best thing in the nation besides skyscrapers. She won a Pulitzer in 1922; her books flew off shelves like saucers in an earthquake. Her "imperial line" struck awe into the heart of the era's most prominent critic, Edmund Wilson. Her love-sonnet sequence seemed to him the greatest the country had produced. And indeed it may be the most unflinching and various exploration of the self in love by any poet in English since John Donne.

This is high praise, and I will be quickly taken to task for it. Edna St. Vincent Millay's star has not so much fallen as crashed in the years since her death in 1950. Excluded from almost every major anthology or study of American verse published in the last few decades, she is forgotten by colleagues and despised (rather roundly) by academics. It is no coincidence that the two biographies of her that have just emerged (the first in many years)

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are not by scholars but by enthusiasts—one might well say iconoclasts. Scholars, even wanna-be scholars, spurn her. In a critical community in which kid gloves often seem part of the dress code—in the current community of American poetry pundits, that is—Millay comes in for the kind of violent and undiscriminating abuse that draws attention to itself. Prominent literary critics call her poetry, flatly, "an embarrassment." A *Boston Globe* essayist does not scruple to quote her six-year-old son's response to a bad country song, in a recent review, in characterizing her own reaction to the work of Millay: "I wish I had a picture *of how sick that makes me feel,*" she intones. Attempting to account for the admiration once lavished on so nauseating an author, she attributes it to . . . her name. Did you know that Edna St. Vincent Millay is a "skipping iambic trimeter, slightly irregular"? It sounds "like waltzing on tiptoes." It "surely helped" to make Millay's fame as the greatest poet of her time. Surely.

The truth is that Edna St. Vincent Millay (who was named, incidentally, not for a poetic meter but for a hospital in which her drunken uncle recovered from a freak accident) was sacrificed on the altar of Literary Modernism over fifty years ago. More recently she is being sacrificed all over again, and the new biographies under consideration here are, alas, not unimplicated.

Neither Nancy Milford nor the luckless Daniel Mark Epstein—whose normal-sized biography of Millay came out at precisely the same moment as Nancy Milford's far larger and better publicized opus (thirty years in the making)—intends to damn Millay. On the contrary, they relate their subject's thousand and one affairs, her sturdy drinking, and late-in-life morphine habit with balance, candor, and a salutary absence of moral outrage. Not so their reviewers, who—with few exceptions—fixate on Millay's "addictions" with a patronizing voyeurism that all but excludes the rest of her unusually rich and productive life. To be sure, it was Millay who announced to the world at the start of her career:

My candle burns at both ends;
It will not last the night;
But ah my foes, and oh, my friends—
It gives a lovely light!

She was right: in some ways her candle didn't last the night. By fifty she was often ill; at fifty-eight she was dead, perhaps in part from her own hard living. That hardly justifies casting this supremely poised artist—who (almost alone in literary history) supported a revolving set of family members with her verse, and who, even in decline, had a memory so photographic it allowed her to recall the contents of two manuscripts when they were lost in a fire—primarily as a "poet sodden with drink and drugs," as she is identified in the first line of a recent *New York Times* review. Nor does it serve us to make her an object of "ghoulish fascination," as Christopher Benfey does in *The New Republic*, quoting more lingeringly from the lists of drugs she ingested on her sickest days than from the poems she wrote in the same period—as though the really important question we needed to answer regarding Millay was, in Benfey's words, "what went so hideously wrong for the golden girl . . ." We might more usefully ask what went so spectacularly *right* with her? Shakespeare, too, died in his fifties—and if Millay *struggled* with verse in the last years of her life, Shakespeare retired from it altogether. Percy Shelley, whose lifestyle was as adventurous as Millay's, died at thirty. What is worth marveling about with these poets, as with so many others, is not how they declined but that they rose at all. How did a penniless half-orphan from Camden who spent her formative years housekeeping for two siblings as her single mother worked nursing jobs in distant townships come to write poetry that galvanized a nation, a generation, and an international assembly of admirers?

Edna St. Vincent Millay was born anything but a golden girl. Her mother kicked her father out when she was eight (as her grandmother had kicked her grandfather out). From that point on "Vincent," as she was called, and her two younger sisters were more or less on their own; their mother worked far away for months at a time, communicating with her children only by letter. Their father would not resurface until his daughters were adults, and then mainly to request medical care and money. In the meantime, the eldest child put the two younger children to sleep and brought them up: she cooked, cleaned, washed, poked the coal in the hearth, and invented songs to make it all "fun." Despite her formidable school achievements, no plans were entertained for her to attend college. There was no

Photograph © The Edna St. Vincent Millay Society, from the Library of Congress

money—and, besides, who would run the house if she left?

