



# Take Up the Song

Commemorating the  
Centennial Anniversary  
of Edna St. Vincent Millay's  
Pulitzer Prize for Poetry



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*Edna St. Vincent Millay with Eugen Boissevain (seated)  
and his brother Jan at Millay's home, 75 ½ Bedford Street,  
Greenwich Village, New York, 1923. Photog. Jessie Tarbox Beals.*

*Cover photo: Edna St. Vincent Millay,  
Croton-on-Hudson, New York, 1923. Photog. John Lofman.*

# TAKE UP THE SONG

Commemorating the Centennial Anniversary of  
Edna St. Vincent Millay's Pulitzer Prize for Poetry

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With Her  
Winning Pulitzer Poetry Entries for 1923

THE BALLAD OF THE HARP-WEAVER

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A FEW FIGS FROM THISTLES  
POEMS AND SONNETS

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EIGHT SONNETS

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Supplemented by  
RENASCENCE

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- I. *When you, at this moment are to me*
- II. *What's this of death, from you who never will die?*
- III. *I know I am but summer to your heart*
- IV. *Here is a wound that never will heal, I know*
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## INTRODUCTION

This booklet celebrates the centennial of the award of the first Pulitzer Prize to a female poet, Edna St. Vincent Millay (VC 1917). On April 30, 1923, Millay received a letter informing her that she had won the \$1,000 Pulitzer Prize in the category of poetry. The publications containing the poems for which she won the prize were published in 1922 and appear in an accompanying exhibit in the Thompson Memorial Library at Vassar College. Copies of the poems themselves appear on the pages following.

Although much is made of the fact that this is the first Pulitzer Prize for poetry awarded to a woman, the poetry category had only just been grafted onto the initial slate of prize genres the previous year, 1922, for submissions published in 1921. Also, the first Pulitzers granted to female authors were awarded the year before, 1921, to Zona Gale for her play *Miss Lulu Bett*, and to Edith Warton for her novel *The Age of Innocence*. In 1922 the first Pulitzer Prize for poetry was awarded by a jury of three male judges, however, to Edwin Arlington Robinson for his *Collected Poems* over two female finalists, Amy Lowell and Millay herself, who had submitted her magnificent collection *Second April*.

After that decision, there was some concern about gender bias—suggested in an editorial in *Poetry* magazine by Harriet Monroe, the magazine's founding editor (also displayed in the Library exhibit). The Pulitzer Prize Board, primarily composed of faculty of the School of Journalism of Columbia University, had that year taken over the award from the Poetry Society of America, which had offered a prize of \$500 for best poet,

and doubled the amount to \$1,000. Over the previous three years the Poetry Society had demonstrated no gender favoritism by awarding their prize to two women, Sarah Teasdale and Margaret Widdemer, as well as to Carl Sandburg. Although Monroe in her commentary makes an effort not to appear to discredit Robinson, she also insinuates that Millay submitted the better poetry:

The initial award is of course worthy of all praise, though the committee may have regretted that they could not honor also Miss Millay's *Second April*. Indeed, the year 1921, presenting two such books, was singularly rich. The three members of the poetry jury were Wilbur L. Cross, Richard Burton, and Ferris Greenslet. Though we cannot criticize the verdict in this case, we must repeat once more our plea that juries be strictly professional, and that poets alone have the right and the authority to award honors in their art.

In the editorial, Monroe also repeats an earlier criticism that the list of awards bequeathed by Joseph Pulitzer for the original prizes granted five years earlier lacked an award for poetry, and, combined with her insistence that poetry judges be poets themselves, she implies a state of affairs where poetry is taken less seriously by the Pulitzer Board than what they regard as more professional forms of writing. There is in this a double critique by Monroe of the critical evaluation of poetry in American culture. As a poet herself sensitive to language, Monroe rubs in the word "professional" when she identifies it with the practice of poetry. For she knows that the genre is less

remunerative, and therefore regarded as less serious than more lucrative forms of writing, implying as well that poetry written by women is bound to be less valued when evaluated by male journalists, editors, academics, publishers, and other linguistic wage-earners as they seek out a poet worthy of being awarded a substantial cash prize.

The loss of the Pulitzer Prize by Millay in 1922 for *Second April* must have stung her as a repetition of her experience ten years previously of her submission of her allegorical poem “Renascence” to the competition for *The Lyric Year*, whose three winners were to share a \$1,000 prize. Although her poem made it into the volume as one of the best 100 poems of 2,000 submissions, “Renascence” was not among the final three winners and she received no cash prize—over which, as a 20-year-old still living at home with her working mother and two younger sisters, she was broken-hearted. Gender bias was certainly at work here. Although Millay had submitted her poem while hiding her gender and identifying herself as E. Vincent Millay, one of the judges, Edward Wheeler, five years previously had awarded Millay a first prize as a judge for one of her poems, “The Land of Romance,” for the children’s magazine *St. Nicholas*, where she had guardedly entered under the same name. Wheeler reprinted the poem in his magazine *Current Literature* later that year, calling her poem “phenomenal,” and stating: “the author (whether boy or girl, we do not know) is but fourteen years of age.” She did, however, send a thank-you letter to the editors of *St. Nicholas* after winning a later cash prize, signing her name “Edna Millay.” If Wheeler did not remember Millay from these transactions, it is likely that Ferdinand Earle, the editor of *The Lyric Year* and also one of

the contest judges, spilled the beans to Wheeler and the other judge, Stanley Braithwaite. For Millay had teasingly admitted that she was “an aspiring Miss of 20” in a letter to Earle when he informed her of having made it into the anthology in the first pass in a letter he had addressed to “E. Vincent Millay, Esquire.” Earle’s subsequent letters and his own introduction to the book make it clear that the decision-rendering was a fraught process, where Earle was obliged to go along in a consensus with Wheeler and Braithwaite, dividing the award between three male poets of no lasting consequence, although Earle had indicated in his letters to Millay that he believed she would be awarded first prize.

Earle makes gender the subject of his introduction to *The Lyric Year*, casting light on the qualities his fellow judges were looking for which would still be at work in the Pulitzer poetry jury of 1922:

The famous first series of Francis T. Palgrave’s *The Golden Treasury*, which includes most of “the best original Lyrical pieces and songs in our language” from Thomas Wyatt, born in 1503, to Samuel Rogers, who died in 1855, is also composed of about one hundred poets. Of Professor Palgrave’s three hundred and thirty-nine poems, covering over three centuries, only five pieces are credited to women—whereas their work constitutes more than forty per cent of this collection. Curiously enough, current verse is more masculine; a tendency due, however, to contact with more virile influences. We are witnessing the decline of Latin and Grecian influence,

and the ascendancy of the art of Norseman, Slav and Anglo-Saxon—a resurrection of Northern Deities.

Our twentieth century poetry is democratic, scientific, humane. Its independence reveals the liberating touch of Walt Whitman, sweet with robust optimism. It reflects the exhilarating trend that is sweeping over Continental music, painting, and poetry. The Editor has endeavored to give preference to poems fired with the Time spirit and marked by some special distinction, rather than mere technical performances—poems representative, as much as possible, of the work done to-day in America, rather than an index to his personal taste.

