Eavan Boland

INFLUENCES: EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

I

The hotel, when I got there, had just opened for the summer. The man behind the desk could have been Irish. He had a breezy, start-of-season friendliness, an unsuspicious manner. He stood behind a circular reception area, bent down, rummaged for a minute, then straightened and handed me a folder.

I took it to the window and put it on a small table. This was the strangest moment of all. I had come to this part of Maine in a cold, early summer. I had wanted to see the town itself, and this place most of all – his little hotel up a steep incline above the bay. I had come here looking for evidence of a poet whose chances and choices had crossed one another in a singular way one summer night long ago in this very room.

What I found was something different. Here, on the table, was a debris of signatures, newsprint, photographs, letters. There was nothing dignified or even literary about it. This could have been the attic collection of a neglected aunt – a shoebox's worth of a life. Except that it was the life of a poet – Edna St. Vincent Millay.

I put the folder around its papers, handed it to the man, and walked to the photographs on the wall. They were hung in neat, plain frames above the piano. One showed Millay as a graceful, neat girl in her late teens, grouped with other high school students on the front grass.

It was hard to fit this vivid, long-ago New England child with the randomness of the papers, the lack of ceremony. But that's what I had come to do: to try to associate and

explain, at least to myself. Over a few years, my interest in Millay had turned to conviction: I was sure she was a crucial link, a piece of missing information in the poetry of the century. But so profoundly missing that it would be hard to recover the context, let alone the text. I had come here to begin.

II

This is a strange story. If it were set in a Victorian gaslight novel, it might have dark corners and a gloomy conclusion. In an equivalent from the American 1930s it would have a missing woman and tough-talking detectives. But genre fiction is not the purpose of this piece. This is the story of a poet who achieved extraordinary fame and glamour in her 'twenties, who held the imagination of her time in a solid poise between respect and fascination. This is a story of contradictions and illusions.

Recently, I have been looking at the work of various women poets – sifting it, revisiting it. Millay's is, in some ways, the most poignant and contradictory. There has been new work done on her, both biographical and scholarly. But her meaning for other women poets is still contested.

In my own case, what happened to Millay has come to interest me because in an important sense she was "disappeared." After the beacon brightness of her presence in the first decades of the twentieth century, she fell from syllabi and curricula. Most of all, she fell from serious discussion.

And yet I believe that in her work, and its transmission, a confluence of permissions and their lack, tolerance and its lack, canonical power and its abuse come together. Many of the questions about women and poetry which have haunted my own sense of myself and my understanding of the poetry of this century find some repose in this curious and

heartbreaking figure. I believe that a closer look at Millay opens up a landscape of lost opportunities. But where to begin?

III

Edna St. Vincent Millay was born in Rockland, Maine, in February 1892. Her father Henry Millay was a teacher and school superintendent, her mother a nurse. After her parents divorced, her family – her mother and Edna and two younger sisters – moved to Rockport and then Massachusetts and finally back to Camden, Maine.

The town is set above the oval, jewelled harbour of Penobscot. On the May afternoon I was there, you could look down from Mt. Battie to something very near the sight Millay herself must have seen: the up-and-down white masts of yachts in the harbour, and farther out, the blue shapes of islands.

Millay went to the local high school. Hers was a close family, comparable in an almost self-conscious way to the domestic heroism of an Alcott novel. "I had never seen anything like this household," wrote Edmund Wilson after he visited them in Truro in 1920. Of Millay's mother he wrote, "She had anticipated the Bohemianism of her daughters." In fact, it was Millay's mother who in 1911 pointed out to her daughter a poetry contest. Submissions were invited by Mitchell Kennerley, the publisher, which would result in a book to be called *The Lyric Year* which would contain the hundred best poems published in the United States in the previous year. Millay sent in the poem she had just finished, called "Renascence." Although she did not win, her poem was included in the book.