Sustained by her own kitchen tunes, nursed on Elizabethan poets, and encouraged by a mother whose own literary moonlighting made her sensible to the gifts of her daughter, Vincent entered—and won—every child's poetry contest available. In 1912 she entered an adult contest, submitting a sparsely written and striking visionary poem, "Renascence," and shocked the judges (who communicated to "Master Millay" their deep admiration for his work) by identifying herself as female. Although "Renascence" won only honorable mention, it was printed in a volume of *The Lyric Year* with the work of sixty better-known poets, and critical outrage over its failure to take first prize threw her into the public eye with a vehemence that winning never could have matched. The recipient of the first prize boycotted his own award ceremony in protest of her exclusion, and a wealthy literary woman put up money to send Millay to Vassar. Her ascent to literary stardom had begun.

For the next few years, the pretty charity girl starred in several university plays and wrote one, met New York editors, published verse, cut class, snubbed authority figures, risked expulsion, and seduced every man, woman, and child within her sphere. It is safe to say that from 1912 until her marriage in 1923, most everybody who crossed her path fell in love with her, and she, at least for a time, fell half in love with them. From the married editor of *The Lyric Year*, with whom she corresponded in tones increasingly impassioned, to the amorous college girls who had nervous breakdowns about her and the male poets who vied for her favor in letter and person, she engaged everyone, loved everyone, left everyone. If there was a touch of manipulation in her exchanges, there was an excess of generosity, childish high-spiritedness, and candor. Straining to guess the identity of the gentleman editor whose name she was not supposed to know until *The Lyric Year*'s contest ended but to whom she had just disclosed that "E. Vincent Millay" was "a girl," she burbled: "You aren't a girl, too, are you? . . . But it makes no difference who you

are. You are perfectly charming, and I am crazy about you. There! Such a relief to be able at last to confess it. . . ."

Millay was a natural at intimacy. This was, after all, the girl whose letters to her family were so heated that she predicted only half in jest that "The Collected Love Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay to her Mother" would emerge one day and astonish the world. It is little wonder that passion became Millay's great poetic subject. It is even less wonder that she had to learn to keep it in a tight grip.

She did so by loving people democratically. She loved them consecutively, simultaneously; good to all, obsessed, usually, by none. Certainly she had a "favorite" much of the time—in general, a man who was marginally unavailable, such as the dashing poet Arthur Ficke, who, beyond being married (most of her serious lovers were), also resided on a different spot of the globe much of the time, and with whom her relationship existed mainly in writing. Daniel Epstein makes much of Millay's "megawatt libido"—and one would be rash to refute it—but the fact remains that her most significant love affairs took place overwhelmingly on paper. She wrote to Ficke for five years before meeting him for the first time and then losing him to Europe for several more years, during which time they wrote to each other with new and, as they agreed, "religious" ardor. The relationship lasted a lifetime, and while Ficke returned to the States, divorced, and remarried, its most intimate exchanges remained textual. The same goes for Millay's liaison with Arthur Hooley, another mysterious editor from her Vassar years. According to Nancy Milford he was married; according to Epstein he was a determined bachelor and probably gay; what is clear is that he was not much interested in meeting Millay—and usually didn't. What they did do was write, feverishly and confessionally. Later in life, Millay would replicate this pattern with the man who inspired her greatest artistic marathon, the handsome younger poet George Dillon. She would pine for him in iambic pentameter but most often leave him in reality—heading to Paris on the heels of their first encounter, returning to America when he was with her in Paris, etc. Not that they refrained from sex, as her husband knew too well, but the bulk of the rapport consisted in epistolary "talk" and in Millay's sonnet sequence, not accidentally entitled *Fatal Interview*.

Millay wrote strong lines in praise of such distanced love. "Breast to breast/Let other lovers lie, in love and rest;/Not we . . .," she declares in one. The poet in sensual "slumber is as mute/As any man . . ." Better to be restless, to *yearn*, to strain, to sing: then love is "far and high,/That else forsakes the topmost branch, a fruit/Found on the ground by every passer-by." Like fallen fruit, lived love is cheap; it is imagined love that occupies the highest "branch" of Eden's tree, that lends the poet—so often voiceless, like her peers—the gift of song.

