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Edna St. Vincent Millay's doubly burning candles

by [X.J. Kennedy](#)

A review of *What My Lips Have Kissed: The Loves and Love Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, by Daniel Mark Epstein, and *Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, by Nancy Milford.

For a long while, the case of Edna St. Vincent Millay has seemed a doleful one. In 1911 it was her fate to ignite a sensation with her first collection, *Renascence*; in 1923, to be the first woman poet to win a Pulitzer Prize; throughout the 1920s and 1930s, to enjoy more critical acclaim and popularity than poets ordinarily attain; but in later life to be dismissed as a moldy fig. She has very nearly gone the way of lesser poets who make the mistake of signing their work with three names. Her *Collected Poems* is no longer a fixture on the poetry shelf of every bookshop, and in the initial volume of the Library of America's anthology of twentieth-century American poetry, she places a mere fourth among woman poets in the number of allotted pages—about a third the space squandered on the maunderings of Gertrude Stein. Perhaps now, with the simultaneous appearance of two new critical biographies derived from long-guarded materials, her stock may be in for a rise. [\[1\]](#)

Like earlier biographers, both Daniel Mark Epstein and Nancy Milford portray Millay as a gallant child. While her divorced mother Cora, a practical nurse, worked night and day, Millay served as surrogate mother to her two younger sisters: cooking, baking, cleaning, mending, scrubbing till she bloodied her hands. All the while, she excelled in school, acted in plays, practiced piano, and won poetry prizes. For much of her early life, the family lived on the charity of relatives, and when at last they found a house of their own it was in a tough section of Camden, Maine, where drunken mill workers would try unsuccessfully to break in and rape the girls on a Saturday night. While high school friends trotted off to college, Millay, poor and burdened with duties, couldn't go.

The familiar myth is that by sheer talent Millay managed to liberate herself from a hardscrabble existence, and indeed, from all evidence, this account is true. When she entered the poem "Renascence" in a national contest, it narrowly failed to win but received such extravagant praise that the winner felt too humiliated to show up in person to claim his prize. This feat brought her a New York woman patron who took her in hand and saw to it that Vassar accepted her.

Despite some archaic diction and inversions of syntax ("Ah! Up then from the ground sprang I"), "Renascence" remains a striking achievement for a poet of nineteen. Indeed, it would have done credit to any American poet of 1911, but it does have a certain youthful gushiness. Like many poems that aspire to win contests, it wears on its sleeve a cosmic significance. The speaker's feeling of being trapped by the surrounding hills and islands of Camden, Maine, leads to a near-mystical experience. Infinity and eternity drop down upon her. She takes responsibility for all the sins of the human race, becomes one with a starving man (from Capri, so as to rhyme with "me"), dies a thousand deaths, then sinks into her grave. From such a low point, where could she go but up? She

exults, hugs trees, even embraces the ground. She beholds God everywhere. Oddly, the poem ends with a twit at people who don't feel so intensely: "And he whose soul is flat—the sky/ Will cave in on him by and by." Apparently "Renaissance" was begun in a period of gloom, set aside, then finished in a moment of elation. Epstein places the turning point of its composition in the young poet's visit to the town of Kingman, where she enjoyed a brief reconciliation with her father, attracted the resident young blades, and flirted with the fiddle player of the Kickapoo-Laguna Vaudeville Medicine Show. Life could be beautiful.

In both these new lives of the poet, much is made of Millay's physical beauty and her flamboyant theatricality. On the streets of Camden, passersby would stop to gape at the slim, pale girl with long, flowing red hair. Later, Arthur Ficke, who had been a lover, called her disproportionately large breasts "the most curiously 'naked' breasts I have ever seen." Her unconventional beauty—clear green eyes, pouty little-bad-girl mouth—would draw both men and women to her as a magnet attracts loose staples. Epstein has perceived her tendency to mimic the poses of her idol, the tempestuous Sarah Bernhardt, whom the young Millay had watched in *Camille*. "Acting," he remarks, "came as naturally to her as breathing; she created several different roles for herself in the private world of her imagination before she ever began to play roles for her friends, her lovers, and the public."