The judgment and its aftermath were the occasion of what Daniel Mark Epstein, in his biography of Millay, calls “a legend central to our literary heritage, like the death of Poe, Whitman’s reviewing *Leaves of Grass* under pseudonyms, Pound’s editing of *The Waste Land* and the vanishing of Ambrose Bierce.” Never has such an aesthetic blunder been so universally decried. The American public, in whom the contest was supposed to cultivate a taste for poetry, responded critically themselves in a collective outcry that Millay had been wronged. A chorus of established critics also expressed this view, among whom was Jessie Belle Rittenhouse, who reviewed *The Lyric Year* in the *New York Times* and declared “Renascence” to be the “freshest, most distinctive” poem in the book. Many poets who had made it into the volume agreed, including the very winners of the contest, who embarrassingly stated that their prizes were undeserved. Orrick Johns, the first-prize winner,

wrote: "It was an unmerited award. The outstanding poem in the book was 'Renaissance,' by Edna St. Vincent Millay, acknowledged by every authoritative critic as such," and he refused to attend the award ceremony. Perhaps what is more astounding, in a remarkable example of life imitating art, "Renaissance," a poem about the rebirth of a soul into poetic language, prophetically proved to be the beginning for Millay of her career as a poet by gaining her critical attention and a national audience at once, beginning with Jessie Rittenhouse's invitation to come to New York to recite the poem to members of the Poetry Society of America.

Just as remarkably, the poem simultaneously opened for Millay the door to her college education at Vassar. For when she recited it at an end-of-summer party at a tourist inn near her home in Camden, Maine, where her sister Norma was working as a waitress, she was approached by Caroline Dow, a Vassar alumna of the class of 1880, who offered to arrange for her admission and tuition and expenses for her education at Vassar. Many of the poems in *Second April* were conceived during her time at Vassar, and Millay expressed her appreciation to Dow and Vassar both by dedicating the volume "To my beloved friend Caroline B. Dow."

Although the slight to *Second April* by the Pulitzer jury was not regarded as the national fiasco of Millay's treatment by *The Lyric Year*, Monroe's criticism helped Millay to win the Pulitzer the following year, and Millay came to regard the press, and, more dependably, the public readership to whom it appealed, as an ally essential to her literary standing. Millay herself was thrilled at the news of the prize. A few weeks after the announcement—upon being whisked to New York for

emergency abdominal surgery on her wedding day by her new husband, Eugen Jan Boissevain—she declared, “Well, if I die now I shall be immortal.”

Millay’s public audience widened immensely after her receipt of the Pulitzer. This is evidenced in our exhibit by a copy of the interview printed two weeks after the announcement in a May issue of the *New York Evening Post*. The interview was conducted by a reporter, Eleanor Carroll, sent up to Croton where Millay was now living with her husband-to-be Boissevain, who is never mentioned in the interview. In the interview Millay talks about nature and travel, and especially about her mother, for whom she has a fantastic plan that she will return to Camden and buy a new home with the prize money where they will live together again near the ocean. Millay ends the interview talking about an upcoming national reading tour, obviously hoping to use the interview to promote the tour; but she meanders off message by separating out the people who come to talk to her after her performances, whom she tends to dislike, from the less voluble, more introverted “shy ones who come up within fighting distance, just to see what the speaker really looks like,” for whom she has an affinity. At the very end of the interview, she blurts out what seems a heartfelt and unrehearsed statement about her love for the national audience for whom she writes:

And now I shall tell you what lies deepest of all: it is my love for this silly old America of ours. Why does it do what it sometimes does? Why does it think so foolishly sometimes? It is because life is brown and

tepid for many of us. I want to write so that those who read me will say to themselves, "Life can be exciting and free and intense."

I really mean it.

Although this statement might be cynically received as a patriotically charged plug for the reading tour, a sensitive reader of her poem "Renascence," which she mentions earlier in the interview, will find in it a sincere if exalted ambition for a raised collective awareness of pure being through poetic language—capable, she suggests, of reforming our political life. It is a sentiment worthy of her favorite poet, Shelley. On another level it speaks directly to the cultural work to be done toward the elevation of public discourse that Joseph Pulitzer sought to cultivate through his endowments.

Among the poems collected here that won her the Pulitzer, "The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver," a fairy-tale narrative dedicated to her mother, provides us with another allegorical expression of Millay's own transformation from the brown and tepid poverty of her childhood to the redemptive world of literature, music, and drama to which her mother exposed her daughters from the time they were small children. Art and a widowed mother's love are melded in the poem in the image of a magical "harp with a woman's head, / Nobody will buy." On the strings of this harp the mother weaves, as on a mystical loom, clothing as a Christmas gift for her naked child, before she dies in the night with "her hands on the harp-strings / Frozen dead."

This poem was born of experiences in which Millay's art and life again were interwoven. In her expansive biography of Millay, *Savage Beauty*, Nancy Milford relates that Millay's



friend, the critic Edmund Wilson, who had published “The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver” in *Vanity Fair* as its Managing Editor, was slightly critical of the poem; he thought it “verged on the sentimental,” and told her so. The ferocity with which she defended the poem surprised him. He later wrote: “I had known that it was about her own mother ... and I knew how devoted she was to the debonair hard-bitten old lady who worked for her and educated her.” Then, Milford relates, “it seized him: ‘the loneliness, the poverty, the undervalued Irish heritage, the Spartan New England self-discipline, the gift of artistic creation and intellectual distinction ... that the mother had been able to transmit.’” Millay’s mother and two sisters, Norma and Kathleen, and Norma’s husband, Charles Ellis, each read the poem with a shared appreciation, as her mother wrote about their responses to Vincent: “we all love it. Charlie and Non were mad about it, and Non told Charlie a little more so that he had a little better idea of what it might mean to us.” One of the things Norma may have told Charlie was that their mother had supported the girls before she found work as a visiting nurse by weaving women’s hair into wigs on a lap loom, a skill she had learned from her own mother.

Readers have often been tempted to confuse Millay’s poetry with her life, as though she were speaking directly through her poetic voice about her own experiences. Many identify her even today with the persona of the Jazz Age New Woman she constructs in many of the poems here that won her the Pulitzer. In the lyrics “Thursday” and “To The Not Impossible Him,” as well as in the sonnets “Oh, think not I am faithful to a vow,” “I shall forget you presently my dear,” “Oh, oh, you will be sorry for that word!,” and, most quintessentially, “What lips my

lips have kissed, and where, and why," Millay presents us with a proud, sexually unfettered female speaker in control of her own destiny and appetites. In 1923, shortly after the enactment of universal suffrage, this figure resonated with her public as women became hopeful that political agency would lead to the achievement of equality in the educational, economic, and social spheres. This was a time as well when young people were rejecting the repressive constraints of a society that had just led them into a world war, who now sought to build a better future. "The younger generation forms a country of its own," as Millay expressed the *zeitgeist* herself. However, as tempting as it has been for many a devoted reader of Millay's works to seek out autobiographical references in her poetry, the stylistic sophistication of her work as well as the variety of voices one finds there prohibit any transparent correspondence between poem and poet. For instance, "What lips my lips have kissed," printed here, is the reminiscence of an older woman recollecting past liaisons. Millay's poems are carefully crafted works with strategically invented speakers. One might make an exception, taking Millay at her word, with "Renaissance"—about which she claimed, when asked about its origin, that the events of the poem had actually happened to her. But there is something of a mystery to be fathomed in this statement. This is a poem, after all, which describes its speaker's death, burial, and resurrection.