All that said, Millay was also the champion of fleeting physical pleasure, short and savage as often as lyrical and poignant. It is poems of this ilk, in fact—buoying, as they were, to budding feminists—that earned her initial notoriety. They range from tart and taunting quotables such as:

> I shall forget you presently, my dear,
> So make the most of this, your little day,
> Your little month, your little half a year,
> Ere I forget, or die, or move away . . .

to darker, rawer, more primal lines:

> I too beneath your moon, almighty Sex,
> Go forth at nightfall crying like a cat . . .
> For birds to foul and boys and girls to vex . . .

Millay wrote traditional verse from stances completely untraditional, unromantic, unfeminine. Only rarely does she strike a classic pose, such as that of the poet grieving the passage of mortal beauty—and even here the conventional lament seems laced with triumph, the grief qualified by lust.

> What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,
> I have forgotten, and what arms have lain
> Under my head till morning; but the rain
> Is full of ghosts tonight . . .

More than many poets, Millay wrote from life. She penned perfectly turned sonnets on imperfect relationships, most ending in heartbreak for her partner and a philosophical smile for her, but others far more consuming. Epstein does a good job of sorting through these many relationships, distinguishing the less from the more important, and providing enough information about the players that they come alive. From her Vassar days to her subsequent years in Greenwich Village and Europe, Millay picked intriguing lovers; it is well worth evoking a picture of them. For all its greater detail, Milford's larger book fails to do that. In fact, Milford too often shares—and trumps—her heroine's sublime egotism: she focuses on Millay with manic myopia, supplying little outside judgment of her companions, or even of Millay's *own* actions, symptoms, and motives. Mainly she lets her subject's excellent letters and journals speak for themselves—and they do—but, arranged almost bumper to bumper and minimally contextualized as they are, they do not tell a full story. They do not tell of the suicide attempts of her lovers' wives, for instance, or even of her own illnesses: We often hear that the lady is sick, but to learn what she's got (and whether it's mental, physical, alcohol-induced, or what have you) we must turn to Epstein. We must turn to him to have our attention drawn to Millay's excluding of her beloved mother from her wedding and her abandonment of her as she died, for instance, or for basic information about her men: to learn that Witter Bynner, Millay's first candidate for marriage, was gay; that he and her other intimate, Ficke—far from the colorless sidekicks they seem in Milford—were literary terrorists who had, when Millay met them, just rocked the lyric world by publishing a book of Modernist parody, which Modernists mistakenly celebrated. Most importantly of all, we must turn to Epstein for any real grasp of the extraordinary Dutch businessman Millay married in 1923, Eugen Boissevain.

It is easy to take him for a masochistic weakling—a slender reed that bent, and bent too much, in Millay's despotic wind. He seems to have allowed everything in his union with her, suffered everything, offered everything, and asked—pathetically—nothing. No sooner had he married Millay

(who, fresh from her Pulitzer, was by that time the most famous poet in America) than he became her nurse; indeed, she checked into the hospital for major intestinal surgery hours after they exchanged vows. As she convalesced for months afterward, he dropped his own life to assume her care, entertainment, and immense correspondence, taking bedside dictation for—and increasingly composing—her letters to family, ex-lovers, friends, and publishers. The habit was never broken. When Millay was sick in her later years, he found her drugs; when she plunged into an excruciatingly painful morphine addiction, he coolly and deliberately provoked the same addiction in himself, in order to show her the way to break it.

At the same time he not only countenanced her lovers but courted them. "Vincent is . . . asking you to come to Steepletop," Boissevain wrote to twenty-five-year-old George Dillon: "I, too, want you to come: I am going to make you love me." When Millay, then forty, proposed to live with Dillon in Paris, Boissevain graciously withdrew: "I am not going to be the black shadow between you and George," he wrote her from New England. "Take a place for a year or come back here with him . . . but do not," he beseeched her, "think of me as the plague of Egypt, or as a husband who with a cold hand any day can be expected to separate two young lovers." As she test-drove her passion for the young poet, Boissevain sent adoring letters: "Go to it Scaramoodles," he urged her, using one of their pet names, "and no heartaches or feeling sorry for ANYBODY!" He praised her bravery in extramarital experiment, pitied her for "loving so much two galumps! And one is more than an ordinary girl can stand!" swore undying loyalty to her, and reminded her to "button up [her] overcoat" in rainy Paris. When the test began to fail—ironically, because the young lover at her side became jealous of the old husband over the sea—the latter did not rejoice but rather resisted his wife's resignation to drop his rival. He did not want her to renounce something that gave her joy: "It is preposterous that three intelligent and courageous people should have to decide that the only way out would be to be resigned to be unhappy. . . . Let's make another heroic attempt," he pressed, to create a *vie à trois*. "Maybe we can teach him not to be jealous of me. . . . I will do anything."