The town of Camden had been a shipping and whaling centre through much of the nineteenth century. Towards the end of the century, Camden took on another, Cinderella-like identity. During the summer, as if the pages of a Wharton novel had opened and

allowed its characters to wander northwards, a stream of New York visitors arrived to take the sea air. On that night of the 29th August, each of the working girls had to sing a song or recite for the guests. This was the custom. Norma convinced Millay to do the same. Millay came and sat at the revolving piano stool – the same one the proprietor had shown me – spun around on it and recited "Renascence."

The poem had already been accepted by then and published in the *The Lyric Year*. But this must have been different: a room full of smoke and laughter and money. The light just gone over the islands and water. A girl of nineteen years of age putting her sights of the local into acceptable language for the transients. A girl who had never been far from this seascape putting its claustrophobia and charm into the clean, surprising, octosyllabic paragraph of the opening.

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.

As a result of Millay's recitation, a woman came forward at the end of the evening to speak to Millay. Her name was Caroline Dow, head of the National Training School of

the Young Woman's Christian Association in New York. She spoke to Millay, urged her to go to College, and promised she would do her best to assist her financially. In that room, at that moment, Millay's life swerved.

I had come to Camden to see that room, to enter that moment. It is, in a sense, the place where Millay's life as a poet – though she had already published "Renascence" – starts. But it was also the time, the year, and the epoch in which that very poetic life was doomed not to prosper. To understand that moment, it is necessary to look not just at a place, but at a time – in fact, a year.

IV

The year 1912 was a turning point. With two years to go to the Great War, the air was full of change and omen: the Titanic sank. Home Rule was passed for Ireland. Under the surface of these public events ran another rich, volatile stream of expressive upheaval. But in poetry.

Change in an old art, the migration of habit, custom, purpose to new patterns, is hard to define. It had been in the air since the start of the twentieth century. "Suddenly in 1900" wrote Yeats, "everybody got down from their stilts. Nobody drank absinthe anymore with his black coffee." Allen Tate wrote, "There was a time when, to many persons on both sides of the Atlantic, 1911 seemed to have witnessed a revolution in poetry."

Now, in 1912, the pace quickened again. Poets emerged from their lairs and changed their habitats: Eliot left America and went to Paris and then moved to London. Robert Frost sold his farm in Derry, New Hampshire, and also sailed to England. Pound was only a year away from spending the winter in Stone Cottage, on the edge of Ashdown forest, with Yeats. Back in Chicago, Harriet Monroe had returned from a trip to China, decided to begin

a magazine of contemporary poetry, and sent out a circular promising poets "a chance to be heard in their own place."

In the Whitehall Inn, reciting her version of the local in the cadences of the familiar, Edna St. Vincent Millay knew nothing about poetic change. But personal change was imminent. Caroline Dow's audience at that occasion, her random encounter with Millay, opened doors which would take Millay out of the small town and a life which had become cramped.

The intrigue and chance of this encounter – and its actual environment in Camden – had fascinated me for several reasons. Here in this room, on a summer night in Maine, Millay had stumbled into a small measure of freedom. The little Maine town had begun to oppress her. Here was her escape route.

But my interest was still more in the unique collision of freedoms this moment represented. Because of her recitation, because of the chance presence of Caroline Dow there that night, Millay would go to Vassar, receive an education, and set out from it into a very different life. But ironically, as those freedoms were opening up for her, the changes in the poetry world – all of them still invisible to her – were ensuring that other, more valuable opportunities were closing down. Out beyond that room, with its merriment and conversation, poetry was beginning one of the most turbulent historic passages ever. The poem would change; the audience would change. Millay could not have known that summer night that as her personal world opened up, her poetic one was turning into a prison.

V

One cold, northerly spring an American sculptor came to Dublin. I was in my early twenties. The sculptor, a woman, was anxious to model younger Irish writers for a

series of heads she was doing. I agreed to sit for her. It didn't seem a strange request. My mother had been a painter, and my childhood had been full of failed episodes of trying to sit still as she pushed the thick oil paints out of metal tubes and squeezed them onto circles of ochre and crimson, looking for perfect flesh tones as the light failed outside.