Edna St. Vincent Millay, as few poets before her and fewer since, was literally able to embody her poetry. She regarded herself as much an actress as a poet, had performed in lead roles in plays semi-professionally in Maine in the years immediately after she graduated from high-school, and professionally after she graduated from Vassar when she performed with the

Provincetown Players in Greenwich Village. At Vassar she was constantly performing in college plays, again in starring roles. She was also a playwright in her own right, and might have won the Pulitzer for drama for her expressionist anti-war play *Aria Da Capo* in 1921 over Zona Gale's *Miss Lulu Bett*, had she submitted it. Moreover, in her public readings of her own work, she was, by all accounts, stunningly successful. She recited to sell-out crowds in theaters and arenas in every city she performed in throughout the 1920s and 1930s, sometimes filling an auditorium like the Hollywood Bowl several days in a row. In his memoir, *The Shores of Light*, Edmund Wilson gives a sense of Millay's talent for embodying her poetry. He writes, reminiscing on these performances after listening to recordings of her broadcast radio readings after her death in 1950:

If you play *Elegy*, you will hear in the closing lines her characteristic cadences that are almost like song. I do not remember whether she had recited this poem the night that I met her first. If she did not, I heard it soon after. It was one of a series she had written for a girlfriend at Vassar who had died, which I thought among the finest of the things that she showed me then. What was impressive and rather unsettling when she read such poems aloud was her power of imposing herself on others through a medium that unburdened the emotions of solitude. The company hushed and listened as people do to music—her authority was always complete, but her voice, though dramatic, was lonely.

Like the mother's singing voice which mingles with the beneficent grace of the harp strings in "The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver," or the silver filaments of the rain that speaks to the poet and restores her from the grave in "Renaissance," which her own song of praise rises to meet, Millay regarded poetry as a material vibration, as something coming from what she refers to in "Elegy" (from *Second April*) as "the chemistry / Of the secret earth." A poem to Millay was not a transparent tool of meaning offered to the ether of consciousness. Like music or the product of any other art or handicraft, she treated it as a thing in space and time with material agency related to the body. In "Renaissance" the voice of the speaker is by the end of the poem that of a newly arisen poet able to answer in kind the language of nature through which things speak to her. Her voice is not that of the schematic, probing, sovereign subject one hears at the beginning of the poem. Nor is it wholly that of an object, a "compassionate I" who feels and suffers everything. Millay's reborn speaker in this early announcement of her vocation is essentially an embodied being or thing, neither subject nor object, in a community of other things with which she is able to belong and converse. When Millay states that the events of "Renaissance" actually happened to her, she is assuming a self that is not the transcendent, singular subject it seems. She is not speaking as an author so much as she is a fellow actor in a drama of being in which she plays a material part. She and the poem share a life.

In her brilliant essay, "Uncanny Millay," Suzanne Clark remarks upon the way in which the poetry of Millay, who "courted oblivion" by "writing sonnets in an era of high modernism," continues to unconsciously haunt readers, public and

academic, through a “mnemonics of sound,” which is “more like a memory of the body than of the mind.”

Clark examines the way Millay’s poetry, “which does not acknowledge the separation of life and art,” performs a self where “there is no separation between artist and person.” This self, however, is *performed*. Millay “delineates the trying on of identities that might work a remedy to alienation at the same time she denaturalizes this identity-making project and exposes its unconscious webbing as art.” The result is that Millay is able to use, and indeed master, traditional forms in a way that brings to consciousness their cultural and political workings to construct identity in her performance of these forms: “A reader might assume that any repetition of traditional forms would assume a traditional or conservative purpose, at least at the level of the unconscious, but Millay mobilizes their power to her own ends. Literature, in Millay’s work, is not kept separate from the political questions of gender.”

What Clark calls the “masquerade of personal identity” that one finds in Millay gives all of her work a narrative and allegorical cast:

Millay uses the traditional forms of poetry in a productive and radical challenge to the hierarchies of modernism. Millay’s poems involve a different rhetorical situation for poetics, not based on self-contained symbols, but rather on figures—embodiments—that point outside themselves in an allegorical gesture. Millay’s allegorical storytelling reproduces literature itself as a figure of reproduction. Her poems require a different view of literature altogether, and of language too,

a view of literature that is interested in exploring the imaginative possibilities for different identities offered by the heterogeneity of language.

The Medievalist Maureen Quilligan explains this propensity of allegory to reach outside of itself at the same time it interrogates its own status as representation:

Perhaps language cannot redeem language, so that poetry cannot redeem society; fiction may only entertain. But all allegorists do aim at redemption; and because they must work with language, they ultimately turn to the paradox at the heart of their own assumptions about words and make the final focus of their narratives not merely the social function of language, but, in particular, the slippery tensions between literalness and metaphor. They scrutinize language's own problematic polysemy.

Even in Millay's shortest poems we can find this inquisitive, experimental attitude toward language. For instance, in her Fig poems, Millay toys with the expressive metaphor, or what T. S. Eliot called the "objective correlative," by ignoring the presumed univalent, objectivizing element of the figure and using the parabolic dimensions that remain to generate new, performative possibilities activated by the personality of her speaker. In "First Fig" she takes a proverbial metaphor, in which each end of the day is represented by two ends of a candle wick, and turns it on its head by animating it as personal allegory. In "Second Fig" she takes the Biblical parable of the house founded on the rock and enlivens it by having us reconsider the

interpretive possibilities open to us when we refuse to read the figure as the last word. In both poems we are presented with symbolic truths that presume to be self-evident which turn out to be artificial, and so possibly deceptive, when connected to personal experiences through their extension into true allegory. She teases us with the titles ("Fig" for "figure," as well as for the labial fruit) giving us schematic illustrations of the schematic, showing their operation, and rendering her most-quoted poem, "First Fig," into a kind of well-lit anti-symbol, worth staying up for, served to her friends and foes alike.