Masochistic? Spineless to the point of evolutionary meltdown? It is easy to think so reading Milford; she gives neither context nor explanation for Boissevain's spectacular tolerance of his wife's infidelities. We are left to assume that their lifestyle was her initiative solely, and that he succumbed to it because he was, quite simply, the weaker partner. We do not learn in Milford that Boissevain had been married long before he met Millay, or that his first wife, who died unexpectedly at age twenty-eight, had been a charismatic women's-rights champion whom he loved exorbitantly, and with whom he had agreed to an open relationship—an arrangement they both considered as humane and egalitarian as it was exciting. A completely faithful marriage, he'd told friends, "is like an icebox with always some cold chicken in it." Nor do we learn that, as Inez Milholland lay dying, Boissevain asked whether she wanted his accompaniment in death, and that it is only because she said no, he must have another life, that he was around six years later to court Millay in the first place. We do not learn, in other words, that Boissevain had extraordinarily passionate and iconoclastic ideas about marriage well before he met Millay, ideas she learned from *him* as much as he learned anything from her.

In Boissevain, Millay picked up not a servant but a soul mate. He was a strong man, a witty and confident man; his laugh, according to friends, "scattered the clouds"; his letters bristle with all the wit of hers, his public motions could attract as much media adulation as hers (shortly before leaving her in Dillon's arms in Paris, he made international headlines by plunging, tuxedo-clad, into the Seine to save a suicidal woman as scores of Frenchmen stood by trembling). His relationship with Millay was a utopian experiment—with all the injuries and elevations such endeavors entail. And their marriage, for all its offense to conventional pieties, took more serious and sensitive account of the complexities of the human heart than most models of conjugal intimacy available, in his time or ours.

For all Millay's testing of her husband, her respect for him was unshakable—and it increased over the years. After two decades of wedlock, she still wrote New Year's resolutions charging herself to "care for *Nothing* so much" as making him happy. Even in the throes of her darkest illnesses she challenged herself to "speak in a voice with *no hint* of pain . . . in the strong, gay, rich voice he loves . . . even when I don't care *anything* about *anything*." And if *he* was generous with her lovers, she was gracious with his ex too, writing a sonnet to Inez Milholland's memory, the final line of which strangely, appropriately, wound up on her own tombstone in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine: "Take up the song," it says, "forget the epitaph."

Had Boissevain and Millay lived more conventional lives, it is dubious whether Millay would have found either the freedom or the source material for her emotionally kaleidoscopic, taboo-busting, and honest art. If ever there was "a great man behind a great woman"—a man who made it possible for a woman to follow her vocation—it was Eugen Boissevain. He believed that his wife needed "stimulating company" in order to realize her peculiar poetic genius, and, for better or worse, he was right. The most productive period of Millay's life coincided with her extramarital affair with Dillon. It was at this time that she wrote poems at the rate of dozens a week, at this time that she drew the course of love with more boldness than any poet in English since the seventeenth century—and with greater detail and truth.

Only in the most superficial sense are the sonnets in *Fatal Interview* "traditional," the word with which they are typically dismissed today. They are traditional, that is, in outward form—Millay never went overboard for the epidermal innovations and prosodic gimmicks that tantalized contemporaries such as e e cummings and Marianne Moore—but jarringly new in substance and sentiment. Millay knew the typo-