I went for a few hours a week to the sculptor's hotel and she worked quickly. Our conversation was mostly fragmentary and anecdotal. One morning, casually, she told me that a woman poet – a celebrated woman poet – had first read out her poetry in her mother's drawing room in New York. Almost her first poetry reading, she said. The poet, she added, wore flowing clothes and had a deep voice. She was a thrilling reader. She was young then, she said, very young. But she went on to be famous, to be celebrated, to win the Pulitzer. Her name was Edna St. Vincent Millay.

I was disconcerted. Instead of being grateful for the story, I was disappointed. I hardly ever heard news of women poets. Now here was one, fixed by anecdote, but in exactly the sort of world I wanted to get away from. My reaction was a mix of superstition and memory. My father had been a diplomat. I had grown up in a house full of glasses, plates, hazy cigar smoke, and buzzing voices.

I had left all that behind. Poetry was part of my freedom. Now I wore jeans and listened to rock music and knew Yeats and Joyce by heart and was about to be married. Here in the small, charged city of Dublin, where the life of the writer seemed a self-conscious pageant, I was trying to fit in. Why on earth, I thought, would a poet want to go back to a drawing room, to wearing long dresses and declaiming?

VI

In 1920 Millay published a small paper volume of poems with a bright green cover.

The print run was a thousand copies, which sold out almost immediately. Like her previous books, it was brought out by Mitchell Kennerley. Two years later, Harper & Brothers acquired her copyrights and re-issued it. In 1920, however, it crept into the world, almost a chapbook, practically a throwaway gesture.

It was called *A Few Figs from Thistles* and it is revealing that Millay herself was ambivalent about it. She had dedicated an interim volume, *Second April*, to Caroline Dow, but increasingly her former patron expressed her unease with the sexual frankness of Millay's work.

Like the rest of Millay's work, the book was uneven. But the successful poems had a wit and estrangement which made them startling and memorable. The fact that Millay was ill at ease with the book, that she regarded it as "light verse," may, for these very reasons, have guaranteed its poise and exuberance.

For the first time in a decade, the lack of any intellectual pressure towards romantic diction, the absence of any template of literary posture suddenly liberated her into a strange and compelling tone shift. Effortlessly, and all at once, Millay stumbled into an old, historic centre of poetry: a place in which it is almost impossible to distinguish where the public life of an age ends and the popular lyric begins. Where the poet enters an intense musical partnership with a community of readers, to the extent that the lyric may even be said to be co-authored by that partnership. So many poems of the past, from the Troubadours onward, constituted the lost cities of that lyric. Suddenly, in this slight book, Millay stood on the same ground, an inspired archaeologist. Her reward was the intense affection she garnered for just a few lines.

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.

A thick, silvery seam of lyric exuberance goes through the book. “A Portrait by a Neighbour” creates a magical, off-kilter snapshot of Millay as reported on by convention:

She digs in her garden

With a shovel and spoon

She weeds her lazy lettuce

By the light of the moon.

The light-hearted tone and confrontational rhetoric, put together with Millay’s perfect ear, destabilises the poetic conventions, including myth. Her poem “Daphne” is a model of elegance and compression:

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 my embrace.

Yet if over hill and hollow

Still it is your will to follow,

I am off! – to heel Apollo!

At the heart of *A Few Figs from Thistles* are the defiance and wit of Millay's musical choices and the authority with which the old contract between poet and community was re-constituted. The poems, which Millay hesitated over, at least consciously, are blessedly free from the self-consciousness of her other work. They show unexpected reserves of irony and a capacity to use that quality of estrangement to burn off the mists surrounding her first poetic persona. In this book, the outline is sharp and clear at last. The voice is audible, freed from the muffle and clutter of the previous diction. And at the center of the book is the wonderful, do-or-die "Recuerdo" with its good-natured hexameters and surreal images of New York. Here are the first two stanzas:

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.

VII

When I was a young poet, I spent more time than I wanted to trying to find my way in an intensely political and national Irish poetic culture. The lyric I saw around me – the poem of the day – was so often taken over by public feelings and cultural prescription that I was often unsure where the poetic energies of this lyric began and the public life of that ethos ended.