Giving readings in her maturity, Millay would put on an overpowering show. She would look the part of a poet, typically draped in a loose velvet gown with red-and-gold braid, girdle-free, flicking a black velvet cape behind her as she strode. Audiences were surprised when out of her elfin form came a rich contralto voice like (said one reporter) "a bronze bell." Reciting from memory, she would act her poems with her whole body, winning thunderous applause. Long before the reading tours of Dylan Thomas, Millay was traipsing the continent. She knew how to bowl 'em over in Des Moines.

In the strict enclave of Vassar, Millay had the advantages of being four years older than the other freshmen and of being already a poet of national fame. When she starred in a campus production of Synge's *Deirdre of the Sorrows*, the *New York Tribune* sent its drama critic. Her celebrity quite intimidated Vassar's president, Henry Noble McCracken. Though she habitually tumbled, ducked chapel, cut classes, and skipped away from campus without leave, he told her, "You couldn't break any rule that would make me vote for your expulsion. I don't want a banished Shelley on my doorstep." To which she replied, "Well, on those terms I think I can continue to live in this hellhole." And so she did, absorbing all that Vassar could provide, dazzling her teachers with her papers, taking every modern language course the college offered, and obtaining a good grounding in Latin besides. As far as I know, no later rebel poet, no celebrated Beat, brought to the writing of poetry a more conscientious schooling.

Epstein sees her college days as busily androgynous. He envisions Millay's keeping "a harem of sex-starved Vassar girls eager for same-sex experiments" while at the same time sharing the bed of Arthur Hooley, a New York editor who printed her poems. Epstein credits this cool and reticent Englishman with teaching Millay, by his example, to stay in control of an affair and not hand over her entire heart. He suspects that her involvement with Hooley may have inspired this remarkable early sonnet:

If I should learn, in some quite casual way,
That you were gone, not to return again—
Read from the back-page of a newspaper, say,

Held by a neighbor in a subway train,
How at the corner of this avenue

And such a street (so are the papers filled)
A hurrying man—who happened to be you—

At noon today had happened to be killed,
I should not cry aloud—I could not cry

Aloud, or wring my hands in such a place—
I should but watch the station lights rush by

With a more careful interest on my face,
Or raise my eyes and read with greater care
Where to store furs and how to treat the hair.

This poem, sometimes mistaken for a statement of cool indifference, is quite the opposite. Millay sees deeply into the psychology of feeling. Her poem recalls Dostoyevsky's recollection of the moment when, facing a firing squad, he concentrated his gaze intently on the brass buttons on the coats of the fusiliers.

About Millay's college days, Milford is more cautious in her inferences. From her account, the poet's life at Vassar doesn't seem quite a "four-year bacchanal," but a pack of girlish intrigues with just a smattering of lesbian dalliance. Arthur Hooley shrinks into the background, and it is the playwright Floyd Dell who shatters the poet's virginity. But whoever the man responsible, both biographers report that Millay converted to heterosexuality with religious zeal. Epstein totes up no fewer than one hundred love-affairs in her lifetime. According to Epstein, one afternoon, between two other quick tricks, she barely had time to sandwich in John Peale Bishop.

It was a balancing act comparable in skill to that of a Casanova or Don Juan. Shrewdly, Millay juggled her many lovers: discreetly keeping secrets, gracefully breaking off affairs, and letting her victims down so gently that several remained her friends for life. Edmund Wilson never got over her. In his mercifully forgotten novel *I Thought of Daisy*, he portrayed her, thinly veiled, as the irresistible queen of a Greenwich Village hive. At the time, Millay didn't mind serving as a fictional heroine, but regretted that Wilson hadn't given her a better novel in which to star.

