

THE WORLDS OF EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

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by
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Abstract

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I argue that the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay has been misinterpreted within the academic community. A closer focus on her less anthologized poems helps to reveal a common thread within many of her poems that clarifies her motivations as a writer. Contrary to popular opinions, Millay was not writing for her reputation, nor was she primarily performing femininity. Millay adopts a range of speaking roles—not just gendered roles—but different identities that can be broken down into specific personae. Each new identity allows her to project a different view of the world, and she adopts various roles to build a series of sub-worlds, in which her poems create opportunities to either interrogate or escape reality, or discover meaning that is otherwise shrouded by reality. Thus, for Millay, the act of writing poetry is often correlated with the ability to envision imaginary worlds.

The following chapters will articulate different themes Millay tackles, and will show how Millay sets up different natural worlds, apocalyptic worlds, and worlds of the afterlife. At times, I will turn to critical anthologies to juxtapose Millay's works

with her contemporaries in order to prove that her poetic skills are overlooked. Furthermore, each theme will allow for a different theoretical approach, exemplifying the multiple layers of meaning that will no longer be limited to issues of gender. This broader field of theoretical critiques will make room for new possibilities of reception, providing a better chance for academia to gain a fuller understanding of thus far unexplored thematic and theoretical possibilities in Millay's work.

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Dedication

For my family.

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Chapter One: Discovering the Worlds of Edna St. Vincent Millay

Edna St. Vincent Millay is not exactly a household name. She isn't as famous as many of her contemporaries and her works are overshadowed by those of poets like Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, and T.S. Eliot. A quick Google search of university level English syllabi shows that Millay is taught considerably less often than other writers of or around her time. For instance, her name appears 33,000 times within these syllabi, a rather low number, indeed, when compared to the number of syllabi featuring William Carlos Williams (80,400), Elizabeth Bishop (99,200), Wallace Stevens (106,000), E. E. Cummings (142,000), Ezra Pound (218,000), Robert Frost (452,000), and T.S. Eliot (542,000) (Google Search). Throughout my college education, only one (female) American literature professor taught her sonnets, and she was the only instructor who barely even glanced at her poetry. In fact, one English professor was moved almost to repulsion when I proposed writing about her for my M.A. thesis. "But isn't she like...not that great?" he asked. "After all, look at the other poets writing during her time. Does she really live up to authors like Eliot and E. E. Cummings?" I started to wonder if I was wrong about her. I reconsidered writing my thesis on something else. After all, maybe she was too typically sentimental. I flipped through the pages of *Second April*, contemplating whether she was worthy of higher praise. I thumbed through the poems, and stopped on "The Poet and His Book." As I read aloud, I could almost see the shadows of Millay's grey-green eyes flickering across the words on the page while she read along with me:

When shall I be dead?
When my flesh is withered,
And above my head
Yellow pollen gathered

All the empty afternoon?
When sweet lovers pause and wonder
Who am I that lie thereunder,
Hidden from the moon?

Stranger, pause and look:
From the dust of ages
Lift this little book,
Turn the tattered pages.
Read me, do not let me die!
Search the fading letters, finding
Steadfast in the broken binding
All that once was I! (9-48)

I remembered what initially drew me towards her poetry: Millay speaks to the reader. At times, her voice seems so familiar it is as though she were sitting across the table from you. The intimacy that Millay creates between herself and her audience echoes the voices of past poets. For instance, in “Retraction,” Chaucer also speaks directly to his audience, and his apology for vulgarity within *The Canterbury Tales* helps him to establish a communion with his readers in much the same way that Millay does with hers. But although Millay participates in this traditional convention, she also transcends it by speaking as if she were already dead. Her voice simultaneously sounds far more mysterious and more convivial than Chaucer’s.

Millay is not quite dead, but she is dying. While she is currently undervalued by scholars, this is partly due to the misrepresentation of her by her contemporary critics. During roughly the first half of Millay’s writing career, her personal attractiveness seemed to be just as entertaining a topic as her poetry. J. D. McClatchy reminds us that although she was quite popular for a few decades, “...literary historians can agree...that the road to hell is often paid with good reviews” (45). He goes on to explain that:

At the start of Edna St. Vincent Millay's career, the reviews were astonishing. By 1912, when she was just eighteen, Millay was already famous. When, five years later, her first book appeared, she was launched on a rushing current of acclaim....Even so severe a reader as A.E. Housman praised her virtuosity. Thomas Hardy once said, famously, that the two great things about America were its skyscrapers and the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay. In 1952, two years after her death, when it was already unfashionable to admire Millay, her devoted reader and one time lover Edmund Wilson insisted that "Edna St. Vincent Millay seems to me one of the only poets writing in English in our time who have attained to anything like the stature of the great literary figures." But that was the last time such a claim was made. By 1976, she was not even represented in *The New Oxford Book of American Verse*. All the sand had run through the hourglass. (45)

The "time to be loved" for Millay was certainly passing. Indeed, it is uncertain whether the face she left on the world of poetry is one of futility or one of stagnation.

Let's take a look at the most famous portrait of Millay, taken in the spring of 1913:



Fig. 1. Arnold Genthe. Edna St. Vincent Millay at Mitchell Kennerley's house in Mamaroneck, New York. 1913. *Savage Beauty: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay*. By Nancy Milford. New York: Random House, 2001. 115. Print.

Nancy Milford's commentary on this photograph rings with a tone of freshness and naturalism:

At the Kennerley's in Mamaroneck that spring, Arnold Genthe took a photograph of her standing among the blossoms of a magnolia tree in full bloom. Wearing that linen dress, .. she touched the branches of the tree, her glance away from the camera and slightly downcast, her long curling hair caught in a knot at the nape of her neck. She looked winsome and young and fragile, as if at any minute she might become a wood nymph. (115)

This was the Millay that (almost) everybody knew and loved. She was a natural beauty and a vivacious young woman. But, as McClatchy notes, her image soon withered away. Though Millay evolved into a poetic icon at a young age, by the time the fifties rolled around her reputation had gone the way of the dodo. Many attribute her loss of public devotion to the propagandist nature of her book *Make Bright the Arrows* (1940), "a heavy-handed tribute to the Allies" (Eir Jenks 118). However, other factors seem more likely to account for her decreasing celebrity status. After a car accident in 1936, Millay became addicted to morphine due to suffering from chronic pain, an addiction "she was never able to overcome" (McClatchy 51). McClatchy explains that:

Her final years are a sad parable of helplessness. Puffy and dumpy and slow, she must have looked like Eurydice back from the underworld...[By] 1949, Millay merely went through the motions of life. A year later, alone at Steepletop, she sat at

the top of the staircase, a bottle of wine beside her. At some point she pitched forward, down the stairs, breaking her neck. She was fifty-eight. (52)

Indeed, it seems as though Millay's deteriorating personal charm directly correlates with her diminishing popularity.

Thus, in some ways, this project is one of recovery; it is an attempt to pay her the recognition she deserves. It is more importantly a reevaluation of Millay's place in American literature and her contributions to poetry. In this chapter I will theorize how she came to be misrepresented and undervalued within literary discourses and conclude by offering a new and better method for understanding the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay.

It is a Question of Inventiveness

Millay first stepped into the public light with her highly acclaimed poem, "Renescence." On July 17, 1912, the then twenty-year old Millay received a letter informing her that "Renescence" had been chosen as one of the best one hundred poems in "The Lyric Year" contest put on by The Magazine Maker (Milford 64). One of the editors, Ferdinand Earle, had mistakenly addressed the young writer as "Dear Sir," for she had signed her submission to the magazine as "E. St. Vincent Millay" (Milford 64). In retrospect, it seems only fitting that from the moment of its inception, Millay's literary reputation was shaped by misguided assumptions about gender. Numerous misconceptions would later be posited about her role as a female poet, and unfortunately, these inaccurate conceptions continue to shape her poetic reputation. Millay was assured by Earle that "Renescence" would win top prize in the finals. Earle could not convince the other two judges, and Millay did not place among the top three, who were all men. The results of the winners sparked an outrage among poetry critics. Even

Arthur Davison Ficke and Witter Byner, the winners of “The Lyric Year” competition, wrote Millay to tell her that she deserved first prize. Interestingly, Millay became more famous by not winning. The disappointed Millay was eventually consoled by journalists like Louis Untermeyer, who praised “Renaissance” in the *Chicago Evening Post* shortly after “The Lyric Year” announced its results (Milford 79-80). *New York Times* reporter Jessie Rittenhouse also criticized “The Lyric Year” judges for not awarding Millay first prize in her article “The Lyric Year: The Great Symposium of Modern American Verse” (1912), claiming “that so young a poet should have so personal a vision of humanity, nature and God, such a sense of spiritual elation, of mystical rebirth, and present it to us with the freshness of first view—is certainly worthy of recognition and one could wish that the judges had seconded Mr. Earle in his choice of this poem for one of the awards” (746). Had it not been for this media back-fire, Millay might have second-guessed her own talent. But Millay's creative drive persisted, and she went on to publish seventeen books of poetry and five plays.

What is intriguing about Millay's first public appearance is that she still faces similarly fluctuating critical receptions. Current academia is wishy-washy about her position as a twentieth-century poet. While a decent amount of relatively recent study has been devoted to her,¹ Millay critics neglect to engage in any depth with the immensely rich meaning within her poems. Scholars have determined that poets such as Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams brought a level of inventiveness to their work that helped transform the face of poetry, but I argue that no one has yet developed an accurate analysis of Millay's own discoveries and contributions to poetic innovation and literary tradition. There are several

¹ Judith Nierman and John J. Patton explain that their most recent annotated bibliography of Millay scholarship, which is a continuation of Nierman's 1977 bibliography, offer a total of nearly 1,500 items, claiming that together, these two bibliographies are a “sure testimony, if such is needed, that Millay should be considered a major fixture in modern America Poetry” (1996).

reasons why a deeper analysis of Millay has been comparatively neglected, and they have to do with a misreading of Millay's historical context; the structuring of narratives of literary history; and the impact of academic discourses in shaping our response to her work. While contemporary critics approach Millay's poetry differently, they seem to share one common notion: each implies or asserts that Millay was not as inventive as her contemporaries. In this thesis I hope to examine how Millay is positioned within a historical, scholarly, and critical context in order to argue that she is too often misrepresented. I will then propose that a closer reading of Millay's lesser-known works provides an opportunity to shift current attitudes about Millay. Shifting focus to her less-acknowledged poetry helps support my claim that she was a highly inventive poet who imagined worlds that are simultaneously similar and yet far different from those imagined by her contemporaries. Although I do plan on comparing and contrasting Millay's idealized worlds with the poems of her contemporaries, it is not my intent to argue that she deserves to be recognized as a modernist poet. Jo Ellen Green Kaiser explains that "Rather than imagining a battle between men and women, modernism and sentiment..." criticism should "demonstrate that writers cannot simply be divided into opposing camps" (28). Instead, criticism should map "the cultural terrain shared by these figures and the conflicting ideological positions that eventually lead them to embark on aggressively different courses" (Kaiser 28). More importantly, this thorough exploration will help illuminate how Millay functioned as a poet and her distinct contributions to the methods of writing poetry. I acknowledge that Millay is not entirely neglected. But she is comparatively neglected, especially because she is not exactly a modernist figure and thus has been left out of academic syllabi and narratives of literary history for her era that overstate the centrality and importance of modernism. Modernism was certainly important,

but a great deal of the richest literature produced during the first half of the twentieth century cannot be subsumed by it. I hope to demonstrate how Millay has been misconceived, and prove that she deserves to be reevaluated.

A Historical Narrative

Millay's place in the modernist era is undoubtedly a peculiar one: her often personal voice and traditional poetic forms, such as the sonnet, make it difficult to deem her a modernist. She is further distinguished from other modernist poets because her works do not exhibit modernist features such as the private and highly idiosyncratic symbolism and mythology of Yeats, the learned allusions and polylingual diction of Pound and Eliot, or the iconoclasm and quirkiness of Williams and Stevens. Most importantly, whereas the modernist poets were driven to overt avant-garde experimentation by Pound's injunction to "Make it new," Millay was not (Perkins 373). The modernist movement was revolutionary, and on the surface, Millay seems to resist this highly experimental artistic counter-current within history. Therefore, many modernist scholars failed to give her the attention she deserves, and this critical neglect is the origin of the present flawed debate surrounding Millay. Non-modernist currents that flourished during the same period of the culturally prestigious modernist movement have been left out by scholars of modern American literature because non-modernist poets do not seem to fit into their story of modern American literature (Lauter 104). In order to gain insight into the current literary debate revolving around Millay, it is critical to understand the historical context in which she wrote and in which her work was received. David Perkins' venerable and widely influential two-volume *A History of Modern Poetry* (1976 and 1987), published by Harvard University Press, can be taken as a

representative traditional late twentieth-century narrative of poetic literary history from the 1890s to the 1970s. Perkins provides a "broader scale of treatment" to the entire field of twentieth-century poetry, focusing on the underlying politics and detailed historical contexts to construct a concise narrative of poetic developments (1: vii). He devotes many chapters to the emerging modes of poetry, comparing and contrasting the different styles and subject matters that make up the modernist movement. While Perkins' work might strike some scholars today as outdated, *A History of Modern Poetry* is a useful source for understanding Millay's place in literary history precisely because Perkins so effectively voices the mainstream academic opinions of his time, and his work influenced many subsequent scholars who continue to map out this poetic terrain.