At the end of a day, in a city whose literary culture became increasingly exasperating to me, it was not unusual for someone to turn aside from a conversation in a pub or in the blue air of a smoky room and suddenly recite verse after verse of a poem while others nodded and supplied lines or interjected comments.

This was the world I first entered. This was the one I was increasingly at odds with. This was the one where passion, argument, exclusion seemed to be the order of poetry and the inevitable habitat of the young poet.

But I was wrong on several counts. There was nothing invincible or permanent about this strange, poignant, maddening world. If I had only known it then, Ireland was one of the last places where there was a sort of eco-system, a shelter for the lyric poem in its public and cultural guise. I was, whether or not I understood it yet, in a throwback culture.

Later I would think of that when I thought about Millay. That part of me which found myself in the lyric also found myself in an Ireland which treasured the resonant line. That part of me which relished public poetry also relished the memory of a culture where the poem was a possession and not a piece of marginalia.

Above all, Ireland showed me the rich, ancient tradition of co-authorship. Poems were so intensely in the culture that the glittering traffic, to and fro, from audience to poet happened all the time, so much so that it was hard to make out the driver from the passenger.

But Millay belonged to a different culture. Living in the American moment at the very start of the rise of modernism – she became subject to choices and critiques which no poet in the English-speaking world would be able afterwards to ignore. Hard choices. Punishing critiques.

VIII

Modernism had two great projects. We have lived, as poets and readers, in the light of the first and the shadow of the second for almost eighty years. The first project cannot be contested. It was to re-make the poem so that it could converse with the world it came from, and therefore with the past.

So far so good. If this was all, poetry would be a more coherent entity than it now is. The second project, however, was far less clarifying. It was to re-make, not the poem this time, but the reader of the poem. This – as the statements and arguments of modernists began to make clear – meant cutting the reader off from the old, popular expectations of the poem.

It meant requiring a readership to forget a vast, sun-splashed hinterland where the troubadours had sung and the balladeer had shaped the day's events. It meant forgetting the rooms where poems were recited, couplets remembered, where people finished each other's poems. Millay was one of the first victims.

In the beginning, this second project showed up merely in the wish-list of the

times. In hints and warnings. "We can only say that it appears likely that poets in our civilisation, as it exists at present, must be difficult" wrote Eliot.

Later, Allen Tate wrote more intemperately, showing more clearly the impatience of modernism with the reader who refused to be re-made in the image of the modernist poem. "This kind of poetry" he wrote in an essay called "Understanding Modern Poetry," "must have the direct and active participation of a reader who today, because he has been pampered by bad education, expects to lie down and be passive when he is reading poetry. He admits for some reason that poetry is part of his education; but he has been taught to believe that education is conditioning; something is being done to him, he is not doing anything himself. And that is why he cannot read poetry."

Tate's asperity and Eliot's arguments go some way to opening the charged space and history between the nineteenth and twentieth century. Modernism's impatiences and resistances with the popular audience had roots in a volatile past. David Perkin's careful account in *A History of Modern Poetry* gives an interpretation and chronology of that developing rift. Since it bears directly on Millay, I quote it here at length.

> *The personal, emotional, agreeable, reflective poetry was, like prose fiction, music, and painting in the nineteenth century, essentially a popular art. In due course there was a direct turnabout. English aesthetes in the 1880s and 1890s caught from France the concept of the poet as intrinsically alienated from society. By "society" they meant, of course, the middle class, for which the major Victorians had written. Would not this class prefer plumbing to poems? Had not Matthew Ar-nold, himself an earnest Victorian, rightly characterized middle-class values and styles*

> as *Philistine and utilitarian, "purblind and hideous"? With such persons there could be no rapport, and the poet withdrew to cultivate peculiarities of impression or sensa-tion, or to worship Beauty, or sometimes to study in the library. Modernist poets later mocked both aestheticism and its correla-tive notion of Beauty, but they shared the aesthete's opinion that the first duty of the poet is to his art. Art was not necessarily communication – that would be "rhetoric," for which few toler-ant words have been said in the twentieth century – and they were often willing to be unpopular. But it was not just that. There is some truth in the argument of Ortega y Gasset and others that high Modernist art was not simply unpopular, as any new art may be for a while, but antipopular.*

In *A Few Figs from Thistles* Millay was the popular poet par excellence. The vivid, racy cadences, and the simplified gestures of defiance and despair caught a popular mood and were influenced by it. But the book also gestures far more subtly towards the history of poetry.

