

THE POIGNANT MILLAY

by WILFREDO M. CHICA

SALIENT among the qualities of Edna St. Vincent Millay's poetry, one all her readers will agree on, is the articulate poignancy of her lyricism of pain, sadness and loss. It is so prominent the reader inescapably notices — and is carried away by — it.

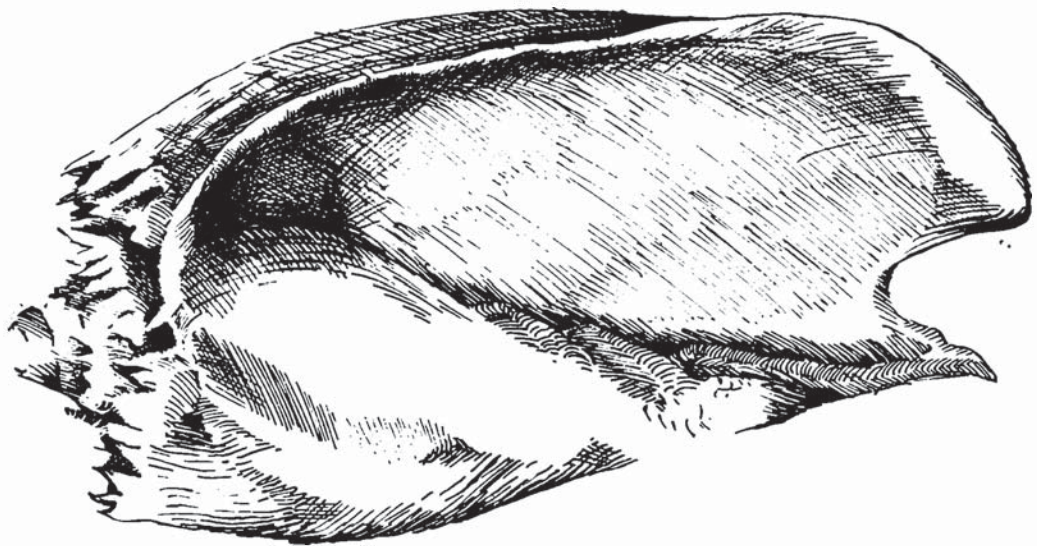
We find it early in her work. In INTERIM where she mourns the death of a beloved, this poignant strain begins:

*... part of your heart
Aches in my breast; part of my heart
lies chilled
In the damp earth with you.*

The note is heard again in SORROW,
*Sorrow like a ceaseless rain
Beats upon my heart.
People twist and scream in pain, —
Dawn will find them still again;*

in EBB,

*I know what my heart is like
Since your love died:
... a hollow ledge
Holding a little pool . . .
A little tepid pool,
Dying inward from the edge.*



and in such poems as PASSER MOR-
TUUS EST, HYACINTH and MORI-
TURUS. It appears more and more
often so that we discover a familiarity
growing in us, feeding an expecta-
tion to encounter and to hear this
note of keen feeling. And we are
not disappointed. The regularity
continues; in fact, the succeeding
lyrics are almost always keyed to
this strain.

One may ask: over what things
is she so poignant? what moves her
to such swift, piercing emotions? As
we mentioned above, this particular
gift of Millay she devoted to ex-
pressing, describing pain, sadness
and loss. Now there are things and
things in this world the experience
of which sometimes bring grief, dis-
appointment and disenchantment.
Every man knows that — and every
woman, especially a woman and an
artist like Millay who had an abound-
ing love of life, an almost ecstatic
joy in experience and who felt a
sense of miracle in life and death.

We will mention only a few sig-
nificant themes. At one instance we
find her grieving over the death of
a dear friend:

*But your voice . . .
. . . the beauty of that sound
. . . in no way of all
Ever will be heard again.*

*On and on eternally
Shall your altered fluid run
Bud and bloom and go to seed:
But your singing days are done;
But the music of your talk
Never shall the chemistry
Of the secret earth restore.
All your lovely words are spoken.
Once the ivory box is broken,
Beats the golden bird no more.*

—ELEGY

At another, love estranged from a
cold and selfish world pains her:

*How far from home in a world of
mortal burdens
Is Love, that may not die . . .*

—THE HARDY GARDEN

*O early love unfortunate and hard,
Time has estranged you into a jewel
cold and pure!*

—THE CAMEO

Life, hard and demanding, weighs
heavy on her, disenchanting her to
wish for grim death:

*Life, were thy pains as are the pains
of hell,
So hardly to be borne, yet to be borne.
And all thy boughs more grim with
wasp and thorn
Than armoured bough stood ever;
too chill to spell
With the warm tongue, and sharp with
broken shell
Thy ways, whereby in wincing haste
forlorn
The desperate fool must travel, blind
and torn,
Yet must I cry:*

—a Sonnet from
THE BUCK IN THE SNOW

With this poignant note stream-
ing in and through Millay's lyrics
one may justifiably fear that the
poetess' works are depressing. It
is true her poems are often sad but
they are never maudlin nor over-
sentimental. Her poignancy does
not stem only from pain or sadness
for its own sake. Rather it is the
result of poetic contemplation real-
izing not only the exquisite beauty
of life, nature and this world but
also the accompanying pain that
grips the artist's soul finding the
insufficiency of all he beholds.

This poignant note is not some-
thing new, not something Millay has
innovated. The reader of poetry is
familiar with it. He has heard it
in the immortal lines of Yeats,

*I am haunted by numberless islands,
and many a Danaan shore. . .*

—THE WHITE BIRDS

of Arnold,

*Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery;*

*But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawn roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night-wind, down the vast edges
drear
And naked shingles of the world.*

—DOVER BEACH

and Rossetti:

*Remember me when I am gone away,
Gone far away into the silent land;
When you can no more hold me by
the hand,
Nor I half turn to go, yet turning stay.*

—REMEMBER

Edna St. Vincent Millay's gift is
that she has made the feeling so
moving and keen, so personal and in-
timate that it has been identified
with her. Also, what distinguishes
her from other poets in this matter
is her attitude towards it. To her,
this poignancy in experience is not
shocking nor a cause for despair. It
is a reality that is woven into the
strands of life, something which he
who would be initiated into, partici-
pate, enjoy, understand and perhaps
change life has to accept and work
with:

*I am not resigned to the shutting away
of loving hearts in the hard ground.
So it is, and so it will be, for so it
has been, time out of mind:
Into the darkness they go, the wise
and the lovely.
Crowned with lilies and with laurel
they go; but I am not resigned.*

*Down, down, down into the darkness
of the grave*

*Gently they go, the beautiful, the
tender, the kind;*

*Quietly they go, the intelligent, the
witty, the brave.*

*I know. But I do not approve. And
I am not resigned.*

—DIRGE WITHOUT MUSIC