graphical and metrical experiments of her colleagues; she made fun of them in some of her poems and, occasionally, appreciated them: it is she, after all, who nominated e e cummings for his first poetry fellowship. But it is not for this reason that she wished to imitate him. In her historical moment it was far more original—and probably difficult—to draft an Elizabethan sonnet than to trot out a cutting-edge Modernist lyric (Ficke and Bynner's voluble parody suggests just how easy it could be to do the latter). It was Millay's choice and gift to write sonnets, and if we fault her for being "archaic" in her own day, we must fault the greatest poets in the English language for the same offense: Edmund Spenser penned *The Faerie Queene* in a vernacular that had gone out of date in the age of Chaucer, centuries before. Similarly, if we attack Millay for being "sentimental," as many do, then we must attack Shakespeare and Donne equally, for Millay can be deemed sentimental only in the sense that she writes, as they do, about love. Her sonnets are cynical, defiant, disturbing; rarely does she pause on an unambivalent feeling; never does she exhibit the emotional indulgence traditionally associated with sentimentality. The fact that "sentimental" seems, among today's literati, to have come to mean anything *at all* to do with romantic love, no matter how skeptical, original, or subtle, is testimony to the sterilization of our culture, the ironization of our artistic intellect. It is a comment, ultimately, on the embarrassment of our collective soul, on the limits of our critical temperament at this point in history—and not on Millay's lyrical talent.

Millay marks the *boundaries* of love more frequently than she evokes its aspirations. Take "Bluebeard," a sonnet composed before *Fatal Interview* but that, by virtue of theme and artistry, is best read alongside it. The poem is a remaking of the popular fairy tale in which a vindictive prince, Bluebeard, weds one righteous young woman after another, only to give her an impossible command and destroy her when, inevitably, she breaks it. He tells her not to enter a chamber in his palace; inside is a smoldering pile of carcasses—the carcasses of his previous curious wives; upon discovering this pile, the most recent bride is added to it. In Millay's poem, the murderous prince is radically decriminalized; he is modernized, and his gender is made ambiguous: Millay lends him her own autobiographical voice.

"This door you might not open," she begins, in the "imperial" vein Wilson so admired, "and you did." The line ends on a raised voice and, implicitly, a raised knife. "So enter now," the speaker resumes with sudden gentleness, "and see for what slight thing/You are betrayed." Slight? The reader is thinking blood and guts. "Here is no treasure hid," says smiling Bluebeard,

> No cauldron . . .
> . . . no heads of women slain
> For greed like yours, no writhings
> of distress;
> But only,

he soothes,

> what you see . . . Look yet again:
> An empty room, cobwebbed and
> comfortless.
> Yet this alone out of my life I kept
> Unto myself, lest any know me quite;
> And you did so profane me when you
> crept
> Unto the threshold of this room
> tonight
> That I must never more behold your
> face.
> This now is yours. I seek another
> place.

The brutality of the original myth returns in the end—and yet the speaker is no clichéd patriarch hankering for blood but a fragile androgynous soul pining for privacy, for a "room of her own," however modest, however, indeed, symbolic. "Bluebeard" has become a person in a recognizably modern relationship who would not be consumed, possessed—and must move on with pathological abruptness when she is. A dated myth about male predators and female innocents has been changed into a psychologically sophisticated—though still viscerally haunting—allegory of the limits of romantic union: the need for distance and, indeed, of secrecy in human liaisons. Millay's Bluebeard is, among other types, the artist in love—yearning at once for creaturely closeness and artistic individuality, for union with another and maintenance of a fundamental solitude. As in many of her poems, Millay puts what is habitually glossed as a male need into the mouth of a female.

Her speaker in *Fatal Interview* is given much grief by partners who are too timid for her, too chained to their domestic comfort to entertain her wildness. Take the prognosis of this Millayean siren:

> Small chance, however, in a storm so
> black
> A man will leave his friendly fire and
> snug
> For a drowned woman's sake, and
> bring her back
> To drip and scatter shells upon the rug.

Her images are startling: she is a kind of mad mermaid in this sonnet, a cross between Marley's Ghost and a sea nymph—a disrupter of men's domestic comfort, a destroyer of carpets and consciences.

If Millay sees the timorousness at the threshold of passion, the recalcitrant reserve at the heart of intimacy, she also sees the potential for grandeur in the most banal of erotic dalliances. "We talk of taxes," begins one poem, dryly,

> and I call you friend;
> Well, such you are,—but well enough
> we know
> How thick about us root, how rankly
> grow
> Those subtle weeds no man has need
> to tend,
> That flourish through neglect . . .
> . . . how such matters go,
> We are aware, and how such matters
> end.

She and her friend are jaded adulterers, veterans of the sexual marketplace, consenting adults embarking on what they know to be a compromised, terminal relationship. And yet, Millay declares (in the classic—but here utterly unexpected—volta of an Italian sonnet),

> Yet shall be told no meagre passion
> here;
> With lovers such as we forevermore
> Isolde drinks the draught, and
> Guinevere

Receives the Table's ruin through her door,
Francesca, with the loud surf at her ear,
Lets fall the coloured book upon the floor.