Millay's masquerade of personal identity destabilized the transcendent universal subject that was central to the project of monolithic high modernism. Her placing of personality, not to mention the female body, front and center as a tool of her craft caused her to be regarded as a threat to proponents of what became the standard literary ideology through much of the twentieth century. Ironically, criticism on behalf of an impersonal poetics, particularly from the academic adherents of New Criticism, almost invariably became personal. Nowhere is this more obvious than in John Crowe Ransom's influential essay, "The Poet as Woman" (1936). Ransom singled out Millay in his essay as the emblem of a female poet exhibiting a "deficiency in masculinity," and therefore lacking the intellectual requirements demanded by a modern poetics. There is an academic provenance for his argument that Clark traces to Kant's gendered cordoning off the intellectual sublime from the merely beautiful. We see an early twentieth-century expression of this attitude working in Ferdinand Earle's introduction to *The Lyric Year* above, with its incidental bleeding over into racial essentialism.

Among modernist critics of Millay, the prize for best supporting actor in this melodramatic theater of the *ad hominem* should go to Allen Tate. Tate was especially critical of Millay's unwillingness to separate literature from political activism, a legacy perhaps of her Vassar education with politically engaged English professors such as Laura Johnson Wylie. In his review of Millay's sonnet cycle "Fatal Interview" entitled "Miss Millay's Sonnets" (1931), Tate characterizes Millay's personalization of the political in gendered terms (intellectual vs. emotional), although he makes an effort not to seem to be dismissive of Millay's popularity *per se*:

Miss Millay is, not at all to her discredit, the spokesperson for a generation. It does not behoove us to enquire how she came to express the feelings of the literary generation that seized the popular imagination from about 1917 to 1925. It is a fact that she did, and in such a way as to remain its most typical poet. Her talent, with its diverting mixture of solemnity and levity, won the enthusiasm of a time bewildered intellectually and moving unsteadily towards an emotional attitude of its own. It was the age of the Seven Arts, the old Masses, of the Provincetown Theatre, of the figure and disciples of Randolph Bourne. It has been called the age of experiment and liberation; there is still experiment, but no one is liberated; and that age is now dead.

Tate goes on in the essay to classify Millay as a poet "of the second order" because she is intellectually unable to make a clean break with the past. Again, this is described in highly gendered and prejudicial terms:



Miss Millay was not prepared to give to her generation a philosophy in comprehensive terms; her poetry does not define the break with the nineteenth century. This task was left to the school of Eliot, and it was predictable that this school should be—except by young men who had the experience to share Eliot’s problem—ignored and misunderstood. Eliot penetrated to the fundamental structure of the nineteenth-century and showed its breakdown. Miss Millay assumed no such profound alteration of the intelligence because, I suppose, not being an intellect but a sensibility, she was not aware of it.

Millay’s unwillingness to distance herself from the world of the past, and her extraordinary facility with traditional prosodic forms like the sonnet and the ode, certainly won her no friends among the modernists, and challenged their program of historical transcendence. Here, the imagined progress of art, now enjoyed by an elite few, trumped the historical inheritance and cultural citizenship of the many. Moreover, the accessibility and popularity of Millay’s poetry to the general populace caused no small critical resentment, particularly among critic-practitioners like Tate and Ransom. “Modern poetry is supposed to be difficult,” T. S. Eliot had declared. Millay’s lucrative public performances of her work as well as the substantial living she was able to make from the royalties from her books, which sold in astonishing numbers even through the Great Depression, threw gasoline on the fire. Ironically, unlike the many ignored and misunderstood but critically acceptable poets who had withdrawn to a wasteland of alienation and

obscurity, Millay's proletarian identification with the common woman and man, certified by her upbringing and the years she spent in the circle of the editors of *The Masses*, and by their loyalty to her in return, allowed her to prosper materially over a longer period of time from her poetry in a way that no professional poet in America has done since.

Even at the age of 19 Millay seems to have anticipated her eventual critical reception and its aftermath, as we read in the struggle of poetry with positivism in "Renaissance," which ends with the lines: "And he whose soul is flat—the sky / Will cave in on him, by and by." As the sky caved in on modernist critics through the last quarter of the twentieth century, preservers of Millay's works began to recognize the value and extent of her contribution to American life and letters, and the incongruity of her critical isolation. Suzanne Clark's essay appearing in Diane P. Freedman's book *Millay at 100: A Critical Reappraisal* (1995), which I have brought to bear here, is one such example, as are the other essays in that collection. In the 1991 centenary edition of Millay's *Selected Poems*, Colin Falk describes Millay as "one of the most skilled technicians in the whole history of English poetry," combining a "spiritual intensity with intellectual sophistication in a way which may constitute an almost unimaginable universe of sensibility for present day readers." Holly Peppe, in her introduction to the more recent Yale University Press edition of her *Selected Poems*, edited by Timothy F. Jackson (2016), remarks upon a renewed interest in Millay's legacy as a feminist, as well as her role as a "proponent of gender equality" through the "radical revision of social and sexual protocols" one finds in her work and life. More recent interest in Millay by the academy is attested to by two more collections

published in the past two years by Yale: her diaries entitled *Rapture and Melancholy*, edited by Daniel Mark Epstein (2022), and her letters, entitled *Into the World's Great Heart*, edited by Timothy F. Jackson (2023). This triad of Yale volumes was shepherded into being with excellent contextualizing prefatory texts by Millay's long-time literary executor Holly Peppe. These publications will go far to help scholars trace the threads of the common fabric of Millay's poetry and personal life.

Important to these efforts as well is the work carried on by the Edna St. Vincent Millay Society, the stewards of her home, its grounds, and her possessions at Steepletop in Austerlitz, New York. Recently the Society published a partial catalog of Millay's library, which resides on the upper floor of the house. The catalog is available digitally to the public on the society's website at <http://millay.org>. The site also contains an audio archive of Millay's spoken recordings of many of her poems, including "Elegy," mentioned by Edmund Wilson above, as well as "The Ballad of the Harp-Weaver" and "Renascence." From 2010 to 2018 Steepletop was open to visitors on a seasonal basis. The Society is currently working on establishing a long-term sustainable future for the property and has been able to open for tours on a limited basis. Also located at Steepletop, Millay Arts (formally the Millay Colony for the Arts), a separate organization from the Society, celebrated its 50th anniversary this year. This creative oasis established by Norma Millay as a living legacy to her sister has offered since 1973 a tranquil, communal environment to more than 3,000 poets, playwrights, composers, screenwriters, filmmakers, and other authors who have drawn inspiration from one another and from the Berkshire valley that Millay chose for her home.

Millay's grave, as well as the graves of her husband Eugen, her mother Cora, her sister Norma, and Norma's husband Charles Ellis, are on the property and still see a stream of literary pilgrims drawn by the pull of whatever of memory exists in the earth and in things themselves. I would submit that this memory is not imaginary but real, at least as real as syllables felt upon the tongue and formed into sounds. I believe the task for us on this centennial anniversary to celebrate Millay's prize is to *re-member*: to re-integrate ourselves with the earth, with history, with the creative possibilities offered to us by imagination and language, and with one another, not through a static medal or symbol, but in the living, dynamic flow of the spatial and temporal world around us. Surely Joseph Pulitzer would have sanctioned this recollection of the relation of language to the physical world as a proper way to honor his legacy for an elevated public discourse. As would Millay, who wanted us to see that life could be "exciting, and free, and intense" in the presence of poetry.