In 1920, in the early morning of her fame, Millay's now almost tiresomely familiar quatrain "First Fig" earned her notoriety as a flapper and a frequenter of wild parties:

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!

Milford calls this little poem the rallying cry of a new generation of American women, and apparently it did wonders for Millay's sales.

In both biographies Millay emerges as a committed idealist, albeit one not averse to having her public gestures make the newspapers. She embraced many a decent cause, demonstrating against the Wilson administration's effort to gag the magazine *The Masses* (whose editors had doubted that the War to Make the World Safe for Democracy was entirely altruistic) and briefly going to jail for protesting the death sentences handed Sacco and Vanzetti. She was ahead of many of her fellow

countrymen in disliking Hitler and, well before the Pearl Harbor attack, bought the embattled British an ambulance.

She could be generous to people in need. When her shiftless father pleaded illness and poverty, she forgave his having virtually abandoned his family and sent him support checks for the rest of his life. She strove to advance the careers of fellow poets, notably Elinor Wylie and Louise Bogan, and toiled as an anonymous sifter of Guggenheim applications. Her taste and sense of fairness were such that she could recommend E. E. Cummings for a grant despite her personal dislike for him.

Her leftward leanings seem never to have prevented her from enjoying the capitalist system to the hilt. At the height of her career, her book royalties were handsome and her readings drew throngs eager to behold a woman whose lovers were beyond count. At a time when she was the best-paid poet in America, she invested in a personal stable of race horses, owning a colt named Challedon who dashed her hopes by placing a mere second in the Kentucky Derby. Milford mentions Millay's wish to own race horses some day, but it is Epstein who gives us a full account of this obsession. He notes that Millay kept her big-time gambling activities secret, not wanting the racing gazettes to tarnish her name as an apostle of ideal beauty.

Ever since girlhood Millay had imagined some knight in armor who would swoop in, carry her away, and be her ideal mate. Almost miraculously in April 1923, when she was down on her luck, suffering from writer's block and mysterious bodily ills, such a man appeared. She went to a party where she found herself cast together with Eugen Bossevain, a big, hearty, high-spirited Dutchman who had struck gold in America in the import business. Bossevain had been variously tried in the crucible of life. He had shot elephants in Africa, reclined on the couch of Carl Jung, and served as an assistant to the inventor Marconi. Son of a Dutch publisher, he was the widower of Inez Mulholland, once famed as a crusader for women's suffrage. He had a heroic streak and a penchant for rescuing damsels in distress—he once dived into the Seine to save a woman bent on suicide. Enthralled by Millay, Bossevain decided it was time for a rescue operation. He would throw away his fleet of merchant ships and devote his life to freeing the delicate poet from mundane care, that she might simply write.

Bossevain was a take-charge guy. On the very day of their wedding he whisked her off to a hospital where surgeons untangled a knotted lower intestine and set her back on the road to health. He purchased Steepletop, a seven-hundred-acre retreat in the Berkshires near Austerlitz, New York, and took over the running of the household: cooking, serving breakfast in bed, handling dull correspondence, even doing his ethereal wife's clothes shopping. Children were ruled out as an unnecessary distraction, and by agreement each partner would be free to sleep around. As things turned out, Millay was indeed to exploit this freedom when she met pretty-boy poet George Dillon and passionately fell for him. Bossevain urged her on, supposing that an affair with a younger man might trigger good poems.

His expectation proved accurate. While bombarding Dillon with love letters and enticing him to make visits to Steepletop, Millay churned out a spate of sonnets. These, mostly addressed to Dillon, make up a sequence of fifty-two, gathered in 1931 as *Fatal Interview*. Cash registers jingled as readers tut-tutted about this married woman who could call herself "Hell's mistress" and identify with "treacherous queens" who "took their knights to bed."