In all ages, at all times, the poet and the community have come together to be authors – in the figurative way of affinity and mutual influence – of certain poems. Have shared the task, the record, the memory. The job is divided: the poet finds the language; the community records it in memory. Wars, emotions, storms, marriages, the birth of nations, and the ruin of cities have all been set down in this way.

Of all the popular poetic traditions modernism feared, co-authorship was the chief. That historic part of poetry, that place where a poet and his/her community meet in the seamless language of a lyric or a narrative, has been at the heart of poetry for

thousands of years. Touching the dark vibrations of the Jazz age, reaching out confidently to attitudes and elements of her time, Millay, in *A Few Figs from Thistles*, was an inspired and unapologetic co-author.

IX

And she paid the price. The effects of the modernist critique on Millay's reputation – the disapproval of her popular stance – were catastrophic. "Does anyone still discuss the work of Edna St. Vincent Millay as a serious contribution to modern poetry?" wrote Harold Orel in an essay on her. "The critics have done with her. The Professors no longer write about her."

Another, more contemporary measure of Millay's lost stature is an essay written about her by John Crowe Ranson called "The Poet as Woman" and published in 1938. The language is strange, disrespectful, and revealing. Here are some extracts: "Miss Millay is the best of the poets who are 'popular' and loved by Circles and Leagues of Young Ladies...She is also a woman. No poet ever registered herself more deliberately in that light. She therefore fascinates the male reviewer but at the same time horrifies him a little too. He will probably swing between attachment and antipathy, which may be the very attitudes provoked in him by generic women in the flesh, as well as by the literary remains of Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Barrett (sic), Christina Rosetti...This is the age which among other things has recovered the admirable John Donne. Therefore it is hardly the age of which it may be said that Miss Millay is the voice."

X

What does Millay mean to me? I am clear enough not to confuse my affection with my critical sense. Many of her poems are crossed with arcane diction

and soft feeling. The weakest of them come awkwardly from the page, like affected speech. But the best are sharp, charged, rich with melodrama and generosity.

I have long forgiven her for dressing in long skirts and reading to rich audiences. Now I see her as a place of meanings. I also see her as a vital source for self-definition for other women poets. The modernist critique made it difficult to recover such a relationship. The sharp words of poets like John Crowe Ransom made it seem a soft option, a peculiar weakness of women poets.

But his words represent a narrowing and darkening. The wonders of modernism in the hands of working poets was changed from a cluster of suggestions into a system, almost overnight. After a while, poetic modernism – which began in the good conscience of experiment – became a hard, conceptual rule of thumb for judging not just the present of poetry, but the past as well.

Under this rubric, the contemporary poet – and his or her reader – was warned away, like a child told not to talk to strangers, from the exuberant past where a couplet caught fire or a quatrain was repeated in a room at twilight. In trying to pre-judge, re-make, re-train the poetry reader away from the old joys of memory and sentiment and song, the secondary modernist project cut deep into the root and sap of the art.

Millay's relation with the audience is of particular use to women poets. It is something to be enjoyed and studied. When I look at it, I see a freedom, a verve, a way of claiming territory for both poem and poet. Millay's relationship to the popular audience was fearless. *A Few Figs from Thistles* is a particularly bold and swift book. It builds on slang, legend, posture, and communal self-reflection in the way a torch singer does. That bold relation – with its freedoms and access to a communal adventure – is one which

women poets should freely claim. These are the spaces she opened. They should not lie unused.

For myself, I value, honor, and return to Millay: to her music, her courage, her witness. Her best work – like the good work of all good poets – has widened my sense, not just of what poetry says, but of what it is.