I offer here as a summation a poem that was not submitted for her Pulitzer, but that Millay composed and performed in the year she received her Pulitzer in a commemoration for another Vassar alumna, Inez Milholland (VC 1909). Suzanne Clark ends her own essay with it. Milholland was a women's labor rights champion and a charismatic leader in the struggle for universal suffrage. She was also married to Eugen Boissevain before he married Millay. She collapsed while speaking at a suffrage rally on October 22, 1916, and died from pernicious anemia a month later, on November 25. Millay composed and performed the poem to honor a woman with whom she now had a personal connection through Boissevain, for a ceremo-

nial occasion honoring Milholland held in Washington on November 18, 1923. The ceremony took place in front of a statue of three leaders of the suffrage movement, Lucretia Mott, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Susan B. Anthony. The poem resists closure and characteristically expresses its unwillingness to define a subject through a memorial object. It urges us to remember Milholland by taking up her cause and joining in the material furtherance of the long struggle to realize an only seemingly accomplished political goal. Today the poem seems particularly prescient. It also surely aligns with the views of Joseph Pulitzer on the importance of vigilance and tenacity in the safeguarding of a democracy.

To Inez Milholland

Upon this marble bust that is not I  
Lay the round, formal wreath that is not fame;  
But in the forum of my silenced cry  
Root ye the living tree whose sap is flame.  
I, that was proud and valiant, am no more; —  
Save as a dream that wanders wide and late,  
Save as a wind that rattles the stout door,  
Troubling the ashes in the sheltered grate.  
The stone will perish; I shall be twice dust.  
Only my standard on a taken hill  
Can cheat the mildew and the red-brown rust  
And make immortal my adventurous will.  
Even now the silk is tugging at the staff:  
Take up the song; forget the epitaph.

Edna St. Vincent Millay, first published as “The Pioneer” in *The Buck in the Snow* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928); renamed by Millay for her *Collected Sonnets* (Harper & Brothers, 1941).

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**Thomas E. Hill**



WINNING PULITZER PRIZE  
POETRY ENTRIES FOR 1923

**THE BALLAD OF THE HARP-WEAVER**

“Son,” said my mother,  
When I was knee-high,  
“You’ve need of clothes to cover you,  
And not a rag have I.

“There’s nothing in the house  
To make a boy breeches,  
Nor shears to cut a cloth with,  
Nor thread to take stitches.

“There’s nothing in the house  
But a loaf-end of rye,  
And a harp with a woman’s head  
Nobody will buy.”  
And she began to cry.

That was in the early fall.  
When came the late fall,  
“Son,” she said, “the sight of you  
Makes your mother’s blood crawl—

“Little skinny shoulder-blades  
Sticking through your clothes!  
And where you’ll get a jacket from  
God above knows.

“It’s lucky for me, lad,  
Your daddy’s in the ground,  
And can’t see the way I let  
His son go around!”  
And she made a queer sound.

That was in the late fall.  
When the winter came  
I’d not a pair of breeches  
Nor a shirt to my name.

I couldn’t go to school,  
Or out of doors to play.  
And all the other little boys  
Passed our way.

“Son,” said my mother,  
“Come, climb into my lap,  
And I’ll chafe your little bones  
While you take a nap.”

And oh, but we were silly  
For half an hour or more,  
Me with my long legs  
Dragging on the floor,

A-rock-rock-rocking  
To a mother-goose rhyme!  
Oh, but we were happy  
For half an hour's time!

But there was I, great boy,  
And what would folks say  
To hear my mother singing me  
To sleep all day  
In such a daft way?

Men say the winter  
Was bad that year.  
Fuel was scarce,  
And food was dear.

A wind with a wolf's head  
Howled about our door,  
And we burned up the chairs  
And sat upon the floor.

All that was left us  
Was a chair we couldn't break,  
And the harp with a woman's head  
Nobody would take,  
For song or pity's sake.

The night before Christmas  
I cried with the cold,  
I cried myself to sleep  
Like a two-year old.

And in the deep night  
I felt my mother rise,  
And stare down upon me  
With love in her eyes.

I saw my mother sitting  
On the one good chair,  
A light falling on her  
From I couldn't tell where,

Looking nineteen,  
And not a day older,  
And the harp with the woman's head  
Leaned against her shoulder.

Her thin fingers, moving  
In the thin, tall strings,  
Were weav-weav-weaving  
Wonderful things.

Many bright threads,  
From where I couldn't see,  
Were running through the harp-strings  
Rapidly,

And gold threads whistling  
Through my mother's hand,  
I saw the web grow,  
And the pattern expand.

She wove a child's jacket,  
And when it was done,  
She laid it on the floor  
And wove another one.

She wove a red cloak  
So regal to see,  
"She's made it for the king's son,"  
I said, "and not for me."  
But I knew it was for me.

She wove a pair of breeches  
Quicker than that!  
She wove a pair of boots  
And a little cocked hat.

She wove a pair of mittens,  
She wove a little blouse,  
She wove all night  
In the still, cold house.

She sang as she worked,  
And the harp-strings spoke;  
Her voice never faltered,  
And the thread never broke.  
And when I awoke, —

There sat my mother  
With the harp against her shoulder,  
Looking nineteen  
And not a day older,

A smile about her lips,  
And a light above her head,  
And her hands in the harp-strings  
Frozen dead.

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



## A FEW FIGS FROM THISTLES

### FIRST FIG

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!

### SECOND FIG

Safe upon the solid rock the ugly houses stand:  
Come and see my shining palace built upon the sand!

## RECUERDO

We were very tired, we were very merry—  
We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.  
It was bare and bright, and smelled like a stable—  
But we looked into a fire, we leaned across a table,  
We lay on a hill-top underneath the moon;  
And the whistles kept blowing, and the dawn came soon.

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

We were very tired, we were very merry,  
We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.  
We hailed, "Good morrow, mother!" to a shawl-covered head,  
And bought a morning paper, which neither of us read;  
And she wept, "God bless you!" for the apples and pears,  
And we gave her all our money but our subway fares.

## THURSDAY

And if I loved you Wednesday,

Well, what is that to you?

I do not love you Thursday—

So much is true.

And why you come complaining

Is more than I can see.

I loved you Wednesday,—yes—but what

Is that to me?

## TO THE NOT IMPOSSIBLE HIM

How shall I know, unless I go  
To Cairo and Cathay,  
Whether or not this blessed spot  
Is blest in every way?

Now it may be, the flower for me  
Is this beneath my nose;  
How shall I tell, unless I smell  
The Carthaginian rose?