In his discussion of *Fatal Interview*, Epstein is particularly acute. He brings to it his own experience as a poet and fine craftsman. While chiding Millay for hifalutin diction and for striking queenlike poses, he nonetheless admires her as a risk-taker and thinks several of the poems sublime. As for Bossevain, he seems to have remained his wife's devout worshipper. Once, however, left behind in America while Millay and Dillon were off cohabiting in Paris, he dutifully slept with an old flame and reported this infidelity to Millay, as if to prove he was faithfully upholding his end of the open

marriage.

Enabler that he was, Bossevain encouraged Millay to indulge wishes that were ultimately to bring misery to them both. When she sought relief from aches and pains, he supplied her with enough morphine to stun an ox. When her habit became a torment, Bossevain tried overdosing himself on the same drug, the better to understand what she endured. Surely his lavish provision of firewater sped her descent into alcoholism. When she would abuse the servants and provoke them to quit, Bossevain didn't complain, he merely scrounged up new ones. When she craved time with Dillon, he egged the lovers on. Inevitably, Millay found herself caught in a one-way affair, a woman losing her looks, forcing herself upon an unwilling younger man. She told a friend that she was totally miserable. Evidently, since her least whims were Bossevain's commands, she lacked any reason for self-denial.

Both biographers are sensitive in dealing with Millay's sad last years. In continual pain, sometimes racked with nameless terrors, dependent on drugs and alcohol, she made repeated hospital stays to treat recurrent depression. In 1940, fired up with anti-Nazi fervor, she rashly published *Make Bright the Arrows*, a collection hastily written to goad America into war. She had her doubts about it; she called it "not poems, posters." Not all of it was equally bad, but reviewers savaged it. In Epstein's account, Millay survived to write well again by 1947, after bravely kicking both the needle and the bottle.

Milford isn't so sure that Millay quite freed herself. She records the poet's continued reliance on massive doses of barbiturates, but concurs that the poems improved. Millay published no more major collections in her lifetime, but much of the work in her posthumous *Mine the Harvest* proves her ability to write with vigor of matters other than sexual love. She recalls her mother's courage; observes ordinary people, creatures, and the seasons; writes of living with pain, aging, the approach of death; even praises the formal constraints of poetry:

I will put Chaos into fourteen lines
And keep him there; and let him thence
escape
If he be lucky; let him twist, and ape
Flood, fire, and demon—his adroit designs
Will strain to nothing in the strict confines
Of this sweet Order, where, in pious rape,
I hold his essence and amorphous shape,
Till he with Order mingles and combines.

Abruptly, her chief support fell away. Bossevain was diagnosed with lung cancer. After surgery which he dreaded only because it would interfere with his wife's work, he suffered a fatal stroke. Mustering the bravery of her early years, Millay soldiered on alone, but only a year and some weeks later died in a fall down stairs—perhaps while in a drunken stupor.

Why two new biographies at this moment? Both are based on a trove of material long held in limbo. Milford, as if to remind us that she's the biographer with the official blessing, keeps recalling her conversations with Norma, Millay's sister and sole heir, dropping them into her book along the way. Understandably, she is proud of having pried the trove loose from Norma, who had toyed with the notion of writing a biography herself, but I gather that after the sister's death it all ended up in the Library of Congress, where Epstein also had access to it.

Stressing the profundity of the trove, Milford confides that it lacked only three items which Norma

destroyed: an ivory dildo, a letter from a gay male spurning Millay's advances, and a photograph of Millay and Bossevain in hardcore intimacy. At times, though, the abundance of Milford's materials—she often quotes when she might have selected—caused me to lose the thread of her story and ask, "What does all this mean?" And at such moments of helplessness I resorted to Epstein, often finding a pithy summation, such as one deftly encapsulating a journey with lover John Carter: "He even squired her to Albania." In Epstein's history, the lineaments of the plot stand out, clear and compelling. He allows only a few lines to a meaningless round-the-world trip; Milford gives us a travelogue. But you'll have to go to her for the memorable tale of Millay's second abortion (one more than Epstein is aware of), superintended by her mother, who discovered a folk remedy in a seventeenth-century herb book, brewed her daughter a potion, and had her roll about in the Dorset fields.