The flaws in Perkins' narrative of modern poetry are as much the flaws of his time as the flaws of the scholar, and they lay bare some of the forces that account for Millay's current position in the canon. For instance, Perkins fails to account for the rise of gender tensions within the era, and is relatively silent about modernism's highly misogynistic tendencies. His rather shallow critiques of Edna St. Vincent Millay in the first volume should thus be taken cautiously. Perkins condescendingly addresses her as "Miss Millay" and claims that her poems give expression to a "provincially, self-taught, boldly naive American style" (373). Referring to her as "saucy," he goes on to say—rather saucily himself—that "it is as though the young poet, reading anthologies, had compounded a style out of whatever might be found in them....[Her] philosophic reflection was not her forte....She lost ground because of the gradual acceptance in the late 1920s and 1930s of what I have called the 'high Modernist mode,' that is, because of the spread of critical expectations and criteria of which Eliot was the chief symbol and exponent" (373-74). Perkins incorporates a very narrow selection of

Millay's works to argue his point. He chooses short excerpts from a few of her more famous poems, such as "First Fig" and "Renascence," to clearly mock what he terms as Millay's "rhetorical fine feathers" (373). Despite the mere five paragraphs he leaves open for "Miss Millay," Perkins still manages to find room to mention her affair with Arthur Davison Ficke (367). Furthermore, he describes the gossip about her as often "sensational," claiming "She had, one heard, a succession of lovers..." (374). My intention is not to undermine Perkins's credibility, (though he certainly did just that to Millay). Instead, I hope to show how a major modernist literary history helped to express and perpetuate a twentieth-century narrative that shaped and continues to shape the canon, as expressed both in anthologies and syllabi. In order to correct common errors in our narratives of twentieth-century poetry, it is necessary to rethink whether or not Perkins' contribution is entirely accurate. Academics must ask themselves if his judgment is fair, and reconsider his opening claim in which he crowns Yeats, Frost, Stevens, Pound, Williams, and Eliot as "the major figures of the whole modern period and the fathers or grandfathers of most present-day writers" (Perkins 3). The sexism of Perkins' treatment to Millay suggests that his poetic lineage may be just as sexist; it positions Millay within a phallogentric narrative that is preoccupied with her "sensational" (Perkins 374) reputation rather than her poetry.

I acknowledge that some might argue that there has been substantial progress made in regards to reevaluating the modernist era. In *No Man's Land, The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century (1988-1994)*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar offer an alternative narrative of twentieth-century poetry, and address the previously neglected role of gender in modern literary history. This trilogy reveals how a large portion of modernist literature was misogynistic, and provides a counter-perspective for the politics and other underlying issues

that shaped modernism. Gilbert and Gubar adopt a view that claims "first, there is a distinction between the projects of male and female modernists, and, second, the feminine should not be conflated with the so-called avant-garde since the rhetoric of innovation—for instance, Ezra Pound's 'Make it new'—may...camouflage regressive or nostalgic sexual ideologies even while it inscribes a rebellion against what Walter Jackson Bate has called the 'burden of the past'" (3.xiv). Gilbert and Gubar reevaluate an artistic movement that was in many ways revolutionary, and yet could be oddly oppressive. Innovators like Pound called for a poetical "liberation" which ironically restricted many writers, especially women writers, through instructional, "how-to-write-poetry" or "how-one-should-write-poetry" manifestos (Gilbert and Gubar 3.xiv). In the chapter "Female Female Impersonators: The Fictive Music of Edna St. Vincent Millay and Marianne Moore" (Vol. 3), Gilbert and Gubar focus on modernist misogyny. They relate multiple misogynistic comments made towards Millay, such as Eliot's remark to Pound that "there are only half a dozen men of letters (and no women) worth printing" (67). Drawing from the work of feminist theorists Joan Riviere and Simone de Beauvoir, who saw femininity as a function of masquerade, costume and make-up, Gilbert and Gubar argue that Millay adopts the role of female female impersonation, in which she employs the techniques of the female masquerade in order to simultaneously comply "with male demands for stereotypical femininity even while she rebels against them" (73). Gilbert and Gubar's reading of Millay helped shift her position in literary history, as it exemplifies how the modernist movement, while considered culturally prestigious by contemporary scholars of American literature, excluded many female writers from entering into the often times misogynistic modernist discourses. But while I agree with Gubar and Gilbert's conclusion that Millay adopts the role of female female impersonation, I do not

believe that they give adequate analysis of the actual works of Millay. Rather, their argument is driven by secondary sources. For instance, considering the hundreds of poems published by Millay, Gilbert and Gubar weaken their own credibility by only interpreting a few of her most famous poems. While Gilbert and Gubar certainly illuminate the misogynistic context in which Millay wrote, they narrow their research within that context and falsely assume that Millay's techniques of "self-fictionalizing" were primarily feministic in nature (92). Towards the closing of their analysis, Gilbert and Gubar suggest that Millay's "preoccupation with her mechanical dress form" led to her doom, in which Millay was never able to "come of age" (92). They quite abruptly shrug Millay off much like Perkins does, by portraying her as ultimately non-progressive. Is it possible that Gilbert and Gubar's—albeit subtle—but unflattering assertion of Millay's failure to poetically mature stems from their cramped application of theory? It is undeniable that the surge of feminist critiques, which first gained momentum in the seventies, of twentieth-century female authors completely revamped the face of American poetry, and it would be an injustice to belittle such monumental feminist scholarship. However, I argue that by focusing too much on gender politics, critics like Gilbert and Gubar risk overlooking other possible interpretations. While Millay clearly does sometimes practice gender theatricality, I fear that *No Man's Land*—while a corrective to the masculine narrative of modern poetry promulgated by Perkins—sets up a too narrow framework of possible interpretations for Millay's poetic meanings.

A Scholarly Context: Anthologies and Canon Formation

The narrative of literary history that we've inherited from the past fifty years—a narrative that does a disservice to Millay—continues to shape scholarly discourse, popular anthologies,

and the choices instructors make when designing their syllabi. Cheryl Walker suggests that “anthologies have not yet caught up with what has happened to Millay scholarship in the last five years” (186). *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* (2003) exemplifies the tendency among current poetry anthologies to undervalue Millay's poetic skills. For instance, the introductory notes to *The Norton Anthology* selection address limited critical interest by incorporating her most famous anti-love poems, primarily showing how Millay revitalizes the traditional English lyric to resist masculine restraint. Despite hundreds of published Millay poems, *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* and *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* represent a trend of common selection that misrepresents the broad scope of Millay's thematic interests. Both anthologies limit Millay's subjects of interest to her traditional forms of the love sonnet in order to contrast her seemingly conventional rhetoric with her often rebellious subject matter. "I, Being a Woman and Distressed" (1923) is a typical sonnet chosen for inclusion, as it exemplifies how Millay uses a traditional sonnet to de-sentimentalize a woman's love. In the first octave, the female speaker flatters her significant other by discussing his ability to leave her "undone" and "possessed" (line 8). Yet the tone shifts dramatically in the following sestet, in which the speaker warns her lover about her treasonous blood, and commands him to "Think not for this, however.../ I shall remember you with love" (9-11) before concluding in the final couplet that their shared sexual intimacy is nothing but a "frenzy," and an "insufficient" reason for starting a conversation should they meet again (13-14). This sonnet reinforces Gilbert and Gubar's claim that Millay performs gender; the speaker coyly evokes a feminine aura to attract her significant other by succumbing to male power, but eventually subverts this femininity into masculine dominance in order to resist gender constraints. And while this

sonnet is by no means poorly written, it unfortunately reflects Perkins' previous denouncement of Millay as a naive poet, who never achieved philosophical depth due to a preoccupation with her "succession of lovers" (Perkins 374).

A comparison of contemporary popular anthologies' selections of Millay's poems shows that she is usually either neglected or portrayed narrowly as a feminist writer. It is fair to say that this is not always the case. For instance, Cary Nelson's *Anthology of Modern American Poetry* (2000) includes political poems by Millay—such as “Justice Denied in Massachusetts” (1927), “Say that We Saw Spain Die” (1938) and “I Forgot for a Moment” (1940)—but Nelson also includes “Love is not all: it is not meat or drink” (1931) and “Oh, oh, you will be sorry for that word!” (1923). Helen Vendler's *Poems, Poets, Poetry* fails to even address Millay. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* does a better job in choosing lesser known poems, but the poems “Spring” and “Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink” still manage to be picked over others that arguably better display Millay's abilities (Bryer et al. 1803-07). Despite the hundreds of poems editors can choose from, they continue to pick somewhat shallow pieces of work, such as "First Fig." By misrepresenting the vast array of deep poetic themes within her collections, poetry anthologies perpetuate a narrow field of Millay scholarship. Within the last decade or so, the majority of critics have either purposefully or unintentionally built their analyses upon inaccurate literacy narratives and misrepresentative canons. Some critics follow the trend set by Perkins, and ignore her as a major figure during the modernist era. Peter Childs fails to mention her in his critical survey, *The Twentieth Century in Poetry* (1999), as does Peter Howarth in *The Cambridge Introduction to Modernist Poetry* (2012).

In *Cultural Capital*, John Guillory explains that it is only by understanding the social function and institutional protocols of the school that we will understand how works are preserved, reproduced, and disseminated throughout generations. Understanding the construction of literary anthologies is vital to understanding the past and present reception of Millay's poetry. Of course, I recognize the impossibility of the production of a completely accurate narrative of literary history. Determining what does and does not convey a particular genre or era, and what will and will not be included in a canon, is an arduous task which will inevitably be flawed and neglect important contributors and contributions. But calling for action and insisting on the creation of a more diverse portrayal of twentieth-century poetry within academia is my duty as both a pupil and an instructor of English studies. Paul Lauter explains in his 1991 *Canons and Contexts* how literacy narratives are skewed by pointing to the institutional aspects within our country's universities, claiming that academic managers and outside politicians dominate our institutional schools. This academic hierarchy reinforces a literary criticism not derived from inherent value, but from institutional status and power (Lauter 14). Furthermore, he explains that "our work has wandered far from a concern with literacy and values.... Advancement in our profession has increasingly depended on commitment to and performance in formalist rhetoric.... [We privilege] texts that give criticism scope and usefulness, [and privilege] ... individuals most deft in working the lingo" (Lauter 15). His claims suggests how Millay scholarship might have evolved into a narrow scope of feminist insight, since texts are now favored when particular theoretical approaches can be applied; moreover, it shows that certain moral values within her poetry do not matter within canon formation, possibly illuminating why there has been noticeable neglect of her often virtuous works.

Literary Criticism

The majority of the past decade's Millay scholarship has been contributed by feminist theorists. These theorists tend to follow the trend of Gilbert and Gubar. Placing Millay in this feminist theoretical context is to be expected as she was long ago deemed an exemplar of the progressive "Bohemian Woman" (Miller 17). Due to the wide reception of Gubar's and Gilbert's work, and their major contribution to feminist theory, an influx of recent Millay scholars have built upon their criticism. And while a feminist approach does open up new avenues for exploring Millay's poems, it has become the dominant position for critique, leaving alternative approaches unexplored. For instance, in *Poetics of the Body*, Catherine Cucinella dedicates a chapter to analyses of Millay's work entitled "Textual and Corporeal Convergence: Edna St. Vincent Millay," which ultimately reinforces Millay's so-called feminist masquerading techniques, and once again produces a limited conversation within Millay discourse (Cucinella 27-54). Catherine Keyser expands Gilbert and Gubar's argument by placing Millay's female impersonation within the context of her career as a *Vanity Fair* columnist, illuminating how her impersonation sometimes worked against Millay, as her stereo-typical femininity often distracted male readers from the magazine's goal to perpetuate male eroticism. While these theorists are correct in pointing to a type of fictionalization inherent within Millay's poetry, this facade is not primarily gendered. Rather, I plan to show how Millay utilizes poetic techniques to construct imaginary worlds as a means to comment on realistic themes and envision better worlds. Thus, the sense of impersonation that Millay critics discuss has been primarily conceived as feminine; however,

I plan to show that while Millay was deeply influenced by feminism, her imaginary realms and various personas also move beyond issues of gender.

If the majority of current scholarship is dominated by a spirit of feminism, there is another, less noticeable trend driven by a spirit of recovery. These critics work to resurrect Millay studies, though their contributions often unintentionally reinforce a weak reception of her works. For instance, *Millay at 100: A Critical Reappraisal*, is a collection of essays that by praising her exclusively as a springboard for feminist discourse fails to award Millay the justice she deserves. The editor, Diane Freedman, explains that *Millay at 100: A Critical Reappraisal* is a volume of critical theory in which each essay aims to demonstrate how Millay challenged the male romantic tradition of a love object's nature. A more recent collection of Millay's poetry entitled *Edna St. Vincent Millay: Selected Poems*, received rather poor reviews, not because of the chosen collection of poems but because of the editor's notes. For instance, reviewer W. Martin explains that Colin Falck's introductory essay:

does not succeed in doing Millay any favors.... Throughout the essay Falck concerns himself with Millay's reception by contemporary readers and writers of poetry. His argument in general is well-founded.... However, he presents his defense so inconsistently and in such an obnoxious, zealous manner, that I eventually become distrustful of him and suspicious of what he himself has in mind as her 'proper place.'

(211)

J.D. McClatchy's article "Feeding on Havoc: The Poetics of Edna St. Vincent Millay" also proves that Millay is not totally forgotten; but he, too, fails to read her works on a more penetrating level, and instead painfully tries "sticking up for her" by claiming that drug addiction was the ultimate reason for her eventual decline in popularity. Indeed, Millay-

lovers seem to perpetuate a source of jeering for Millay-bashers, and it is precisely this type of special pleading for Millay that I aim to avoid. Rather than attempting to argue that she is actually a good poet, it will be in my better interests to show my readers how Millay exhibits a talent thus far unnoticed.