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

## MACDOUGAL STREET

As I went walking up and down to take the evening air,  
    (Sweet to meet upon the street, why must I be so shy?)  
I saw him lay his hand upon her torn black hair;  
    ("Little dirty Latin child, let the lady by!")  
The women squatting on the stoops were slovenly and fat,  
    (Lay me out in organdie, lay me out in lawn!)  
And everywhere I stepped there was a baby or a cat;  
    (Lord, God in Heaven, will it never be dawn?)  
The fruit-carts and clam-carts were ribald as a fair,  
    (Pink nets and wet shells trodden under heel)  
She had haggled from the fruit-man of his rotting ware;  
    (I shall never get to sleep, the way I feel!)  
He walked like a king through the filth and the clutter,  
    (Sweet to meet upon the street, why did you glance me by?)  
But he caught the quaint Italian quip she flung him from the  
gutter;  
    (What can there be to cry about that I should lie and cry?)  
He laid his darling hand upon her little black head,  
    (I wish I were a ragged child with ear-rings in my ears! )  
And he said she was a baggage to have said what she had said;  
    (Truly I shall be ill unless I stop these tears!)

## THE SINGING-WOMAN FROM THE WOOD'S EDGE

What should I be but a prophet and a liar,  
Whose mother was a leprechaun, whose father was a friar?  
Teethed on a crucifix and cradled under water,  
What should I be but the fiend's god-daughter?  
And who should be my playmates but the adder and the frog,  
That was got beneath a furze-bush and born in a bog?  
And what should be my singing, that was christened at an altar,  
But Aves and Credos and Psalms out of the Psalter?  
You will see such webs on the wet grass, maybe,  
As a pixie-mother weaves for her baby,  
You will find such flame at the wave's weedy ebb  
As flashes in the meshes of a mer-mother's web,  
But there comes to birth no common spawn  
From the love of a priest for a leprechaun,  
And you never have seen and you never will see  
Such things as the things that swaddled me!  
After all's said and after all's done,  
What should I be but a harlot and a nun?  
In through the bushes, on any foggy day,  
My Da would come a-swishing of the drops away,  
With a prayer for my death and a groan for my birth,  
A-mumblin' of his beads for all that he was worth.  
And there sit my Ma, her knees beneath her chin,  
A-lookin' in his face and a-drinkin' of it in,  
And a-markin' in the moss some funny little saying

That would mean just the opposite of all that he was praying!  
He taught me the holy-talk of Vesper and of Matin,  
He heard me my Greek and he heard me my Latin,  
He blessed me and crossed me to keep my soul from evil,  
And we watched him out of sight, and we conjured up the devil!  
Oh, the things I haven't seen and the things I haven't known,  
What with hedges and ditches till after I was grown,  
And yanked both ways by my mother and my father,  
With a "Which would you better?" and a "Which would  
you rather?"  
With him for a sire and her for a dam,  
What should I be but just what I am?

## SHE IS OVERHEARD SINGING

Oh, Prue she has a patient man,  
And Joan a gentle lover,  
And Agatha's Arth' is a hug-the-hearth,—  
But my true love's a rover!

Mig, her man's as good as cheese  
And honest as a briar,  
Sue tells her love what he's thinking of,—  
But my dear lad's a liar!

Oh, Sue and Prue and Agatha  
Are thick with Mig and Joan!  
They bite their threads and shake their heads  
And gnaw my name like a bone;

And Prue says, "Mine's a patient man,  
As never snaps me up,"  
And Agatha, "Arth' is a hug-the-hearth,  
Could live content in a cup,"

Sue's man's mind is like good jell—  
All one color, and clear—  
And Mig's no call to think at all  
What's to come next year,



While Joan makes boast of a gentle lad  
That's troubled with that and this;—  
But they all would give the life they live  
For a look from the man I kiss!

Cold he slants his eyes about,  
And few enough's his choice,—  
Though he'd slip me clean for a nun, or a queen,  
Or a beggar with knots in her voice,—

And Agatha will turn awake  
While her good man sleeps sound,  
And Mig and Sue and Joan and Prue  
Will hear the clock strike round,

For Prue, she has a patient man,  
As asks not when or why,  
And Meg and Sue have nought to do  
But peep who's passing by,

Joan is paired with a putterer  
That bastes and tastes and salts,  
And Agatha's Arth' is a hug-the-hearth,—  
But my true love is false!

## THE PRISONER

All right,

Go ahead!

What's in a name?

I guess I'll be locked into

As much as I'm locked out of!

## THE UNEXPLORER

There was a road ran past our house  
Too lovely to explore.  
I asked my mother once—she said  
That if you followed where it led  
It brought you to the milk-man's door.  
(That's why I have not traveled more.)

## GROWN-UP

Was it for this I uttered prayers  
And sobbed and cursed and kicked the stairs,  
That now, domestic as a plate,  
I should retire at half-past eight?

## THE PENITENT

I had a little Sorrow,  
Born of a little Sin,  
I found a room all damp with gloom  
And shut us all within;  
And, "Little Sorrow, weep," said I,  
"And, Little Sin, pray God to die,  
And I upon the floor will lie  
And think how bad I've been!"  
Alas for pious planning—  
It mattered not a whit!  
As far as gloom went in that room,  
The lamp might have been lit!  
My little Sorrow would not weep,  
My little Sin would go to sleep—  
To save my soul I could not keep  
My graceless mind on it!  
So up I got in anger,  
And took a book I had,  
And put a ribbon on my hair  
To please a passing lad.  
And, "One thing there's no getting by—  
I've been a wicked girl," said I;  
"But if I can't be sorry, why,  
I might as well be glad!"

## DAPHNE

Why do you follow me?—  
Any moment I can be  
Nothing but a laurel-tree.  
Any moment of the chase  
I can leave you in my place  
A pink bough for your embrace.  
Yet if over hill and hollow  
Still it is your will to follow,  
I am off;—to heel, Apollo!

## PORTRAIT BY A NEIGHBOR

Before she has her floor swept  
Or her dishes done,  
Any day you'll find her  
A-sunning in the sun!  
It's long after midnight  
Her key's in the lock,  
And you never see her chimney smoke  
Till past ten o'clock!  
She digs in her garden  
With a shovel and a spoon,  
She weeds her lazy lettuce  
By the light of the moon.  
She walks up the walk  
Like a woman in a dream,  
She forgets she borrowed butter  
And pays you back cream!  
Her lawn looks like a meadow,  
And if she mows the place  
She leaves the clover standing  
And the Queen Anne's lace!

## MIDNIGHT OIL

Cut if you will, with Sleep's dull knife,  
Each day to half its length, my friend,—  
The years that Time takes off *my* life  
He'll take from off the other end!



## THE MERRY MAID

Oh, I am grown so free from care  
Since my heart broke!  
I set my throat against the air,  
I laugh at simple folk!  
There's little kind and little fair  
Is worth its weight in smoke  
To me, that's grown so free from care  
Since my heart broke!  
Lass, if to sleep you would repair  
As peaceful as you woke,  
Best not besiege your lover there  
For just the words he spoke  
To me, that's grown so free from care  
Since my heart broke!

## TO KATHLEEN

Still must the poet as of old,  
In barren attic bleak and cold,  
Starve, freeze, and fashion verses to  
Such things as flowers and song and you;  
Still as of old his being give  
In Beauty's name, while she may live,  
Beauty that may not die as long  
As there are flowers and you and song.

