

POETRY IN MOTION



I'm not sure when or why I stopped reading the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay. I do, however, remember how important her poetry was to me when I was in my mid-twenties, living in Greenwich Village and working at my first job. I knew little about Millay's life at that point, except that she had lived in the Village from 1918 to 1925 when it was a mecca for artists, writers, and free thinkers. In fact, I wasn't particularly interested in her life – it was her poems that had me spellbound. Her life was her own, but her poems were “mine,” in the sense that they touched me in ways that were both startling and emotionally revealing. I still have the first paperback editions of her *Collected Sonnets* and *Collected Lyrics* that I bought. Both books are now brown and brittle with age. I have newer collections of Millay's poetry but I can't bring myself to part with the old ones because of their ability to take me back in time, to where I was and what I was doing (and with whom), when I was devouring her poetry.

Millay was only nineteen years old when her poem “Renascence” was first published in 1912. Nineteen. The poem made her famous, radically and irrevocably changing her circumstances. Born into a hardscrabble life in Maine in 1892, Millay metamorphosed into a celebrity poet and a major literary figure in America. By the 1920s, she was living in New York City, reciting her poetry on the radio, and reading to

huge crowds in auditoriums all over the country. In 1923 she became the first woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for poetry.

A green-eyed, red-haired, charismatic, bi-sexual charmer, Millay came to represent the modern, liberated woman and was seen as the poet of the Jazz Age, an age defined by delirious excess. She captured the spirit of those times in what is probably her most famous poem:

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!

Millay spent many years perfecting her craft and would sometimes search for months for the perfect word to complete a poem. An exceedingly skillful technician, she was one of America's finest and most important poets. Edmund Wilson declared that Millay had the same talent for "giving supreme expression to profoundly felt personal experience" as T.S. Eliot, Auden, and Yeats.

Today, Edna St. Vincent Millay is all but forgotten. During her lifetime, her immense popularity often worked against her. Many influential literary critics disdained the accessibility of her poetry and decried its personal tone. Since her death, Millay has been buried over and over again by fashion trends in poetry – first by "modernism" and then by "post-modernism." And, for the most part, her biographers have not served her well, emphasizing the notorious and tragic aspects of her life while paying scant attention to what makes her worth remembering. The eclipsing of Millay's greatness is one of the

literary scandals of our day. It is time we reclaimed this gifted, intense, and
magnificently literate poet.

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