The Poetic Worlds of Edna St. Vincent Millay

Like many of her unconventional contemporaries, Millay contributes her own school of thought to poetry. Many modernists, like Eliot and Pound, are commended for inspiring new expectations for writing poetry. For instance, Pound's famous series of essays entitled "A Retrospect" functions as a list of the do's and don'ts for writing poetry, and in his "Prologue" to *Kora in Hell* William Carlos Williams writes that "Nothing is good save the new" (25). Millay, on the other hand, often wrote in traditional poetic forms, such as the sonnet, which is why she is still stigmatized as being too conventional. Millay never did publish dictatorial manifestos about what makes poetry good, nor did she found specific sub-movements such as imagism or vorticism; however, this does not mean that her works had no effect on her contemporaries or the evolution of poetry. A closer focus on her less anthologized poems helps to reveal a common thread within many of her poems that clarifies her motivations as a writer. She was not writing for her reputation, nor was she primarily performing femininity. Millay adopts a range of speaking roles—not only gendered roles—but different identities that can be broken down into specific personae. Each new identity allows her to project a different view of the world, and she adopts various roles to build a series of sub-worlds in which her poems create opportunities to either interrogate or escape reality or discover

meaning that is otherwise shrouded by received reality. Thus, for Millay, the act of writing poetry is often correlated with the ability to envision imaginary worlds.²

The following three chapters will articulate different themes Millay tackles and will show how Millay sets up different natural worlds, apocalyptic worlds, and worlds of the afterlife. At times, I will turn to critical anthologies to juxtapose Millay's works with her contemporaries in order to prove that her poetic skills are overlooked. Furthermore, each theme will allow for a different theoretical approach, exemplifying the multiple layers of meaning that will no longer be limited to issues of gender. This broader field of theoretical critiques will make room for new possibilities of reception, providing a better chance for academia to gain a fuller understanding about how Millay's works lend themselves to a broad array of theoretical approaches.

Millay was an artist who painted a different portrait of poetry. She did not comply with the rules of the fathers or grandfathers of our present-day poets, and she paid a price for this. But she was a poetical pioneer, and she used writing as a vehicle to materialize worlds better than our own.

² This is similar to Wallace Stevens' notion that our perceptions of reality are actually a product of the imagination. For instance, in his essay "Imagination as Value," he claims that "The truth seems to be that we live in concepts of the imagination before the reason has established them. If this is true, then reason is simply the methodizer of imagination. It may be that the imagination is a miracle of logic and that its exquisite divinations are calculations beyond analysis, as the conclusions of the reason are calculations wholly within analysis" (154).

Chapter Two: Nature

A young Edna St. Vincent Millay once called herself an “Earth-ecstatic” (Felstiner 45). She grew up in Camden, Maine, and described herself as “a girl who had lived all her life at the very tide-line of the sea” (Milford 3). Although she moved to New York City in 1917 and later bought a farmhouse which she called Steepletop near Austerlitz, New York (where she lived the rest of her life) Millay maintained a longing to be near the sea. Her poem “Exiled,” which first appeared in *Second April* (1921), captures Millay’s insatiable desire to be near the water:

Searching my heart for its true sorrow
This is the thing I find to be:
That I am weary of words and people,
Sick of the city, wanting the sea;

Wanting the sticky, salty sweetness 5
Of the strong wind and shattered spray;
Wanting the loud sound and the soft sound
Of the big surf that breaks all day.

Always before about my dooryard,
Marking the reach of the winter sea, 10
Rooted in sand and dragging driftwood,
Straggled the purple wild sweet-pea;

Always I climbed the wave at morning,
Shook the sand from my shoes at night,
That now am caught beneath great buildings, 15
Stricken with noise, confused with light.

If I could hear the green piles groaning
Under the windy wooden piers,
See once again the bobbing barrels,
And the black sticks that fence the weirs, 20

If I could see the weedy mussels
Crusting the wrecked and rotting hulls,
Hear once again the hungry crying

Overhead, of the wheeling gulls,

Feel once again the shanty straining 25
 Under the turning of the tide,
 Fear once again the rising freshet,
 Dread the bell in the fog outside,

I should be happy!—that was happy 30
 All day long on the coast of Maine;
 I have a need to hold and handle
 Shells and anchors and ships again!

I should be happy...that am happy
 Never at all since I came here.
 I am too long away from water. 35
 I have a need of water near. (1-35)

A nostalgic desire lies at root in most of Millay's "sea poems." There is certainly a tone of bitter sweetness; after all, the speaker implies that she has been "exiled" from what she craves the most. Her ideal vision of nature is inextricable from a yearning for the past which can never be satiated. The ocean serves as a rich and complex symbol representing her youth, and becomes for Millay a type of nurturing womb that shelters her from people.

The rhythm of "Exiled" evokes a type of falling sensation as the reader falls back to a time of youth: "Always I climbed the wave at morning..." (13). Most lines begin with dactyls, such as "Searching my heart" (1) and "This is the thing" (2), creating a meter that mimics the sounds of waves. Classical Greek poetry was often written in dactyls, and Homer's vision of a supernatural sea is similar to Millay's, who describes the wind, surf, tide, mussels, and seagulls as animistic forces (6-26). Furthermore, the indentation of each odd-numbered line reminds the reader of the rise and fall of the ocean tides. Trochees, such as "words and people" (3) and "sticky, salty sweetness" (5) and iambs, such as "I find to be" (2) and "that breaks all day" (7) allude to both the harsh and calming rhythms of the sea.

However, in “Exiled,” the sea is not completely void of human touch. Images like “windy wooden piers” (18), “bobbing barrels” (19), “wrecked and rotting hulls” (22), “shanty straining” and “the bell in the fog” (28) contrast with images like “sticky, salty sweetness/ Of the strong wind and shattered spray” (5-6), the “loud sound and the soft sound/ Of the big surf that breaks all day” (7-8), “rooted in sand” (11), “the wild sweet-pea” (12), “the wheeling gulls” (24), “the turning of the tide” (26), and “the rising freshet” (27). The latter images of untouched nature are powerful, energetic, and dominant, while the images tainted by human touch are described as weak, impotent, and decaying. The contrasts resemble those found in W.B. Yeats’s poem “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” (1890), in which “the roadway” and the “pavements grey” (13) are in opposition to Innisfree’s landscape:

I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee;
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping
slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket
sings;
There midnight’s all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet’s wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart’s core. (1-14)

Yeats seems to imply that to be a part of nature, one must seek out a landscape void of human touch. Although the speakers in both poems desire to leave civilization, the speaker in “Lake Innisfree” desires to make a new home, while the speaker in “Exiled” wishes to return to her childhood home. Yeats portrays nature as sweet and carefree: “a hive for the honey-bee” (3), “the cricket sings” (7) “midnight’s all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow” (9), but

Millay's visions of nature are fierce, even violent. Furthermore, the images of "rotting" or otherwise ephemeral humanity in "Exiled" suggest that humans are incapable of taming the natural world, while Yeats seems to imply that they are: "And a small cabin build there.../Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for a honey-bee" (2-3). Since she seems to believe that humanity will inevitably succumb to forces of nature, Millay wishes to reclaim her old landscape rather than trying to claim new landscapes. She has a desire to regress back to humanity's origin: the sea. Millay has been exiled from the womb of the world, modernization has pushed her onto an urban land that she wants nothing to do with.

Like many poets since the dawn of the industrial revolution, Millay was torn between the advancement of civilization and the pull of a more natural environment. For millennia poets have been exploring our relationship with nature. Vanessa Sage explains that "Nature, represented as a space of hope and critique—where one can either mourn its loss, celebrate its wonder, or work for a better kind of humanity—is found throughout history in the tradition of the pastoral poetry, the Enlightenment, the Romantic period, and also during the period between the two world wars, where nature, via paganism, is seen to offer some liberatory relief to the cold hard modern realities of war" (43). Millay, however, constructed worlds of nature that stretched further back in time; her aquatic worlds recall a prehistoric era. In this chapter, I suggest that Millay's views about nature were quite radical, and I will explain why her views have been disregarded, pointing primarily to both her contemporary and present day audiences' common inclinations to analyze her poetry through a too narrow lens. Because her role as a public figure has been emphasized at the expense of her poetry, a richer interpretation of Millay's poetics has been unable to emerge within critical discourse. I will show that while many critics ironically cast Millay's poetic topics as shallow and

conventional, they fail to acknowledge their own implementation of a focus preoccupied with mainstream superficialities. After suggesting possible reasons as to why Millay's fascination with nature has been overlooked, I argue that her interpretation of nature as a unique environment of primitive space sets her apart from the more traditional Romantics as well as the modernists. An eco-critical approach will thus show how Millay was able to envision a world quite different from reality, in which civilization is regressive and primitiveness is progressive. Her conception of primitiveness, however, differs from both the Romantics and modernist conceptions. This is because rather than romanticizing savage civilizations or alluding to ancient mythologies as a means of bringing order to the chaos of modernity—strategies implemented by modernists like Eliot, Yeats, Picasso, and Stravinsky—Millay's nature poems stretch back about 545 million years ago to one of the very first points on the evolutionary timeline called the Cambrian period:

The Cambrian is famed for its explosion of abundant and diverse life forms. Life had diversified into many forms and many ways of living: animals now swam, crawled, burrowed, hunted, defended themselves and hid away. Some creatures had evolved hard parts such as shells, which readily fossilised and left a clear record behind. However, sometimes geologists get lucky and find beautiful fossils of soft and squishy creatures - as at the Burgess Shale site. In Cambrian times there was no life on land and little or none in freshwater - the sea was still very much the centre of living activity. ("Prehistoric Life" 1)

Millay's nature poems, such as "Low-Tide" (1921), "Inland" (1921), "Exiled" (1921), "Assault" (1921), "Memory of Cape Cod" (1923), "I shall go back again to the bleak shore" (1923), "Night is my sister, and how deep in love" (1931), "Impression: Fog off the Coast of

Dorset” (1939), “Ragged Island” (1954), and “The sea at sunset can reflect” (1954), allude to a prehistoric primitiveness, a time in which humans had not yet evolved. Indeed, many of Millay’s nature themes revolve around the sea, and a closer analysis of these neglected poems will help demonstrate how Millay’s perceptions of nature still remain cutting-edge. Although she acknowledges the inevitability of social evolution, she uses her poetry as a vehicle to transport herself and her readers to an environment that is further back in time. She realized that social progress, in which biological themes of natural selection and survival of the fittest are applied to politics and economics, is dangerous within a corrupt society, and she also believed that even the most primitive and isolated societies are vulnerable towards moral corruption. It can thus be argued that Millay is a pioneer eco-poet who upholds a radically different view about the natural world, because rather than longing for a past before industry, she envisioned a past without people.

Primitiveness in Millay’s Nature Poetry

Although Millay’s poetry is filled with nature imagery, scholars do not typically associate Millay with nature. While some, like Holly Peppe, are quick to comment about her childhood environment, suggesting that some of her poems “contain straightforward nature images and references to the poet’s own background in Maine” (52), they seldom discuss her views on nature beyond that. John Felstiner briefly explores Millay’s nature themes in his rather short *American Poetry Review* column, as does Nina Miller in her essay *Millay’s Poetry in a Greenwich Village Context*, but any other criticism devoted specifically to the analysis of nature in Millay’s poetics is either scarce or nonexistent.

However, some critics—when they are not distracted by Millay’s non-traditional gender roles or unromantic notions, in which the argument is made that despite her use of the traditional verse, such as the sonnet, she can (at least partly) be seen as unconventional due to her adoption of rather unsentimental themes— seem to at least subtly pick up on the heavily-charged nature themes within much of her poetic works. The title of Nancy Milford’s biography, *Savage Beauty*, possibly epitomizes why Millay’s nature themes are detected but rarely explored. Milford opens her biography by featuring Millay’s poem “Assault” (1921):

I had forgotten how the frogs must sound
After a year of silence, else I think
I should not so have ventured forth alone
At dusk upon this unfrequented road.

I am waylaid by Beauty. Who will walk
Between me and the crying of the frogs?
Oh, savage Beauty, suffer me to pass,
That am a timid woman, on her way
From one house to another! (1-9)

While the speaker of Millay’s poem “Assault” addresses an ambivalent “savage Beauty,” Milford’s title suggests that Millay herself is the “savage Beauty.” This unclear description of Millay reflects a similarly unclear overall perception of her poetry. By pairing “savage” with “Beauty,” a word that is often associated with the ideal, it becomes possible to romanticize the socially unacceptable “savage.” Millay’s interrogation of social standards and concepts of what it means to be civilized is romanticized, in turn, and she ironically becomes objectified like the female subjects of the traditional male poets she was condemning. We turn to look at her only because she is a female to be observed, and when she becomes more like an actual savage than a true beauty, we turn away. Thus, the label also raises the issues of her public reception. The juxtaposed descriptions problematize the value of her works, as

well, exemplifying the split between critics who either believe her verse to be natural and free from conformity or unnaturally forced and tainted by the constraints of civilization. The problem seems to arise from an eschewed perspective: because she is female we direct our gaze onto her rather than onto where she is directing her gaze.