Modern and mature, savvy and sullied as they are, Millay's lovers have as much sublimity in their blood as the adulterers of old: Tristan and Isolde, Guinevere and Lancelot, Francesca and Paolo of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The poem is stunning in its consecutive contrasts: the world-weariness and cynicism of the opening, the high idealism of the ending; the tragic glamour of the last sestet, the modesty of the last couplet. After the great queen Guinevere (unleashing, as she did, the ruin of the Round Table), we get little Francesca, the guileless girl who, reading poetry with her tutor, dwindles into his desirous arms: That day, says Dante, with understatement equal to Millay's, "they read no more." That day, she "lets fall the coloured book upon the floor"—so fateful a moment, so quiet a gesture, and placed, once again, in evocative contrast with the "loud surf," the pulsing of Francesca's own blood, "at her ear"; the rush of nubile passion that drives her to sacrifice all she has for the embrace of a transcendent love.

Millay is a master of contrasts: jaded seductress and champion of amorous destiny; admirer of the tragic and expert of the facile; unflinching observer of human smallness and heady grasper after ideals: a cliché-killer. No one is quite so wrong about Millay as those who accuse her, as did the poet Ellen Bryant Voight (quoted in *Critical Essays on Edna St. Vincent Millay*, 1993), of a "rigid and inauthentic persona," a single pose. Such critics are reacting to her reputation as a sexual libertine, it seems to me; they are reacting to her life (which can indeed be caricatured), but not to her poetry, which is as dizzyingly variegated in the poses it strikes—and as precise in its observations about human amorous nature—as any lyrical *oeuvre* in memory.

It is not only the range or honesty of emotional experience in Millay's verse but its sensual intensity that makes it so memorable. In an age of largely dissonant verse, Millay is unabashedly musical. Old-fashioned? Her "imperial line" is unprecedented, even in the oratorical and rhythmic verse of the great Renaissance sonneteers she is sometimes accused of imitating. She is aphoristic even in despair; imposing even in retreat.

To be sure, her sort of monumental, almost mythical, line is not fashionable in modern poetry—it is regarded as inherently false; modern American poets tend to be micro-artists: they work on small slates; they use humble diction and off-rhymes, at best. Too often their poetry sounds like apologetic prose. Elizabeth Bishop—whose stock has risen more rapidly than just about any of her colleagues' in the last twenty years—is a case in point. Note the unremarkability of her lines:

In Worcester, Massachusetts,
I went with Aunt Consuelo
to keep her dentist's appointment
and sat and waited for her
in the dentist's waiting room.

All the repetitiveness and the bungled rhythms of normal speech, and little in the way of music—but this at the opening of one of the best-known poems of one of America's best-esteemed modern poets. Is this a stunning new breakthrough in the craft—a new brand of genius? Or just an uninteresting trend? To be sure, it is a trend that has proven stubborn: already, many decades ago, Elizabeth Bishop's model, Marianne Moore—a contemporary of Millay's whose fame now eclipses hers—was highly celebrated for her inventive use of "syllabic verse." What is "syllabic verse"? It is—not to put too fine a point on it—verse with *no distinguishing characteristics*—verse with no discernible accents or rhythms, consisting of nothing but, well, *syllables*. (Try to write without those.) Next to innovators like Moore, Millay is often seen as a blight on the profession, her poems dismissed, in the words of Millay defender Debra Fried, as mere "retrograde schoolgirl exercises amidst the vanguard verbal dazzle" of Moore and other Modernists. Witness the "verbal dazzle" at the opening of this much anthologized Moore poem:

There is a great amount of poetry in
unconscious fastidiousness
.....
... Disbelief and conscious fastidiousness were
ingredients in [a swan's]
disinclination to move. Finally its hardihood was
not proof against its
proclivity to more fully appraise such bits
of food as the stream

bore counter to it ...

Academic, halting, repetitive—and largely opaque. If this is dazzle, give us darkness.