TO S. M.

*If he should lie a-dying*

I am not willing you should go  
Into the earth, where Helen went;  
She is awake by now, I know.  
Where Cleopatra's anklets rust  
You will not lie with my consent;  
And Sappho is a roving dust;  
Cressid could love again; Dido,  
Rotted in state, is restless still;  
You leave me much against my will.

## THE PHILOSOPHER

And what are you that, missing you,  
    I should be kept awake  
As many nights as there are days  
    With weeping for your sake?  
And what are you that, missing you,  
    As many days as crawl  
I should be listening to the wind  
    And looking at the wall?  
I know a man that's a braver man  
    And twenty men as kind,  
And what are you, that you should be  
    The one man in my mind?  
Yet women's ways are witless ways,  
    As any sage will tell,—  
And what am I, that I should love  
    So wisely and so well?

## FOUR SONNETS

### I.

Love, though for this you riddle me with darts,  
And drag me at your chariot till I die,—  
Oh, heavy prince! O, panderer of hearts!—  
Yet hear me tell how in their throats they lie  
Who shout you mighty: thick about my hair,  
Day in, day out, your ominous arrows purr,  
Who still am free, unto no querulous care  
A fool, and in no temple worshiper!  
I, that have bared me to your quiver's fire,  
Lifted my face into its puny rain,  
Do wreathe you Impotent to Evoke Desire  
As you are Powerless to Elicit Pain!  
(Now will the god, for blasphemy so brave,  
Punish me, surely, with the shaft I crave!)

## II.

I think I should have loved you presently,  
And given in earnest words I flung in jest;  
And lifted honest eyes for you to see,  
And caught your hand against my cheek and breast;  
And all my pretty follies flung aside  
That won you to me, and beneath your gaze,  
Naked of reticence and shorn of pride,  
Spread like a chart my little wicked ways.  
I, that had been to you, had you remained,  
But one more waking from a recurrent dream,  
Cherish no less the certain stakes I gained,  
And walk your memory's halls, austere, supreme,  
A ghost in marble of a girl you knew  
Who would have loved you in a day or two.

### III.

Oh, think not I am faithful to a vow!  
Faithless am I save to love's self alone.  
Were you not lovely I would leave you now:  
After the feet of beauty fly my own.  
Were you not still my hunger's rarest food,  
And water ever to my wildest thirst,  
I would desert you—think not but I would!—  
And seek another as I sought you first.  
But you are mobile as the veering air,  
And all your charms more changeful than the tide,  
Wherefore to be inconstant is no care:  
I have but to continue at your side.  
So wanton, light and false, my love, are you,  
I am most faithless when I most am true.

IV.

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,  
And we are done forever; by and by  
I shall forget you, as I said, but now,  
If you entreat me with your loveliest lie  
I will protest you with my favorite vow.  
I would indeed that love were longer-lived,  
And vows were not so brittle as they are,  
But so it is, and nature has contrived  
To struggle on without a break thus far,—  
Whether or not we find what we are seeking  
Is idle, biologically speaking.



## EIGHT SONNETS

### I.

WHEN you, that at this moment are to me  
Dearer than words on paper, shall depart,  
And be no more the warder of my heart,  
Whereof again myself shall hold the key;  
And be no more, what now you seem to be,  
The sun, from which all excellencies start  
In a round nimbus, nor a broken dart  
Of moonlight, even, splintered on the sea;  
I shall remember only of this hour—  
And weep somewhat, as now you see me weep—  
The pathos of your love, that, like a flower,  
Fearful of death yet amorous of sleep,  
Droops for a moment and beholds, dismayed,  
The wind whereon its petals shall be laid.

## II.

What's this of death, from you who never will die?  
Think you the wrist that fashioned you in clay,  
The thumb that set the hollow just that way  
In your full throat and lidded the long eye  
So roundly from the forehead, will let lie  
Broken, forgotten, under foot some day  
Your unimpeachable body, and so slay  
The work he most had been remembered by?  
I tell you this: whatever of dust to dust  
Goes down, whatever of ashes may return  
To its essential self in its own season,  
Loveliness such as yours will not be lost,  
But, cast in bronze upon his very urn,  
Make known him Master, and for what good reason.

### III.

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.

#### IV.

Here is a wound that never will heal, I know  
Being wrought not of a dearness and a death  
But of a love turned ashes and the breath  
Gone out of beauty; never again will grow  
The grass on that scarred acre, though I sow  
Young seed there yearly and the sky bequeath  
Its friendly weathers down, far underneath  
Shall be such bitterness of an old woe.  
That April should be shattered by a gust,  
That August should be leveled by a rain,  
I can endure, and that the lifted dust  
Of man should settle to the earth again;  
But that a dream can die, will be a thrust  
Between my ribs forever of hot pain.

V.

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 to-night, that tap and sigh  
Upon the glass and listen for reply;  
And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain,  
For unremembered lads that not again  
Will turn to me at midnight with a cry.  
Thus in the winter stands the lonely tree,  
Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,  
Yet knows its boughs more silent than before:  
I cannot say what loves have come and gone;  
I only know that summer sang in me  
A little while, that in me sings no more.

## VI.

Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare.  
Let all who prate of Beauty hold their peace,  
And lay them prone upon the earth and cease  
To ponder on themselves, the while they stare  
At nothing, intricately drawn nowhere  
In shapes of shifting lineage; let geese  
Gabble and hiss, but heroes seek release  
From dusty bondage into luminous air.  
O blinding hour, O holy, terrible day,  
When first the shaft into his vision shone  
Of light anatomized! Euclid alone  
Has looked on Beauty bare. Fortunate they  
Who, though once only and then but far away,  
Have heard her massive sandal set on stone.

VII.

Oh, oh, you will be sorry for that word!  
Give back my book and take my kiss instead.  
Was it my enemy or my friend I heard?—  
“What a big book for such a little head!”  
Come, I will show you now my newest hat,  
And you may watch me purse my mouth and prink.  
Oh, I shall love you still and all of that.  
I never again shall tell you what I think.  
I shall be sweet and crafty, soft and sly;  
You will not catch me reading any more;  
I shall be called a wife to pattern by;  
And some day when you knock and push the door,  
Some sane day, not too bright and not too stormy,  
I shall be gone, and you may whistle for me.

VIII.

Say what you will, and scratch my heart to find  
The roots of last year's roses in my breast;  
I am as surely riper in my mind  
As if the fruit stood in the stalls confessed.  
Laugh at the unshed leaf, say what you will,  
Call me in all things what I was before,  
A flutterer in the wind, a woman still;  
I tell you I am what I was and more.  
My branches weigh me down, frost cleans the air,  
My sky is black with small birds bearing south;  
Say what you will, confuse me with fine care,  
Put by my word as but an April truth,—  
Autumn is no less on me than a rose  
Hugs the brown bough and sighs before it goes.