Milford does an admirably thorough job on Millay's family background, on the tight web of relationships with her mother and sisters. When after college she moved to Greenwich Village, Millay eventually succeeded in bringing the other three along. Mother Cora joined in the fun, embracing the Bohemian life and declaring (in Edmund Wilson's recollection) that "she had been a slut herself, so why shouldn't her girls be." And later, Milford gives us a droll account of Millay's one uncomfortable visit to Holland and her husband's family.

The titles of both biographies are somewhat misleading. Millay was a civilized wastrel, no savage, and it's too bad that Epstein had to subtitle his book "The Loves and Love Poems." As he plentifully shows, there's much more to Millay. The poet herself might be expected to rise in protest from her grave, for in 1948 when her publishers proposed that she gather her old love poems and write a confessional foreword, she refused. She didn't covet the kind of reader who wanted an "erotic autobiography."

Yet clearly we are in for a season of Millay gossip, as gabby as all the talk that has swirled around Sylvia Plath. Nancy Milford is to make a nine-city tour, and her biography has been excerpted in *Vanity Fair*. Movie rights, no doubt, are being hotly agented. Happily, she has also edited a *Selected Poems* for The Modern Library, due to appear along with her biography. Let us hope that many who buy *Savage Beauty* looking for an erotic biography will read the poems Milford quotes and be drawn to seek out more of them.

It would be easy to stand back and view the wreckage of Millay's life, wag a finger and say, "Shouldn't the silly woman have known better?" But neither biographer indulges in moralizing. Both seem content to let Millay's follies speak for themselves, and both underscore her achievements. Approvingly, Milford cites Thomas Hardy's dictum that America had produced only two great things: the skyscraper and the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay. Who today would even dream of ranking the importance of any living poet next to that of the World Trade Center?

Indeed, many of the poems continue to stand impressively tall. Rereading them, I am struck by how many of them have stamped a deep dent upon my memory. It is hard to dismiss the formidable sonnets "Euclid alone has looked on Beauty bare" and "What lips my lips have kissed," "The Return" ("Earth does not understand her child"), the simple but infectious "Recuerdo" ("We were very tired, we were very merry"), "When the Year Grows Old," "Counting-out Rhyme," the almost but not quite sentimental "Ballad of the Harp-Weaver," or that pert epigram "Second Fig": "Safe upon the solid rock the ugly houses stand:/ Come and see my shining palace built upon the sand!"

From the beginning of her career, Millay seems intuitively to have accepted Ezra Pound's principle, "In poetry, only emotion endures." Writing feelingful poems, she forged a splendid plain and formal style, and with it she wrote many of the better sonnets of her century. She produced some verse that children still enjoy; she bequeathed memorable love lyrics to an American literature notably lacking in them; she wrote stageworthy plays, among them the much-produced *Aria da Capo*; she wrote the

libretto for a successful opera, *The King's Henchman*. With Dillon, she translated much of Baudelaire, producing translations that compare well, in my mind, to any I know. Single-handedly, she widened the audience for poetry in America, and even if Epstein is right in thinking that the audience has now eroded, she proved lastingly that the poetry reading can, in the right hands, be good theater.

Fame, for a poet, is as hard to catch as swordfish, and spoils almost as soon. Although Millay's reputation has slumped once and may slump again when the latest spate of curiosity about her colorful life wears off, I suspect that for many of us her finest lyrics will refuse to go away. Forged with a firm control of the language, they continue to stick in the mind, to speak with a bronze bell of a voice.

Notes

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1. *What Lips My Lips Have Kissed: The Loves and Love Poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, by Daniel Mark Epstein; Henry Holt, 288 pages, \$26. *Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, by Nancy Milford; Random House, 553 pages, \$29.95. [Go back to the text.](#)

X.J. Kennedy is **X. J. Kennedy's** new and selected poems were published in Spring 2007 by Johns Hopkins.

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