In "Assault," the "savage Beauty" of nature overwhelms the speaker to the point where she seems agoraphobic, and demonstrates the impact Romantic notions had on Millay, in which she portrays nature as supernatural and animistic. But although nature takes on a sublime aspect by making the speaker feel insignificant, Millay breaks away from the Romantic tradition because the speaker is a slave to civilization and is thus incapable of harmonizing with the natural environment. Much like the speaker in "Exiled," who is "caught beneath great buildings,/ Stricken with noise, confused with light," she has "forgotten how the frogs must sound" because industrialization has walled her in from her outside environment (1). The speaker senses the freeing power of primitiveness, but she misinterprets this power as danger because she is too accustomed to the controlling elements of civilization. She is "waylaid by" a personified "Beauty" within an enchanting environment. The "savage Beauty" of a more primitive state contrasts greatly with the houses that the speaker is more accustomed to, frightening the speaker. Yet, the woman senses that her anxiety stems not from the elements of nature, such as the "crying of the frogs," but from her compliance with civilization's demands as she hurriedly travels from one house to another. The speaker recognizes the absurdity of her fear, and senses that society has tamed her the same way it has tamed natural landscapes. For instance, her complacency within her unnatural social environment exemplifies why she would refer to herself only as "a timid woman," but this self-depreciation also takes on a sarcastic tone which further suggests a

longing for a more natural state. The frogs allude to the Brother Grimms' fairy-tale "The Frog Prince," in which a frog befriends a girl when she drops her ball in his pond. In this original version, the frog transforms into a prince because the girl breaks the spell not by kissing him, but by throwing him at the wall in disgust. In "Assault," the crying of the frogs reminds the speaker of the pressures of living within a normative society and of the expectations for her to find her own prince to marry. Once again, a sense of sarcasm emerges when she asks "Who will walk/ Between me and the crying of the frogs?" (5-6). The question demonstrates how the speaker mocks her advanced civilization by insinuating that she really doesn't need protection from these frogs because, unlike the Frog Prince, these blubbering reptiles are non-threatening. On the surface, the poem's title suggests that the speaker is assaulted by nature's savageness, but the speaker explains that she is "waylaid," or attacked, by humanity's social construction of "Beauty," thus associating society's construction of idealized Beauty with evil. In a sense, the title "Assault" implies that humans have warped nature into something offensive, while humans are ironically the actual perverted assaulters. It is not the beauty of nature that threatens to rape the speaker; rather, it is society's construction of "savage Beauty" that allows man to rape nature.

Romantic Views

Millay was intrigued by the savageness of untamed nature, and struggled within an industrially, scientifically, and technologically advancing society that tried to control it. Like the Romantics of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, she understood that man's use of logic and reason did not necessarily lead to human advancement. Her poetry often echoes the philosophies of Romanticism, which began as a counter-movement to the eighteenth-century Age of Reason, and valued fundamental themes such as imagination, emotion,

infiniteness, nature, and enchantment while opposing themes like rationality, objectivity, positivism and industry (Sage 29). Sage explains that “Nature, for the Romantics, was best understood as being either sublime or beautiful. Beauty in nature is found in picturesque pastoral settings, and the sublime in vast, powerful landscapes where one could not help feeling insignificant” (37). Millay’s admiration for Romantic poets like William Blake and John Keats undoubtedly impacted her views about nature. Indeed, the title *Savage Beauty* alludes to the Romantic notion of the “noble savage” popularized by the eighteenth-century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. James D. Delany explains that “Rousseau argues that the progression of the sciences and arts has caused the corruption of virtue and morality” (1). Delany goes on to explain that

Rousseau’s praise of humans in the state of nature is perhaps one of the most misunderstood ideas in his philosophy. Although the human being is naturally good and the “noble savage” is free from the vices that plague humans in civil society, Rousseau is not simply saying that humans in nature are good and humans in civil society are bad. Furthermore, he is not advocating a return to the state of nature, though some commentators, even his contemporaries such as Voltaire, have attributed such a view to him. Human beings in the state of nature are amoral creatures, neither virtuous nor vicious. After humans leave the state of nature, they can enjoy a higher form of goodness, moral goodness, which Rousseau articulates most explicitly in the *Social Contract*... Rousseau is very clear that a return to the state of nature once human beings have become civilized is not possible. Therefore, we should not seek to be noble savages in the literal sense, with no language, no social ties, and an underdeveloped faculty of reason. Rather, Rousseau says, someone who has been

properly educated will be engaged in society, but relate to his or her fellow citizens in a natural way. (1)

Though Millay seems to desire a return to the state of nature but realizes its impossibility, she does not seem to believe, as we will soon see, that humans can “enjoy a higher form of goodness” (Delany 1). Rousseau’s philosophy about the natural state reflects Romantic notions about man’s relationship to nature, which centers on harmonizing with nature, and which is often marked with melancholy feelings about losing a rural lifestyle due to industrialization.

In “Exiled” and “Assault” we see how Millay certainly believes that nature can have a powerful effect on human spirituality as well as her acknowledgement that her more natural tendencies are threatened by a society that inevitably becomes more and more unnatural. For instance, in both poems the speaker struggles to make sense of her environment that has been perverted by mankind; she is “...caught beneath great buildings,/ Stricken with noise, confused with light” (“Exiled” 14-15) and “...should not have so ventured forth alone” (“Assault” 3) into the environment. However, she breaks away from the Romantic tradition because she does not romanticize primitiveness but rather understands that humans are not naturally moral: she is “weary of words and people” and “sick of the city” (“Exiled” 3-4). Like Rousseau Millay believes that it is impossible to return to a state of nature that is amoral. However, unlike Rousseau she does not romanticize primitive societies because they, too, exhibit signs of human corruption, nor does she believe that society is capable of reaching a moral goodness. For instance, in “Exiled” we saw how the speaker suggests that humanity is decaying, and in “Assault” the speaker is also highly skeptical of humanity’s agenda due to the conditioning of society to believe in perverse ideas about nature. Although

Millay, like many Romantics, writes about her special memories of natural landscapes, she cannot find transcendence through nature because forces of society perverted the natural world into something very unnatural. William Wordsworth, for instance, emphasizes the importance of remembering nature as a means of spiritual fulfillment. For instance, in “I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud,” the speaker sees “golden daffodils” “Fluttering and dancing in the breeze” (4-6). He goes on to explain the transcendent quality of this image:

For oft, when on my couch I lie,
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude;
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils. (19-24)

Here, Wordsworth connects the primitive qualities of nature to the civilized qualities of man, with the couch especially pointing to the entrance of civilization.

Millay, however, notices something universally evil about humankind, and thus turns to the sea to be among her most ancient ancestors. The sonnet “Night is my sister, and how deep in love,” which first appeared in *Fatal Interview* (1931), reflects this type of longing to regress back to our most basic of origins. The animistic features of nature reflect Romantic traditions, but the speaker’s loss of faith in “man” establishes a much less optimistic future for society that the Romantics commonly foresaw:

Night is my sister, and how deep in love,
How drowned in love and weedily washed ashore,
There to be fretted by the drag and shove
At the tide’s edge, I lie—these things and more:
Whose arm alone between me and the sand,
Whose voice alone, whose pitiful breath brought near,
Could thaw these nostrils and unlock this hand,
She could advise you, should you care to hear.
Small chance, however, in a storm so black,
A man will leave his friendly fire and snug
For a drowned woman’s sake, and bring her back

To drip and scatter shells upon the rug.
No one but Night, with tears on her dark face,
Watches beside me in this windy place. (1-14)

The speaker implies that “a storm so black” shoved her onto land while she was being “drowned by love,” implying that she identifies more so with the sea. In lines 3-4, the speaker explains that the “drag and shove” of the tide consumes her: she is magnetically drawn towards the sea while simultaneously being forced to evolve into a land animal. We can almost picture her as a type of mermaid, covered with weeds and shells. The shells could also allude to a type of evolutionary process, in which the speaker must come out of her protective shell, making herself vulnerable towards a civilization that neglects her most basic needs of life. The personification of Night as her sister further emphasizes the speaker’s relationship with the sea. The moon’s gravitational pull, which influences the ocean’s tides, awakens within the speaker a nostalgic desire to go back to where she came from, and to be reunited with her original family. Night watches the speaker, sprawled out on the sand, and has seen the sands of time run through the hourglass. But the civilized man has lost touch with nature, the moon’s gravitational pull does not affect him because he stays inside, warming himself by a “friendly” and “snug” fire. The fire alludes to man’s progress, though a loss of companionship is the price for progression. Unlike Wordsworth’s couch, man’s materialistic “rug” takes on a negative connotation. Man’s arm cannot reach the speaker, because she is lost within the sands of time, and he is stuck in an age of modernity and is unwilling to be bothered with the messiness of the past. Millay, unlike Wordsworth, portrays a speaker who is haunted by her past because she can never return to it. She does not find transcendence through memories about nature because memories do not fulfill her desire to return to a natural state. In fact, she desires this so much that she becomes regressive and is

incapable of moving from “the tide’s edge.” Furthermore, unlike the Romantics she is unable to find companionship with modern humanity, and is completely isolated and void of feelings of bliss.

Modernist Views

There was a divorce between nature and art during the modernist era. The late Victorian avant-garde poets of the 1890s—figures like Yeats, Dowson, and Symons—rejected the Victorian tradition, and “adopted premises and methods which later characterized the modernist poets” (Perkins 30). Perkins argues that “the joint effects of cultural disappointment and the need for novelty...killed the Victorian consensus of ideals” which “assumed the rational character of the human mind and its capability not only to find truth but also to govern emotion and behavior” (30-31). He goes on to explain that:

Art was emphatically not what it was in the Romantic tradition, a cooperation with nature that completes it, an activity grounded in and witnessing to “a bond,” says Coleridge, “between nature in the higher sense and the soul of man.” Nature could not be the object of art; though by nature the Romantics had not merely meant countryside, the art-for-art writers tended to dwell on distinctively man-made—the life of the city; the ceremonies and coiffures, so to speak, of civilized fashion; and art itself: paintings, Chinese jars, cameos, the Javanese dance, the carved lapis lazuli, and the bird of hammered gold. Nature could not suggest a process of composition, for organic form and emotional spontaneity were distrusted and abjured. Above all, nature could supply no criterion of the beautiful, and art was the opposite of nature—formal, conventional, traditional, artificial, and studied. (35-36)

Furthermore, historical events such as the Industrial Revolution and the First World War led the modernists to expose the harsher realities of life. But although modernist poets felt obliged to show the forces of modernity, they often looked towards the past to do so. Jahan Ramazani, Richard Ellmann, and Robert O'Clair explain that:

At the same time that modern life was shedding old traditions and customs, the great expanse of cultural and literary history was becoming more accessible...than ever before. To “make it new” is thus necessarily in part to recycle, refurbish, and recontextualize the old...Modern poetry...looks toward the newness of “just now” and toward the “backward and abyss of time.” It registers the impact of change on the imagination, while answering to the traditions of poetry as an ancient art form. Poems of the greatest allusiveness and synchronicity...are steeped in literary tradition, but they reassemble and amalgamate past myths and vocabularies, figures and forms, in ways that are decidedly anti-traditional. (xlii)

The verse of modernist poets often exhibit “a drama of mental images, a drama made out of the different and conflicting gradations of reality and unreality that mental images seem to possess” (Ellman et al. xliiv). This can be seen through modernists’ use of mythological allusions juxtaposed with images of modern society. Mythology, in many ways, was a means to bring order to the chaos of modernity. Eliot was especially fond of conveying meaning through a mythological dimension. For instance, “In Eliot’s poetry, the imagination conjures broken images of a fragmented world, but strives to reconstruct the symbols needed for survival, symbols that for him are not only imaginative but spiritual...In an age characterized by fragmentation, Eliot searches for a symbolic landscape of wholeness and radiance” (Ellman et. al xliiv). A major source that helped Eliot imagine this “landscape of wholeness

and radiance” was *The Golden Bough*, an anthropological work by Sir James Frazer, who “sought to demonstrate that apparently different myths may be traced back to the same underlying one” (Perkins 506). Eliot briefly references this work in his essay “Ulysses, Order, and Myth” (1923), in which he claims that:

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce [in *Ulysses*] is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. They will not be imitators, any more than the scientist who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats, and of the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to have been the first contemporary to be conscious. It is a method for which the horoscope is auspicious. Psychology (such as it is, and whether our reaction to it be comic or serious), ethnology, and *The Golden Bough* have concurred to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago. Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art, toward...order and form....And only those who have won their own discipline in secret and without aid, in a world which offers very little assistance to that end, can be of any use in furthering this advance. (177-78)

By “manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity,” Eliot and other modernist poets seem to imply that society is not degenerating, but has been and always will be, in Eliot’s terms, futile and anarchic (Eliot 177).

While Eliot and other modernist poets looked back towards ancient mythologies to juxtapose the landscapes of the Golden Age and the modern age, Millay did not parallel “antiquity and contemporaneity,” because to her, the mythical method was yet one more example of human’s incapability of establishing order and form. Indeed, it can even be argued that her “sea poems,” in some ways, are a response to Eliot’s own incorporation of sea imagery in his poems like “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” and *The Wasteland*. In 1949, Millay composed a letter to Cass Canfield in which she discusses a new book of poems she was working on, claiming that “In this collection of poems, of which I think there will be about twenty....there is.....nothing so silly as the childish horsing around of Eliot, when he is trying to be funny. He has no sense of humor....There is, I think, in these poems of mine against Eliot nothing which could be considered abusive: they are merely murderous” (*Letters* 353). Although it was written years after the publication of the poems I will be analyzing, it is possible that Millay was still responding to Eliot before she wrote this letter. Millay’s sonnet “I shall go back again to the bleak shore” (1923) was published about five years after “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” and in many ways presents how Millay was responding to Eliot:

I shall go back again to the bleak shore
 And build a little shanty on the sand,
 In such a way that the extremest band
 Of brittle seaweed will escape my door
 But by a yard or two; and nevermore
 Shall I return to take you by the hand;
 I shall be gone to what I understand,
 And happier than I ever was before.
 The love that stood a moment in your eyes,
 The words that lay a moment on your tongue,
 Are one with all that in a moment dies,
 A little under-said and over-sung.
 But I shall find the sullen rocks and skies
 Unchanged from what they were when I was young. (1-14)

Here, the speaker does not recall ancient myths as a means to gain understanding. Instead, she longs to go back to a time when she was young and unlearned, and to a place that is untouched by man's progress. Once again, we see a desire to regress: "I shall go back again" (1), "I shall be gone" (7), and "I shall find the sullen rocks and skies/ Unchanged from what they were when I was young" (13-14). Such phrases all demonstrate Millay's eagerness to go back to her most basic of origins. The speaker is most likely disappointed with adulthood because growing (or evolving) can make life more complex. For instance, she wishes to go back to what she understands (7), she wants things "Unchanged from what they were when" she "was young" (14). This is because she has lost faith in humans: "The words that lay a moment on your tongue,/ Are one with all that in a moment dies" (10-11). It seems that the speaker places more faith in "the bleak shore" because she expects humans, and not nature, to be loving, and is let down.