Poetry criticism today has become largely disingenuous. We say we like things that we really don't. We are so in awe of innovation—even innovation that consists only in removing rather than adding poetic skills—that we play dumb: we sacrifice sense, relevance, and aesthetics alike. "Never before [Millay's time] had experiment been so generally pursued and valued in and of itself," writes David Perkins in his classic *History of Modern Poetry*. We have not matured much since then. Like the audience of the emperor with no clothes, we see something strange and applaud. We applaud out of duty, not pleasure. We have assimilated that what is true for medicine and breakfast cereal is true for verse: if it tastes bad, it's good for us. But there is no truth to this. What used to distinguish poetry from the other genres, according to its first great defender, Sir Philip Sidney, was that it could not only "instruct" (in the way of a history text, for example) but "delight" as well. I defy anyone to cull more delight nowadays from a Marianne Moore poem than from an historical novel—or a history textbook, or a history *midterm*, for that matter.

Millay has music: her lines are incantatory even in sadness—like chants, like prayers. She also has imagery. Where more fashionable modern lyricists might give us clusters of polysyllabic abstractions (fastidiousness, disinclination, proclivity), Millay offers concrete chunks of life; vivid monosyllables:

My kisses now are sand against your mouth,

Teeth in your palm and pennies on your eyes.

With her combination of gritty imagery and beguiling rhythm, her kaleidoscope of tones and rude psychological honesty, it is no wonder critics once declared her "the most interesting poet in America." Her work demands to be read anew—and if these two flawed but fascinating biographies can effect as much, they have rendered a formidable service. Unfortunately, the danger is that they will effect the opposite: they will confirm the fashionable snobs of literature in their belief that Millay was known only for her wild life and not for her expert lines. They will make those inclined to moralism writhe and those inclined to envy weep.

For after a childhood of poverty and neglect, Millay achieved an adult life of exceptional privilege—for many years, she had fame, beauty, charisma, an adoring and indulgent husband, a legion of admirers, and license and leisure to do with them as she pleased. Her later problems seem largely self-imposed. Milford predictably gets washed up in details in the final part of her biography: the reader is at sea among drug lists. Epstein characteristically keeps his eye on the larger picture. The only problem with his book is that for all his clarity of perspective and general soundness of judgment, his prose can be almost comically disastrous—so much so, in fact, that his well-meaning attempt to rehabilitate Millay's reputation as a literary stylist might reasonably backfire. His book is shot through with clichés—often of the most cloying kind—and spattered with avuncular asides. Reporting on a letter in which the high-spirited twenty-one-year-old Millay tells her baby sisters she has developed attractive lips, Epstein cannot refrain from speculating whether it is "possible that no one had explained to her the ancient doctrine that a young woman's mouth grows beautiful by doing what it is meant to do at twenty-one: kissing, making love? ...Kisses are more colorful and lasting than lipstick and rouge."

It doesn't get any worse than this; but it does not, alas, get terribly much better either. One must read Epstein for content and Milford for style—the style, specifically, of her lengthy letter quotations. In combination, they provide a canny—if slightly overlapping—picture of Millay's astonishing rise and fall.

For fall she literally did—down the staircase of Steepletop. She broke her neck. It is an irony of literary biography that the stupendously popular Millay, the girl who once slept with two literary journalists at once, the damsel who had ten saviors to her side when distressed by a hangnail or a hangover, dies spectacularly alone. Eugen Boissevain had succumbed to lung cancer a year earlier, and Millay had shocked friends and family by resolving to stay in their remote farmhouse unattended. To everybody's surprise, she had become strong again—strong enough to forge on without her cavalier, to harness her various addictions and illnesses, to stare down her own declining reputation; strong enough, as she said in one of her last and most defiant sonnets, to "put Chaos into fourteen lines and keep him there."

But she had become a recluse. It is for this reason that nobody found her as she lay dying at the foot of the stairs in the deep of the night. Perhaps this is how she wished it. After decades of serial intimacy, perhaps Millay wanted, in the end, to seize the artistic solitude she evokes in some of her strongest poems. After a lifetime of being attended to, doted on, and saved from herself, perhaps the poet did not wish to be disturbed in her dramatic and desired exit. A childishly haunting verse of hers—in which she uncannily identifies her temperament and destiny—suggests something of the kind:

"Wolf!" cried my cunning heart
At every sheep it spied,
And roused the countryside.
.....
At length my cry was known:
Therein lay my release.
I met the wolf alone
And was devoured in peace.

If only we do not let her rest in peace. It is time to rouse her ruined reputation, to seize her glowing poems from the pyre of the old modernists, to snatch her stained body from under the stones of the new puritans. ■