## RENASCENCE

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.  
So with my eyes I traced the line  
Of the horizon, thin and fine,  
Straight around till I was come  
Back to where I'd started from;  
And all I saw from where I stood  
Was three long mountains and a wood.

Over these things I could not see;  
These were the things that bounded me;  
And I could touch them with my hand,  
Almost, I thought, from where I stand.  
And all at once things seemed so small  
My breath came short, and scarce at all.

But, sure, the sky is big, I said;  
Miles and miles above my head;  
So here upon my back I'll lie  
And look my fill into the sky.  
And so I looked, and, after all,  
The sky was not so very tall.  
The sky, I said, must somewhere stop,  
And—sure enough!—I see the top!  
The sky, I thought, is not so grand;  
I 'most could touch it with my hand!  
And reaching up my hand to try,  
I screamed to feel it touch the sky.

I screamed, and—lo!—Infinity  
Came down and settled over me;  
Forced back my scream into my chest,  
Bent back my arm upon my breast,  
And, pressing of the Undefined  
The definition on my mind,  
Held up before my eyes a glass  
Through which my shrinking sight did pass  
Until it seemed I must behold  
Immensity made manifold;  
Whispered to me a word whose sound  
Deafened the air for worlds around,  
And brought unmuffled to my ears  
The gossiping of friendly spheres,  
The creaking of the tented sky,  
The ticking of Eternity.

I saw and heard, and knew at last  
The How and Why of all things, past,  
And present, and forevermore.  
The Universe, cleft to the core,  
Lay open to my probing sense  
That, sick'ning, I would fain pluck thence  
But could not,—nay! But needs must suck  
At the great wound, and could not pluck  
My lips away till I had drawn  
All venom out.—Ah, fearful pawn!  
For my omniscience paid I toll  
In infinite remorse of soul.

All sin was of my sinning, all  
Atoning mine, and mine the gall  
Of all regret. Mine was the weight  
Of every brooded wrong, the hate  
That stood behind each envious thrust,  
Mine every greed, mine every lust.

And all the while for every grief,  
Each suffering, I craved relief  
With individual desire,—  
Craved all in vain! And felt fierce fire  
About a thousand people crawl;  
Perished with each,—then mourned for all!

A man was starving in Capri;  
He moved his eyes and looked at me;  
I felt his gaze, I heard his moan,  
And knew his hunger as my own.  
I saw at sea a great fog bank  
Between two ships that struck and sank;  
A thousand screams the heavens smote;  
And every scream tore through my throat.

No hurt I did not feel, no death  
That was not mine; mine each last breath  
That, crying, met an answering cry  
From the compassion that was I.  
All suffering mine, and mine its rod;  
Mine, pity like the pity of God.

Ah, awful weight! Infinity  
Pressed down upon the finite Me!  
My anguished spirit, like a bird,  
Beating against my lips I heard;  
Yet lay the weight so close about  
There was no room for it without.  
And so beneath the weight lay I  
And suffered death, but could not die.

Long had I lain thus, craving death,  
When quietly the earth beneath  
Gave way, and inch by inch, so great

At last had grown the crushing weight,  
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.  
From off my breast I felt it roll,  
And as it went my tortured soul  
Burst forth and fled in such a gust  
That all about me swirled the dust.

Deep in the earth I rested now;  
Cool is its hand upon the brow  
And soft its breast beneath the head  
Of one who is so gladly dead.  
And all at once, and over all  
The pitying rain began to fall;  
I lay and heard each pattering hoof  
Upon my lowly, thatched roof,  
And seemed to love the sound far more  
Than ever I had done before.  
For rain it hath a friendly sound  
To one who's six feet underground;  
And scarce the friendly voice or face:  
A grave is such a quiet place.

The rain, I said, is kind to come  
And speak to me in my new home.  
I would I were alive again

To kiss the fingers of the rain,  
To drink into my eyes the shine  
Of every slanting silver line,  
To catch the freshened, fragrant breeze  
From drenched and dripping apple-trees.  
For soon the shower will be done,  
And then the broad face of the sun  
Will laugh above the rain-soaked earth  
Until the world with answering mirth  
Shakes joyously, and each round drop  
Rolls, twinkling, from its grass-blade top.  
How can I bear it; buried here,  
While overhead the sky grows clear  
And blue again after the storm?  
O, multi-colored, multiform,  
Beloved beauty over me,  
That I shall never, never see  
Again! Spring-silver, autumn-gold,  
That I shall never more behold!  
Sleeping your myriad magics through,  
Close-sepulchred away from you!  
O God, I cried, give me new birth,  
And put me back upon the earth!  
Upset each cloud's gigantic gourd  
And let the heavy rain, down-poured  
In one big torrent, set me free,  
Washing my grave away from me!  
I ceased; and through the breathless hush

That answered me, the far-off rush  
Of herald wings came whispering  
Like music down the vibrant string  
Of my ascending prayer, and—crash!  
Before the wild wind's whistling lash  
The startled storm-clouds reared on high  
And plunged in terror down the sky,  
And the big rain in one black wave  
Fell from the sky and struck my grave.

I know not how such things can be;  
I only know there came to me  
A fragrance such as never clings  
To aught save happy living things;  
A sound as of some joyous elf  
Singing sweet songs to please himself,  
And, through and over everything,  
A sense of glad awakening.  
The grass, a-tiptoe at my ear,  
Whispering to me I could hear;  
I felt the rain's cool finger-tips  
Brushed tenderly across my lips,  
Laid gently on my sealed sight,  
And all at once the heavy night  
Fell from my eyes and I could see,—  
A drenched and dripping apple-tree,  
A last long line of silver rain,  
A sky grown clear and blue again.

And as I looked a quickening gust  
Of wind blew up to me and thrust  
Into my face a miracle  
Of orchard-breath, and with the smell,—  
I know not how such things can be!—  
I breathed my soul back into me.

Ah! Up then from the ground sprang I  
And hailed the earth with such a cry  
As is not heard save from a man  
Who has been dead, and lives again.  
About the trees my arms I wound;  
Like one gone mad I hugged the ground;  
I raised my quivering arms on high;  
I laughed and laughed into the sky,  
Till at my throat a strangling sob  
Caught fiercely, and a great heart-throb  
Sent instant tears into my eyes;  
O God, I cried, no dark disguise  
Can e'er hereafter hide from me  
Thy radiant identity!

Thou canst not move across the grass  
But my quick eyes will see Thee pass,  
Nor speak, however silently,  
But my hushed voice will answer Thee.  
I know the path that tells Thy way  
Through the cool eve of every day;



God, I can push the grass apart  
And lay my finger on Thy 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 heart can push the sea and land  
Farther away on either hand;  
The soul can split the sky in two,  
And let the face of God shine through.  
But East and West will pinch the heart  
That can not keep them pushed apart;  
And he whose soul is flat—the sky  
Will cave in on him by and by.

*Take Up the Song*

Commemorating the Centennial Anniversary of  
Edna St. Vincent Millay's Pulitzer Prize for Poetry

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