In "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the speaker never is able to sing his love song to a woman because of a communication breakdown. He recalls the mythological mermaids, or sirens, and as he walks along the beach, hears them singing to one another. He claims that:

We have lingered in the chambers of the sea
By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown
Till human voices wake us, and we drown. (129-31)

Interestingly, Millay's speaker wishes to build her dwelling "In such a way that the extremest band/ Of brittle seaweed will escape my door/ But by a yard or two..." (3-5). It is almost as if she is mocking Eliot's ideal of an alluring woman; her vision of nature has not been tainted by man's myth. Perhaps Prufrock is representative of the type of person Millay's speaker is addressing. Like Prufrock, who simultaneously overstates yet confuses his proclamation of

love, and who explains that “In a minute there is time/ For decisions and revisions which a minute will reverse” (46-47), the person Millay’s speaker addresses undergoes a similar reversal of love: “The love that stood a moment in your eyes,/ The words that lay a moment on your tongue,/ Are one with all that in a moment dies” (9-11). Millay does not utilize the “mythic method,” because mythology is also tainted by the tongue of man, and her “landscape of wholeness and radiance” is untouched by such things.

In conclusion, Millay’s vision of “a landscape of wholeness and radiance” imagined a world far different than a romantic version of a primitive society or Greece’s Golden Age. Her hope in humanity was too cynical even for her skeptical contemporaries, and so she looked back at a time when the sea was home to all creatures. Millay’s worlds of aquatic nature are tied to a theme of nostalgic longing, and her “sea poems” recall a prehistoric that are rooted in her desires to regress.

Chapter Three: Apocalyptic Worlds

*High on his naked rock the mountain sheep
Will stand alone against the final sky,
Drinking a wind of danger new and deep,
Staring on Vega with a piercing eye,
And gather up his slender hooves and leap
From crag to crag down Chaos, and so go by.*

- From "Epitaph for the Race of Man" by Edna St. Vincent Millay

Edna St. Vincent Millay, who died on October 19, 1950, was alive to witness the official invention of the Doomsday Clock. NPR journalist Jasmine Garsd explains that, "The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (BAS) was created in 1945 by the scientists who had participated in the Manhattan Project, developing the atomic bomb. They came up with the Doomsday Clock in 1947, after the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, to alert the public to the dangers of nuclear proliferation. Midnight represents a global catastrophe" (1). She explains that the clock, which hangs in the Bulletin's office at the University of Chicago, originally represented an analogy for the threat of global nuclear war; however, since 2007 the scientists also began taking into account climate change and modernization of weapons.

The question remains: will the world end, and if so, when? On January 22, 2015, Garsd reported that "The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists has moved the Doomsday Clock two minutes closer to disaster. It now stands at three minutes before midnight" (1). From Robert Frost's "Some say the world will end in fire, / Some say in ice" ("Fire and Ice," 1920), T. S. Eliot's "This is how the world ends: not with a bang but a whimper" ("The Hollow Men," 1925), and W. B. Yeats's "rough beast" slouching "toward Bethlehem to

be born” (“The Second Coming,” 1919) down to the present, the past century has been haunted by visions of the apocalypse. Lost in a panic, we forget that these sinister warnings have been prophesized for centuries. The Book of Revelations is, after all, a very old book, and as James Longenbach reminds us, the modernist penchant for the apocalyptic grew out of a similar strand of thought in Arnold and Tennyson, with roots still further back in Blake, Shelley, and Wordsworth.

Millay, who witnessed two world wars, counted down the number of days until the end of the world along with millions of other people. On August 27, 1950, Millay wrote to a friend about a Thanksgiving poem that she had promised to deliver to *The Saturday Evening Post*. Frantically trying to meet the deadline, she explained “What, I asked myself, would a few Indian war-whoops mean, and a neighboring little scalping party, — to a nation dreading and awaiting the atom bomb? Fun and games, that’s all; just good, clean fun” (*Letters Millay* 374). In *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, Frank Kermode addresses this apocalyptic issue in a way that illuminates the work of Millay:

The main object [of the apocalyptic] is the critical business of making sense of some of the radical ways of making sense of the world. Apocalypse and the related themes are strikingly long-lived; and that is the first thing to say about them, although the second is that they change...Men of all kinds act, as well as reflect, as if this apparently random collocation of opinion and predictions were true. When it appears that it cannot be so, they act as if it were true in a different sense. Had it been otherwise, Virgil could not have been *altissimo poeta* in a Christian tradition; the Knight Faithful and True could not appear in the opening stanzas of *The Faerie*

Queene. And what is far more puzzling, the City of Apocalypse could not have appeared as a modern Babylon....The apocalyptic types—empire, decadence and renovation, progress and catastrophe—are fed by history and underlie our ways of making sense of the world from where we stand, in the midst. (29)

In this chapter, I will explore how Millay's apocalyptic poetry was a way for her to make sense of the world as well as point out how and why Millay's apocalyptic beliefs changed from a religious nature to a scientific one.

Millay's apocalyptic poems have yet to be thoroughly explored; thus, scholars have yet to discuss the possible locations of what Kermode would call Millay's "middest" (Kermode 29). Kermode argues that humans are distressed by the fact that our lives account for an insignificant portion of the history of the world, and since so much has taken place before us and will take place after us, humans seek a coherent pattern to explain this fact, and invest in the belief that we find ourselves in the middle of a story. By "middest," Kermode refers to the literary pattern in which writers seek to find consonance between the beginning, the middle, and the end. Kermode explains that "Given this freedom, this power to manipulate data, in order to achieve this desired consonance, you can of course arrange for the End to occur at pretty well any desired date" (9). In this chapter, I apply Kermode's theory about apocalyptic types to my own analysis of Millay's apocalyptic visions, keeping in mind that her beliefs about the end of the world change with time and function as a kind of method for her to make sense of her place in the universe. This chapter is divided into two parts. The first part is dedicated to one of her lengthier and earlier apocalyptic poems, "The Blue Flag in the Bog" (1921), in which I interpret it and hypothesize why it has been neglected by scholars. In the second

part, I take a closer look at some poems from Millay's 18-sonnet sequence "Epitaph for the Race of Man" (1934), exploring how Millay's political beliefs triggered a transition to a much more iconoclastic tone. My primary goal is to reposition Millay as an important apocalyptic poet who clearly demonstrates how apocalyptic beliefs, while bizarre and personal, have the potential to impact society beneficially.

What distinguishes her apocalyptic poetry from other modernists' apocalyptic poetry is what I call her "journey of transformation," in which Millay's earlier works tend to take on religious undertones that are reminiscent of Victorian ideology. However, her later poems reposition her as a more radical thinker who held a much more ominous opinion about the world's end. For instance, Yeats's apocalyptic themes were attached to his notion that humanity undergoes "a series of inescapable historical cycles" (Fletcher ii), meaning that civilizations both collapse and reemerge, while Eliot's poems like "The Hollow Men" contain a highly spiritual tone. Millay's later apocalyptic poetry, however, envision the end of the world in strictly scientific terms, and allows no hope for potential regeneration of the destroyed humanity. Her interpretation of the apocalypse thus induces a stronger sense of urgency to avoid final destruction.

"The Blue-Flag in the Bog": A Question of Aesthetics

"The Blue-Flag in the Bog" was first published in Second April (1921). Norman A. Brittin explains that besides "Journey," these "poems were written during 1918-20, the poet's disenchanting New York years" (84). You will remember from chapter two that Millay moved from her hometown of Maine to New York to pursue her writing career, and she often was desperately homesick and discontented with city life. In "The Blue-Flag in the Bog," a narrator struggles to leave a burnt earth and follow God to heaven

because even though earth has been destroyed by fire, it is her familiar home. This reflects the theme of the second April, which “represents a time of saddened, disillusioned maturity, or gradual maturing” (Brittin 84). The narrator continues to question God throughout the poem until she observes a blue-flag flower—which can grow in both bogs and gardens—sprouting out from the charred earth. The flower becomes representative of everything the narrator loves, so she picks it and plants it in heaven. (Appendix A.)

The poem is never collected, and it is often criticized. For instance, Winfield Townley Scott claims that “The disproportionate overloading of emotion was done full-length in ‘The Blue-Flag in the Bog’” (341) and O.W. Firkins describes it as a “devious, supramundane allegory” of the worship of earthly beauty (195). Even Scott—who wrote his review before Millay’s death and who argues that she is unfairly damned by critics—thinks that “...the reason for Millay’s attractiveness for the undergraduate, or adolescent, mind” is because her “mood of self-pity is famously attractive to the young” (338). However, I argue that the narrator’s “self-pity” in “The Blue-Flag in the Bog” encompasses a universal self-pity, which is why the poem begins and ends with the personal collective pronouns of “us” and “we.” By incorporating both second and first person narratives, Millay allows her audience to identify with the speaker. Millay, who was no more than twenty-two years old when she wrote this, was most likely using the apocalypse to symbolize the devastation of the recently ended World War I, much like Frost, Eliot, and Yeats were doing in their above mentioned poems. Indeed, the poem’s

setting of a burned over landscape seems to come directly from photographs Millay would've seen during the war, such as this one taken of U.S. soldiers of the Second Division fighting in the Argonne Forest (1918):



Fig. 2. Department of Defense. *Gun crew from Regimental Headquarters Company, 23rd Infantry, firing 37mm gun during an advance against German entrenched positions. 1918. The National Archives Catalog. Web. 4 April 2015.*

Linking the war to an apocalypse was Millay's way of making sense of her place in the world, and she did so by imagining an eventual peaceful ending. Had Millay realized the disastrous decades of history that were to follow, her hopeful tone most likely would've been more skeptical. But why does literary cynicism seem to always be valued over literary optimism? Because we have inherited an aesthetics from the modernists, happy endings tend to be equated with the sentimental tradition. Furthermore, morality is often interpreted as sentimental. Although the anti-genteel strain in American criticism predates the 1920s and

the 1930s, (you could trace its roots back to the anti-idealism central to the Realist movement of the final quarter of the 19th century), one might make the case that this is when it finally triumphed.

In *Canons and Contexts*, Paul Lauter explains that “the problem of aesthetic standards needs to be encountered on its own grounds” (104). He refers to Eliot and Pound, who set their own standards for what makes poetry good, reminding us that “such standards were not delivered on tablets of bronze” into their hands (104). He explains,

...it may help to recall that our views of literary excellence derive largely from criticism of recent vintage, for only in the 1920s and 1930s was the professional focus on texts and structure developed. Such formalist criticism emphasized as the poetic virtues complexity, irony, emotional restraint, and verbal sophistication. Allen Tate, for example, argued that “tension—the full organized body of all the extension and intension we can find in it”—determines greatness in poetry. Such a standard responded to the modernist poetry then being written...and it provided a basis for combatting the moralistic and “subjective” writing of “genteel” critics. (104)

This type of formalist explication damages the reputation of not only a more traditional verse but also a moralistic type of aesthetics. This means that Millay’s moralistic poems like “The Blue Flag in the Bog” are undervalued and deemed as simple and emotional. Lauter explains:

In general when we talk about “literary” or “aesthetic” merit we are speaking of the interest the form and language of a text hold for us—even if its values are alien, even if we have to ask our students to make believe that they can willingly “suspend disbelief.” What if one were to argue that merit resides as importantly in the capacity of a work to move us, to evoke authentic feelings, even to prod us into action? It

seems to me that literary training—perhaps on the medical model—practices us in dissociating what a work is about and how it affects us from the ways in which it is put together. Thus we teach the shape and the sinew and texture of a hand, not whether it offers us peace or a sword. It is, after all, far easier to talk of form than of feelings—especially in a classroom. (104)

Some might argue that “The Blue Flag in the Bog” does not exhibit the virtues of irony, complexity, or tension which “emerged as gospel” within New Criticism methodology (Lauter 137). However, as a GTA I had the privilege of introducing this poem to college freshmen, and they certainly did not feel perturbed by the lack of such “virtues.” In fact, the overall consensus was one of affirmation; indeed, many students agreed that the poem was inspiring. The “hand” of “The Blue-Flag in the Bog” offers us peace instead of a sword. Furthermore, the poem presents numerous poetic techniques; thus, it is still possible to “teach the shape and the sinew and the texture” of its “hand,” as well (Lauter 104).

I argue that “The Blue-Flag in the Bog” certainly has the capacity “to move us, to evoke authentic feelings, [and to] even...prod us into action” (Lauter 104). Bringing religion into the picture can be a tricky matter, and it sometimes has the effect of coming off as self-righteous or judgmental. What is admirable about this poem, however, is the speaker’s candidness. She does not pretend to be all-knowing, but instead suffers from a lack of faith. Most Christians will argue that there is no place better than Heaven, but the speaker here is not so sure. Perhaps one of the most moving passages, particularly for those of us who struggle with faith, is the tenth stanza:

God had called us, and we came,
But the blessed road I trod
Was a bitter road to me,
And at heart I questioned God. (37-40)

Here, the speaker clearly does not take on a fanatical tone, but cautiously questions her God. This skepticism is probably a familiar stance to many of her readers, and makes the speaker's final revelation all that more moving for Millay's audience. What is also so alluring about "The Blue-Flag in the Bog" is its authenticity. The idea of taking beloved worldly things—here represented obviously by the flower—into heaven is unique, and exemplifies Millay's knack for innovation:

All my heart became a tear,
All my soul became a tower,
Never loved I anything
As I loved that tall blue flower!

It was all the little boats
That had ever sailed the sea,
It was all the little books
That had gone to school with me;

On its roots like iron claws
Rearing up so blue and tall,—
It was all the gallant Earth
With its back against a wall! (117-128)

The transition of tone from heartache to peacefulness is also very appealing, and has the potential to give hope to the down-trodden. The flood of emotions is palpable, and can be analyzed through other poetic devices besides the theme of morality.

The trochaic tetrameter throughout the poem creates a rhythm that produces multiple effects. Lines such as "God had called us and we came" (1) suggest a harshness similar to someone rapping on a door, making God seem nearer than one thinks. Sometimes, the trochaic rhythm produces a type of falling effect, especially in lines like "Weary wings that rise and fall/ All day long above the fire" (13-14) and "Crumbling stones and sliding sand/ Is the road to Heaven now" (129-30). The rhythm becomes even more complex when the

harshness of sounds, (representing an apocalypse), transition into the soft, soothing sounds of a lullaby: “Lullabye—lullabye—/ That is only God that calls...” (141-42). Finally, most lines consist of seven syllables—seven, of course, being a holy number.

There is also an abundance of vivid and rich analogies. While figurative language is sometimes perceived as a text’s ornamentation, the striking images that Millay’s metaphors and similes produce capture the reader’s attention in a way that mere decoration could not. We can picture a personified Spring wandering slow on the charred landscape, holding a dead seed in her hand (35-38); we can imagine the dry and brittle seafloor and the naked skull of a mountaintop (86-89). Millay’s construction of such a conceivable apocalyptic world seems to capture a timeless portrait of the end of time; it is as if she drew a projection of the apocalypse that belongs to a universal imagination. And because readers believe that this is a highly probable world, they in turn conceive the positive message of peace as possible, too.

“Epitaph for the Race of Man”: Sonnets by an Apocalyptic Rebel

The sonnet sequence “Epitaph for the Race of Man,” which first appeared in *Wine from These Grapes* (1934) includes apocalyptic poems situated within the more scientific (and less religious) context of evolution. In order to understand why Millay transitioned from constructing mystical apocalyptic worlds to more rational ones, it is first necessary to understand her role in politics, since it is inextricable from her beliefs about the world’s fate. While her early apocalyptic poems, such as “The Blue Flag in the Bog” (1921), are more religious than political, her later poems, such as her 18-sonnet sequence “Epitaph for the Race of Man” (1934) include apocalyptic poems that seem to reflect Millay’s more radical political ideas.

As mentioned in chapter one, Millay's reputation has been damaged by the claim that she was a propagandist poet. However, her apocalyptic poems certainly do not seem to glorify her country. In his article "The Woman as Political Poet: Edna St. Vincent Millay and the Mid-Century Canon," John Timberman Newcomb explains:

She was never able to muster much confidence in any specific political or social program; in this she shared an alienation from practical politics with most of the other bourgeois modernist poets of her generation. Unlike many of them, Millay refused to accept that alienation as a mandate to universalize or ignore the political. Instead, she used her disillusionment to produce forceful, explicit expressions of protest against and critique of social injustice. (262)

But being a political poet does not seem a strong enough argument for undervaluing Millay. After all, one is not able to become apolitical without entering a discourse about politics. I am reminded of E. E. Cummings poem ["next to of course god America"] (1926), in which he mocks war-hungry Americans. Or consider other works by Yeats (for instance, "Easter, 1916"), Auden (for instance, "The Fall of Rome"), or, God forbid, Pound (in the pro-fascist *Cantos*). But in fairness to current critical tastes—while poets like Cummings, Yeats, Auden, and Pound have not been dismissed because they were political, the political has seldom played a positive role in what is admired in their poetry. As seen above in the excerpt of Millay's letter, and as we will see in her poems, Millay's later political beliefs seem to be quite iconoclastic.

Newcomb explains that "the immediate external catalyst of Millay's politicization ... was the Sacco-Vanzetti case" (262). Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were wrongfully convicted of murder in Braintree, Massachusetts in 1920. They were Italian-born anarchists

who advocated against oppressive governments, violence, and war. In 1927, Millay was arrested for protesting the impending executions. The day before the executions, she met with the Massachusetts governor “who apparently felt forced to listen to her impassioned hour-long appeal” (Newcomb 262). Newcomb claims that “There is little question that the profound disillusionment she experienced from the failure to save Sacco and Vanzetti triggered a fundamental and permanent shift in the tone of her poetry, in which an aesthetic of ‘mature’ bitterness superseded one of ‘immature’ beauty” (262). This transition is especially relevant to Millay’s apocalyptic poems. In “The Blue-Flag in the Bog,” Millay’s aesthetics tend to be criticized as juvenile due to the naïve hopefulness of tone and the thematic search for idealized beauty. But by 1934 Nazi Germany was on the rise, and the fate of humanity still seemed dismal. Especially after the Sacco-Vanzetti trial, “Millay came to see one of the central social functions of poetry as that of protest and resistance against the powerful forces of xenophobic paranoia and intolerance which appeared to control the American social establishment and system of justice” (Newcomb 262).

With her loss of faith in the political system, Millay began to situate her apocalyptic poems within the context of evolution. As she does in her “sea poems” discussed in chapter two, Millay looks back to a world before the evolution of humans to challenge the American creed of progress. In Sonnet II, “When Death was young and bleaching bones were few,” the narrator recalls how the dinosaur:

...slept contented in a world he knew.
In punctual season, with the race in mind,
His consort held aside her heavy tail,
And took the seed; and heard the seed confined
Roar in her womb; and made a nest to hold
A hatched out conqueror...but to no avail:
The veined and fertile eggs are long since cold. (8-14)

The poem's ending probes the reader to question the fate of the human species. But while the ending provokes an ominous feeling, it is interesting that Millay also invokes a humorous tone within the sex scene. It is as if she is laughing at a masculinist desire to conquer in vain by implying that our species will one day be wiped out, too. This sense of irreconcilable doom is evident in Sonnet IV, "O Earth, unhappy planet born to die":

O Earth, unhappy planet born to die,
Might I your scribe and your confessor be,
What wonders must you not relate to me
Of Man, who when his destiny was high
Strode like the sun into the middle sky
And shone an hour, and who so bright as he,
And like the sun went down into the sea,
Leaving no spark to be remembered by.
But no; you have not learned in all these years
To tell the leopard and the newt apart;
Man, with his singular laughter, his droll tears,
His engines and his conscience and his art,
Made but a simple sound upon your ears:
The patient beating of the animal heart. (1-14)

Millay seems to equate the universal "Man" to the Greek myth of Icarus, who flew too close to the sun and thus died because of his hubris. In lines 4-8, Millay also seems to imply that if something as dazzling as the Golden Age of Ancient Greece, which "shone an hour" (6) was destined to perish, then the great American Empire should, as well, face a similar fate. She certainly takes an ecocritical approach, as she indicates that Earth does not decipher different species from one another, that Earth does not even know how "To tell the leopard and the newt apart" (10). Instead of God wreaking havoc on the earth, Millay seems to suggest that the human race—a species much dumber than the non-human species—will bring about their

own doom. In Sonnet V, “When Man is gone and only gods remain,” Millay mocks the limits of human knowledge:

...when the plain
Round skull of Man is lifted and again 5
Abandoned by the ebbing wave, among
The sand and pebbles of the beach,—what tongue
Will tell the marvel of the human brain?
Heavy with music once this windy shell,
Heavy with knowledge of the clustered stars; 10
The one-time tenant of this draughty hall
Himself, in learned pamphlet, did foretell,
After some aeons of study jarred by wars,
This toothy gourd, this head emptied of all. (4-14)

Millay’s loss of faith in humanity caused her apocalyptic predictions to change; as she came to witness just how powerful humans’ evilness can be, she no longer imagined heavenly peace. Instead, she seemed to gain relief in believing that one day humanity would be entirely wiped out; moreover, there would be no “tongue” to “tell the marvel of the human brain” (7-8). Rather than being saddened by this, however, we could assume that Millay would find this comforting, for it seems to be that man’s so called “reason” only harms the Earth. Millay’s distaste for Man’s purported “logic” is also evident in Sonnet XVI, “Alas for Man, so stealthily betrayed”:

Alas for Man, so stealthily betrayed,
Bearing the bad cell in him from the start,
Pumping and feeding from his healthy heart
That wild disorder never to be stayed 5
When once established, destined to invade
With angry hordes the true and proper part,
Till Reason juggles in the headsman’s cart,
And Mania spits from every balustrade.
Would he had searched his closet for his bane,
Where lurked the trusted ancient of his soul, 10
Obsequious Greed, and seen that visage plain;
Would he had whittled treason from his side
In his stout youth and bled his body whole,
Then had he died a king, or never died. (1-14)

Interestingly, the speaker here hypothesizes that the only salvation for humanity is for Man to recognize his Greed and whittle this “treason from his side” (11-12). Unfortunately for Man, however, it is too late: “that wild disorder” which is “never to be stayed” (4) has already wreaked havoc on Man’s Reason, leaving no hope for reconciliation with the world he has so greatly afflicted.

Desperately needing to make sense of the chaos around her, Millay latched onto science to hypothesize about the apocalypse. Ironically, this evolutionary approach, in which humans lose in the battle of survival of the fittest, brought a similar sense of peace that “The Blue-Flag in the Bog” did; caught in the “middest,” an apocalypse represented a way to make sense of her place within the world.

Chapter Four: The Afterlife

In my final chapter, I would like to turn to what is arguably one of Millay's most popular subjects: death. Millay's reoccurring theme of death appears in numerous poems, including "The Suicide," "Moriturus," "The Little Ghost," "The Shroud," "Elegy Before Death," "The Curse," "Burial," "Dirge Without Music," "Conscientious Objector," "What's this of death, from you who never will die," "The Poet and His Book," "The Death of Autumn," "Mortal Flesh, Is Not Your Place in the Ground?" and many more. In many of Millay's death poems, her speakers are either dealing with the actual dead or are the dead. This back-from-the-dead type of narrative is quite consistent within Millay's works, and begs to be explored more closely.

Two poetic traditions most likely helped shape these poems by Millay. First the Victorian tradition of mortuary poetry— popularized by poets like Lydia Huntley Sigourney and Julia A. Moore—portrayed the dead in romantic, and oftentimes overly dramatic, terms. Moore, who was so bad of a poet that Mark Twain satirized her works in *Huckleberry Finn*, exemplifies how the ritual of death in Victorian literature was often maudlin and oversentimental. Take, for instance, this excerpt from Moore's poem "Hiram Helsel" (1876):

Just before little Hiram died—
His uncle and aunt were there—
He kissed them both—bid them farewell,
They left him with a prayer.
Now he is gone, Oh! Let him rest;
His soul has found a haven,
For grief and woe ne'er enters there,
In that place called heaven. (25-32)

The unsophisticated rhyme scheme, common meter, and the even less sophisticated subject matter, in which Hiram becomes sick due to being struck by lightning, are almost comical. While it is unfair to use Moore as a prime model for Victorian mortuary poets, death was often portrayed in literature as very dramatic. Margarete Holubetz explains:

Due to the ritual dramatization of death prevailing at the time, most nineteenth-century deathbed scenes seem intolerably melodramatic to the modern reader. Death in the Victorian novel is generally conceived as a spectacle. The hour of death is often presented as a grand scene of farewell and judgment, and many nineteenth-century protagonists meet death as decorously and with as seemly sentiments as any Jacobean hero....This theatrical grandeur in the face of death ...strikes us as shallow and incongruous in the context of domestic realism. However, if the reader today objects to the presumed artificiality of the fictional death-bed scenes, he has to bear in mind that these descriptions, were, in fact, fairly accurate sketches of the behavior at the time they were written....We tend to forget that the ritual celebration of death—so radically different from our customs—was the ideal to which people on their deathbeds aspired. (16)

While poets like Sigourney and Moore exemplify the type of mortuary poets writing during the Victorian era, it is also important to note that there were other renegade Victorian poets who examined death with a keener eye, and who saw a darker side to dying. Emily Dickinson, for instance, was also a mortuary poet writing during the Victorian era. However:

She reacted selectively to the popular gospel of consolation. Sometimes she accepted its formulas without question; sometimes she subverted them through exaggeration,

burlesque, and distortion; sometimes she used them only as pretexts for outright skepticism and satire. In doing so Dickinson was continuing a process of transformation that had long appropriated classical means for romantic ends. (St Armand 44)

Dickinson's poems are far less celebratory and perhaps more analytic than the typical mortuary poets. "I felt a Funeral in the Brain" (1861) and "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died" (1862) both contain speakers that imagine their deaths. But rather than imagining a glorious passing into a spiritual world, the poems seem to portray a type of failed transcendence. For instance, in "I Heard a Fly Buzz When I Died," a fly, "With Blue- uncertain- stumbling Buzz" (13) disturbs the process of passing into another world, as the speaker explains that she "could not see to see" (16). Dickinson is oftentimes skeptical about life after death, and it is precisely this type of skepticism that allowed future poets, like Millay, to consider death and the process of dying differently.

While Millay would have been familiar with the Victorian tradition of mortuary poetry, she would have also been influenced by Edgar Lee Master's *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), which was a huge success just as Millay was beginning her career. This collection of over 200 "dead speaker" poems might be argued to offer a sort of anti-Victorian rejoinder to the old Victorian tradition. It influenced everything from Sherwood Anderson's *Wineburg, Ohio* and Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time* to William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*. In "Voice of America," John Hollander describes just how much of an impact the anthology of fictional rural epitaphs has had on American literature:

Spoon River Anthology is one of those remarkable, seemingly sui generis American books...which seem[s] to mark milestones in the long, strange course of our

country's effort to understand itself. It creates a fictional community through the short dramatic monologues spoken by its deceased inhabitants, rather than by overt description....The volume appeared for the first time in 1915 [and]...[i]t was an immediate success, praised extravagantly and also condemned for its skeptical energy, its erotic specificity, its reforming naysaying coupled with romantic transcendent yearnings, its unfamiliar structure and mode of verse. (47)

Masters's interpretations of the dead are exceedingly less sentimental than those found in most Victorian mortuary poetry. "Sam Hookey" is perhaps one of the more comical epitaphs that turn the serious matter of dying into a hilarious one:

I ran away from home with the circus,
Having fallen in love with Mademoiselle Estralada,
The lion tamer.
One time, having starved the lions
For more than a day, 5
I entered the cage and began to beat Brutus
And Leo and Gypsy.
Whereupon Brutus sprang upon me,
And killed me.
On entering these regions 10
I met a shadow who cursed me,
And said it served me right...
It was Robespierre! (1-13)

Millay would have been influenced by Masters's visions of what the dead might be thinking. She shared with Masters a similar "skeptical energy" concerning the afterlife. This can be seen in her poem "Mortal Flesh, Is Not Your Place in the Ground?" (1939), in which the speaker urges "Mortal flesh" to "Learn to love blackness while there is yet time, blackness/ Unpatterned, blackness without horizons" (7-8). Rather than admiring the scenery of "the trees in autumn" (9), the speaker thinks it is better to "Learn to love roots instead, that soon above your head shall be as branches" (17-18). Poets like Dickinson and Masters were

able to break away from the traditional notions of death and reimagine death on their own terms, and paved the way for a new generation of mortuary poets.

Millay—like Dickinson and Masters—contributes to this “evolving genre of dead speaker poems” (Jamison 191) by rendering far less mystical views about death than those generated by typical mortuary poets. However, Millay’s access to psychology provided a chance to explore more deeply the internalized beliefs about dying and the dead. Dickinson, who died in 1886, would not have been familiar with the psychoanalytic works of Freud, who enjoyed most of his public reception during the early twentieth century. This, of course, would have been the same case for other renegade poets of the Victorian era, such as Edgar Allan Poe, who also dabbled in poems about the dead long before Freud. But because Millay was writing during the height of Freud’s popularity, her poems about the afterlife seem to fit more into a Freudian context.

Despite Freud’s excessive fame in the early twentieth century, current Millay scholars have failed to find any correlations between him and Millay. Yale Kramer, in his essay “Freud and the Culture Wars,” explains that “nineteen hundred and nine, when Freud was 53, marked a turning point in the vicissitudes of his professional life, the beginning of worldwide fame and of the spread of popular Freudianism--and it all began in Worcester, Massachusetts” (38). He goes on to explain that “Most of the American academic world of psychology and psychiatry came to hear Freud's ideas, and he didn't disappoint. In five brilliant introductory lectures, he dashed off a reprise of his theories on dreams, the sexual life of children, and the neuroses. Even William James, who was no admirer, was reportedly impressed” (38). It is hard to tell just how much of an impact Freud made on Millay, especially because no references are made to him in Nancy Milford’s biography, nor does his

name appear in *Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay*. Moreover, any scholarly work done on Millay fails to even mention Freud. However, Kramer does briefly mention that Millay was, in fact, influenced by Freud:

[T]he most powerful disseminating force [for Freudian ideas] during the years before and after the Great War was the cadre of writer-intellectuals who became patient-advocates of psychoanalysis and Freudianism. They wrote for the *New York Times*, the *New Republic*, and *Vanity Fair*, and their social center was the Liberal Club in Greenwich Village. They wanted to practice free love and to escape from the morality of the past—and they found their intellectual justification in Freud. Walter Lippmann writing for the *New Republic*, Eugene O'Neill, Edna St. Vincent Millay, Sherwood Anderson, Van Wyck Brooks writing for the *Masses* and the *Little Review*—rebels, all, against Puritan morals—became spokesmen for a Freudianism that went beyond Freud. For them psychoanalysis meant sexual fulfillment and miraculous personal transformation; and, furthermore, it was easy, almost effortless. All you needed was a good imagination, good verbal abilities, and a good education. It was made for them. They consulted analysts like Smith Ely Jelliffe and A. A. Brill for short periods of time and wrote about their experiences. Max Eastman told his readers in *Everybody's Magazine*, "We have but to name these nervous diseases with their true name, it seems, and they dissolve like the charms in a fairy story." (40)

It is highly probable that Millay was naming "these nervous diseases with their true name" (Kramer 40) in many of her afterlife poems.

Nancy Milford explains in her biography that Millay was an alcoholic, addicted to morphine, and had suicidal tendencies. Furthermore, her bizarre death, in which she drunk a

bottle of wine, toppled down the stairs and broke her neck, raises serious questions about whether or not it was accidental. In this chapter, I propose that Millay's afterlife poetry engages with Freud's theories about the pleasure principle and the death drive. Although it is difficult to determine whether the origin of Millay's engagement with Freud comes from her actual psyche or from her reading of Freud, there is an obvious correlation that begs to be explored. Drawing from Max Eastman's idea that writers from Millay's era "name these nervous diseases with their true names" in order for them to "dissolve like the charms in a fairy story," I argue that these poems about the afterlives possibly function as a coping strategy for dealing with the pain of desiring what cannot be had. For instance, Millay makes clear in many of these afterlife poems that what she desires is immortality, but to live forever is obviously impossible. Take, for instance, her poem "Moriturus" (1928):

If I could have
Two things in one:
The peace of the grave,
And the light of the sun;

My hands across
My thin breast-bone,
But aware of the moss
Invading the stone,

.....

If I might be
Insensate matter
With sensate me

Sitting within,
Harking and prying,
I might begin
To dicker with dying.

.....

Death, however,

Is a spongy wall,
Is a sticky river,
Is nothing at all.

Summon the weeper,
Wail and sing:
Call him Reaper,
Angel, King;

Call him Evil
Drunk to the lees,
Monster, Devil,—
He is less than these.

Call him Thief,
The Maggot in the Cheese,
The Canker in the Leaf,—
He is less than these.

Dusk without sound,
Where the spirit by pain
Uncoiled, is wound
To spring again;

The mind enmeshed
Laid straight in repose,
And the body refreshed
By feeding the rose,—

These are but visions;
These would be
The grave's derisions,
Could the grave see...

...What thing is little?—
The aphid hid
In a house of spittle?
The hinge of the lid

Of the spider's eye
At the spider's birth?
"Greater am I
By the earth's girth

Than Mighty Death!"
All creatures cry

That can summon breath;—
And speak no lie.

For He is nothing;
He is less
Than Echo answering
“Nothingness!”—

Less than the heat
Of the furthest star
To the ripening wheat;
Less by far,

When all the lipping
Is said and sung,
Than the sweat dripping
From a dog’s tongue. (1-8, 22-28, 37-64, 81-104)

The speaker here clearly does not adopt a mystical vision of the afterlife, though she does wish that her soul would live on after her death. In his article “How to Look Death in the Eyes: Freud and Bataille,” Liran Razinsky explains that “Death’s place in psychoanalysis is very problematic. Beginning with Freud, death can be variously said to have been repressed, reduced, pathologized, or forgotten altogether” (63). One might argue that “Moriturus” reduces and represses death more than anything. Death “Is a spongy wall,/ Is a sticky river,/ Is nothing at all” (38-40); death is less than “The Maggot in the Cheese/ The canker in the Leaf” and “...the sweat dripping from a dog’s tongue” (103-04). “Moriturus,” which is one of Millay’s lengthier poems, ends with the speaker concluding that she will put up a hard fight with the personified Death:

With all my might
My door shall be barred.
I shall put up a fight,
I shall take it hard.

With his hand on my mouth 145
He shall drag me forth,

Shrieking to the south
And clutching at the north. (141-48)

Rather than facing death, or even embracing it in the way that many Victorian mortuary poets did, the speaker here hides from it, fights it, and “take[s] it hard” (144). To her, death is something abnormal and incomprehensible. She admits, after all, that if death were more than nothingness, if she could have both “The peace of the grave,/ And the light of the sun” (3-4), then she “...might begin/ To dicker with dying” (27-28). Writing about death was most likely Millay’s way of naming the nervous diseases of anxiety and fear so that they might “dissolve like the charms in a fairy story” (Kramer 40).

The next two poems I will analyze and interpret in this chapter share a similar tone with “Moriturus.” Each of these poems seem to function as a coping strategy for Millay: because Millay does not want to die, she becomes obsessed with death. Through writing about dying, Millay is able to maintain a sense of control and pleasure.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud explains:

In the theory of psychoanalysis we have no hesitation in assuming that the course taken by mental events is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle. We believe, that is to say, that the course of those events is invariably set in motion by an unpleasurable tension, and that it takes a direction such that its final outcome coincides with a lowering of that tension—that is an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure. (3)

But Millay seems to cope with her pain by making her pain pleasurable. The future confrontation with death, unlike the nostalgic longing for the past, is a realistic force, and by controlling that force within poetry Millay triumphs over the undesirability of death.

Although a longing desire for the past is never fulfilled, Millay manages to escape the undesirability of the future. This reversal of expectations surrounding death is expressed in her poem “Burial” (1921):

Mine is a body that should die at sea!
And have for a grave, instead of a grave
Six feet deep and the length of me,
All the water that is under the wave!

And terrible fishes to seize my flesh,
Such as a living man might fear,
And eat me while I am firm and fresh,—
Not wait till I’ve been dead for a year! (1-8)

The speaker triumphantly opens the poem with a bold declaration, and the tone remains victorious throughout. The rhythm marches on to the beat of the speaker’s drum; although the image of razor-teethed fish ripping apart a body’s flesh exemplifies a dissonance between subject matter and voice, the speaker, whose body is “firm and fresh,” still portrays a sense of self-achievement.

By turning a painful experience into something pleasurable, Millay responds to death in a way best explained by Freud. Freud explains that inhibition of the pleasure principle—which is “proper to the primary method of working on the part of the mental apparatus” (7)—is “a familiar regularity” (7). This is because “from the point of view of self-preservation of the organism among the difficulties of the external world, [the pleasure principle] is from the very outset inefficient and very dangerous” (7). The healthy way to combat the pleasure principle is to apply the method of the reality principle, which “demands and carries into effect the postponement of satisfaction, the abandonment of a number of possibilities of gaining satisfaction and the temporary toleration of unpleasure as a long and indirect road to pleasure” (7). However, “the replacement of the pleasure principle by the reality principle

can only be made responsible for a small number, and by no means the most intense, of unpleasurable experiences” (7). We can examine this alternative and far more dangerous method of replacement by taking a closer look at “Burial.”

In “Burial,” Millay seems to suggest that manipulating her own psyche through mind control is powerful enough to: a) weaken feelings of suffering due to unobtainable desires for pleasure, and b) create pleasurable feelings due to obtainable desires for pain. In other words, the speaker attempts to avoid the fear of dying by picturing her body’s decomposition process as satisfactory; rather than imagine worms slowly eating away at her flesh, she’d rather be consumed by “terrible fishes.../Such as a living man might fear” (5-6). The speaker is unable to temporarily tolerate unpleasure, but since unpleasure is inevitable, she converts it to pleasure.

By rejecting a conventional burial, the speaker can minimize the fear of dying and maximize the pleasure of pain. Freud explains that this sort of release of “unpleasure”:

is to be found in the conflicts and dissensions that take place in the mental apparatus while the ego is passing through its development into more highly composite organizations. Almost all the energy with which the apparatus is filled arises from its innate instinctual impulses. But these are not allowed to reach the same phases of development. In the course of things it happens again and again that individual instincts or parts of instincts turn out to be incompatible in their aims or demands with the remaining ones, which are able to combine into the inclusive unity of the ego. (8)

In other words, Freud believes:

“Beyond” the pleasure principle there was a compulsion to repeat that was independent of pleasure, an urge to return to an earlier state, even if this state was predominantly unpleasurable....He saw this urge as being stronger than the wish for pleasure, and it seemed to have a biological analogue; that is, ontogenetic development tends to repeat stages of phylogenetic development—and beyond that, stages in the development of life itself. In Freud’s view, life developed out of the lifeless, the anorganic, and thus one could, if one wanted, think [of] the urge to return to an earlier state, applied to the extreme...[as] a return to lifelessness, the anorganic state. (May 210-11)

Through repression, these unevolved instincts that are dangerous to one’s survival often find roundabout paths “to a direct or substitutive satisfaction” (Freud 8). We see in “Burial” a conflict between the will to live versus the will to die, a conflict that is also present in “Moriturus.” The speaker attempts to immortalize herself, but does so by fantasizing a paradoxically terrifying yet exultant burial. The complete submergence of the body under water, in which she desires to “...have for a grave, instead of a grave/...All the water that is under the wave” (2-4) also signifies a form of repression: the speaker is attempting to drown these less-developed impulses, but they reemerge as substitutive satisfaction. In his article “Between the Quills: Schopenhauer and Freud on Sadism and Masochism,” Robert Grimwade explains that “When projected inwardly,” Freud’s theory about this impulse to die “is masochist.” Masochism emerges as an eagerness to die throughout Millay’s poetry, and leads me to my next application of theory: the death drive.

Millay's obsession and treatment of death seems to reflect Freud's own theories about the death drive. While "contemporary psychoanalytic theorists tend to view the death drive as fanciful noise, an artifact of imagination" (Mills 373), and while Freud himself "largely believed that his ideas on the death drive were left to further investigation" (Mills 373), evidence about it has appeared and continues to reappear within literary and historical settings. The consensus on its validity is certainly split, though I tend to side more with psychiatrist John Mills, who claims:

Freud's thesis on the death drive is one of the most original theories in the history of ideas that potentially provides a viable explanation to the conundrums that beset the problems of human civilization, subjective suffering, collective aggressivity, and self-destructiveness....Freud accounts for an internally derived motivation, impulse, or activity that is impelled toward a determinate teleology of destruction that may be directed toward self and others, the details of which are multifaceted and contingent upon the unique contexts that influence psychic structure and unconsciously mediated behavior...Freud was committed that the mind seeks 'a return to an earlier state,' a notion that is verifiable through clinical observation. Despite the psyche's inherently evolutionary nature, death becomes the fulcrum of psychic progression and decay.

(373)

It has already been noted that Millay's natural and apocalyptic worlds portray this "return to an earlier state." However, Millay's worlds of the afterlife solidify my argument about the presence of the death drive within her works.

Millay's reoccurring theme of death is symbolic of "the compulsion to repeat" negative actions. By imagining herself as dead, or imagining others as dead, Millay performs a self-destructiveness that is rooted in the instinctual desire to return to a state of quiescence.

"The Suicide" (1917)—which was written three years before *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—marks an earlier poem of Millay's that shows signs of the death drive. (For the full text of the poem, please see Appendix 2.)

It begins with the speaker contemplating suicide: "Curse thee, Life, I will live with thee no more!" (1). After she goes on to lament the cruelties and hardships of life, she explains that "Thus I to Life, and ceased; but through my brain/ My thought ran still, until I spake again" (15-16). At this instance, we see how Millay enters into a modern psychoanalytic discourse; the impulsive self-destructive thoughts reside in her brain, or psyche, and tempts her to go through with the suicide, but the speaker seems to detach herself from this impulse by using her words as a distraction to her thoughts, thus prolonging her plans of suicide. One might argue that this self-distraction occurs because the speaker, saddened by the lack of pleasure, is also subconsciously aware that she should postpone pleasure and temporarily endure pain for the sake of survival. The speaker seems to be influenced by her ego's instinct of self-preservation, and for a few moments, there remains the chance that her pleasure principle will be replaced with what Freud calls the reality principle (5). A few lines down, the speaker exhibits Freud's theories about a desire to return to an earlier state:

Ah, life, I would have been a pleasant thing
To have about the house when I was grown
If thou hadst left my little joys alone!
I asked of thee no favour save this one:
That thou wouldst leave me playing in the sun!

And this thou didst deny, calling my name
Insistently, until I rose and came.
I saw the sun no more...(28-35)

Here marks the major conflict: as a child grows into an adult, life becomes more complex.

The law of evolution requires us to adapt, in many ways, to harder terms of survival.

Eventually, the speaker comes upon a strange door that marks the entrance into the unknown:

But turning, straightway, sought a certain door
In the rear wall. Heavy it was, and low
And dark,—a way by which none e'er would go 60
That other exit had, and never knock
Was heard thereat,—bearing a curious lock
Some chance had shown me fashioned faultily,
Whereof Life held content the useless key,
And great coarse hinges, thick and rough with rust, 65
Whose sudden voice across a silence must,
I knew, be harsh and horrible to hear,—
A strange door, ugly like a dwarf.—So near
I came I felt upon my feet the chill
Of acid wind creeping across the sill. (58-70)

This door is yet another example of Millay's vision of the afterlife. It is "thick and rough with rust" and "ugly like a dwarf" with "acid creeping across the sill." When she "laid upon the hatch" (78) she becomes "without." This correlates with Freud's idea of life developing from nothingness, and a human's impulse to return to this state of nothingness. However, the ending of the poem, in which the speaker finds that God does exist, conflicts with this idea and could be used as a way to confront dismal beliefs about the death-drive. For instance, the speaker longs for a continuum of pleasure, but only receives this until she goes to Heaven:

 "Child," my father's voice replied,
"All things thy fancy hath desired of me
Thou hast received. I have prepared for thee
Within my house a spacious chamber, where

Are delicate things to handle and to wear,
And all these things are thine. Dost thou love song?
My minstrels shall attend thee all day long.
Or sigh for flowers? My fairest gardens stand
Open as fields to thee on every hand.
And all thy days this word shall hold the same:
No pleasure shalt thou lack that thou shalt name. (127-36)

Here, Millay seems to offer the reality principle's secret weapon, finding pleasure in serving God: By busying one's self with do-good tasks, one is able to focus on helping others and forgets self-suffering. When the speaker finally has access to infinite pleasure, she becomes bored, and begs God for a task, to which He responds: "'But as for tasks—' he smiled, and shook his head;/ 'Thou hadst thy task, and laidst it by,' he said" (137-38).

As I have argued in chapters one and two, Millay's poetry reflects insatiable desires to go back to a prehistoric past and forward to an apocalyptic future. While seemingly at odds, these desires both seem to be rooted in nostalgic feelings about youthful innocence. For instance, Millay often uses the metaphor of the sea (in poems such as "Night is my sister, and how deep in love" and "I shall go back again to the bleak shore") to evoke memories of childhood and memories of the embryonic stage in which the sea symbolizes a womb, and memories of the origin of evolution. Furthermore, Millay uses apocalyptic settings to imagine an innocent childhood faith in God or the prehistoric world corrupted by man. In a sense, then, nostalgic experiences of these constructed worlds present unattainable desires, much like her poems of the afterlife. But interpreting Millay's poetry about death through a Freudian lens provides only further insight into this desire to regress.

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Appendix A

“The Blue-Flag in the Bog”

God had called us, and we came;
Our loved Earth to ashes left;
Heaven was a neighbor's house,
Open to us, bereft.

Gay the lights of Heaven showed, 5
And 'twas God who walked ahead;
Yet I wept along the road,
Wanting my own house instead.

Wept unseen, unheeded cried,
"All you things my eyes have kissed, 10
Fare you well! We meet no more,
Lovely, lovely tattered mist!

Weary wings that rise and fall
All day long above the fire!"—
Red with heat was every wall, 15
Rough with heat was every wire—

"Fare you well, you little winds
That the flying embers chase!
Fare you well, you shuddering day,
With your hands before your face! 20

And, ah, blackened by strange blight,
Or to a false sun unfurled,
Now forevermore goodbye,
All the gardens in the world!

On the windless hills of Heaven, 25
That I have no wish to see,
White, eternal lilies stand,
By a lake of ebony.

But the Earth forevermore
Is a place where nothing grows,— 30
Dawn will come, and no bud break;
Evening, and no blossom close.

Spring will come, and wander slow
Over an indifferent land,

Stand beside an empty creek,
Hold a dead seed in her hand." 35

God had called us, and we came,
But the blessed road I trod
Was a bitter road to me,
And at heart I questioned God. 40

"Though in Heaven," I said, "be all
That the heart would most desire,
Held Earth naught save souls of sinners
Worth the saving from a fire?

Withered grass,—the wasted growing!
Aimless ache of laden boughs!" 45
Little things God had forgotten
Called me, from my burning house.

"Though in Heaven," I said, "be all
That the eye could ask to see,
All the things I ever knew 50
Are this blaze in back of me."

"Though in Heaven," I said, "be all
That the ear could think to lack,
All the things I ever knew 55
Are this roaring at my back."

It was God who walked ahead,
Like a shepherd to the fold;
In his footsteps fared the weak,
And the weary and the old,

Glad enough of gladness over,
Ready for the peace to be,— 60
But a thing God had forgotten
Was the growing bones of me.

And I drew a bit apart,
And I lagged a bit behind, 65
And I thought on Peace Eternal,
Lest He look into my mind:

And I gazed upon the sky,
And I thought of Heavenly Rest,—
And I slipped away like water 70

Through the fingers of the blest!

All their eyes were fixed on Glory,
Not a glance brushed over me;
"Alleluia! Alleluia!"
Up the road,—and I was free.

75

And my heart rose like a freshet,
And it swept me on before,
Giddy as a whirling stick,
Till I felt the earth once more.

All the earth was charred and black,
Fire had swept from pole to pole;
And the bottom of the sea
Was as brittle as a bowl;

80

And the timbered mountain-top
Was as naked as a skull,—
Nothing left, nothing left,
Of the Earth so beautiful!

85

"Earth," I said, "how can I leave you?"
"You are all I have," I said;
"What is left to take my mind up,
Living always, and you dead?"

90

"Speak!" I said, "Oh, tell me something!
Make a sign that I can see!
For a keepsake! To keep always!
Quick!—before God misses me!"

95

And I listened for a voice;—
But my heart was all I heard;
Not a screech-owl, not a loon,
Not a tree-toad said a word.

And I waited for a sign;—
Coals and cinders, nothing more;
And a little cloud of smoke
Floating on a valley floor.

100

And I peered into the smoke
Till it rotted, like a fog:—
There, encompassed round by fire,
Stood a blue-flag in a bog!

105

Little flames came wading out,
Straining, straining towards its stem,
But it was so blue and tall
That it scorned to think of them! 110

Red and thirsty were their tongues,
As the tongues of wolves must be,
But it was so blue and tall—
Oh, I laughed, I cried, to see! 115

All my heart became a tear,
All my soul became a tower,
Never loved I anything
As I loved that tall blue flower!

It was all the little boats
That had ever sailed the sea,
It was all the little books
That had gone to school with me; 120

On its roots like iron claws
Rearing up so blue and tall,—
It was all the gallant Earth
With its back against a wall! 125

In a breath, ere I had breathed,—
Oh, I laughed, I cried, to see!—
I was kneeling at its side,
And it leaned its head on me! 130

Crumbling stones and sliding sand
Is the road to Heaven now;
Icy at my straining knees
Drags the awful under-tow; 135

Soon but stepping-stones of dust
Will the road to Heaven be,—
Father, Son and Holy Ghost,
Reach a hand and rescue me!

"There—there, my blue-flag flower;
Hush—hush—go to sleep;
That is only God you hear,
Counting up His folded sheep! 140

Lullabye—lullabye—
That is only God that calls, 145
Missing me, seeking me,
Ere the road to nothing falls!

He will set His mighty feet
Firmly on the sliding sand;
Like a little frightened bird 150
I will creep into His hand;

I will tell Him all my grief,
I will tell Him all my sin;
He will give me half His robe
For a cloak to wrap you in. 155

Lullabye—lullabye—”
Rocks the burnt-out planet free!—
Father, Son and Holy Ghost,
Reach a hand and rescue me!

Ah, the voice of love at last! 160
Lo, at last the face of light!
And the whole of His white robe
For a cloak against the night!

And upon my heart asleep
All the things I ever knew!— 165
"Holds Heaven not some cranny, Lord,
For a flower so tall and blue?"

All's well and all's well!
Gay the lights of Heaven show!
In some moist and Heavenly place 170
We will set it out to grow.

Appendix B

“The Suicide”

“CURSE thee, Life, I will live with thee no more!
Thou hast mocked me, starved me, beat my body sore!
And all for a pledge that was not pledged by me,
I have kissed thy crust and eaten sparingly
That I might eat again, and met thy sneers 5
With deprecations, and thy blows with tears,—
Aye, from thy glutted lash, glad, crawled away,
As if spent passion were a holiday!
And now I go. Nor threat, nor easy vow
Of tardy kindness can avail thee now 10
With me, whence fear and faith alike are flown;
Lonely I came, and I depart alone,
And know not where nor unto whom I go;
But that thou canst not follow me I know.”

Thus I to Life, and ceased; but through my brain 15
My thought ran still, until I spake again:

“Ah, but I go not as I came,—no trace
Is mine to bear away of that old grace
I brought! I have been heated in thy fires,
Bent by thy hands, fashioned to thy desires, 20
Thy mark is on me! I am not the same
Nor ever more shall be, as when I came.
Ashes am I of all that once I seemed.
In me all’s sunk that leapt, and all that dreamed
Is wakeful for alarm,—oh, shame to thee, 25
For the ill change that thou hast wrought in me,
Who laugh no more nor lift my throat to sing!
Ah, life, I would have been a pleasant thing
To have about the house when I was grown
If thou hadst left my little joys alone! 30
I asked of thee no favor save this one:
That thou wouldst leave me playing in the sun!
And this thou didst deny, calling my name
Insistently, until I rose and came.
I saw the sun no more.—It were not well 35
So long on these unpleasant thoughts to dwell,
Need I arise to-morrow and renew
Again my hated tasks, but I am through
With all things save my thoughts and this one night,
So that in truth I seem already quite 40

Free and remote from thee,—I feel no haste
And no reluctance to depart; I taste
Merely, with thoughtful mien, an unknown draught,
That in a little while I shall have quaffed.”

Thus I to Life, and ceased, and slightly smiled, 45
Looking at nothing; and my thin dreams filed
Before me one by one till once again
I set new words unto an old refrain:

“Treasures thou hast that never have been mine!
Warm lights in many a secret chamber shine 50
Of thy gaunt house, and gusts of song have blown
Like blossoms out to me that sat alone!
And I have waited well for thee to show
If any share were mine,—and now I go!
Nothing I leave, and if I naught attain 55
I shall but come into mine own again!”

Thus I to Life, and ceased, and spake no more,
But turning, straightway, sought a certain door
In the rear wall. Heavy it was, and low
And dark,—a way by which none e'er would go 60
That other exit had, and never knock
Was heard thereat,—bearing a curious lock
Some chance had shown me fashioned faultily,
Whereof Life held content the useless key,
And great coarse hinges, thick and rough with rust, 65
Whose sudden voice across a silence must,
I knew, be harsh and horrible to hear,—
A strange door, ugly like a dwarf.—So near
I came I felt upon my feet the chill 70
Of acid wind creeping across the sill.
So stood longtime, till over me at last
Came weariness, and all things other passed
To make it room; the still night drifted deep
Like snow about me, and I longed for sleep.

But, suddenly, marking the morning hour, 75
Bayed the deep-throated bell within the tower!
Startled, I raised my head,—and with a shout
Laid hold upon the latch,—and was without.

.

Ah, long-forgotten, well-remembered road,
Leading me back unto my old abode, 80

My father's house! There in the night I came,
 And found them feasting, and all things the same
 As they had been before. A splendour hung
 Upon the walls, and such sweet songs were sung
 As, echoing out of very long ago, 85
 Had called me from the house of Life, I know.
 So fair their raiment shone I looked in shame
 On the unlovely garb in which I came;
 Then straightway at my hesitancy mocked:
 "It is my father's house!" I said and knocked; 90
 And the door opened. To the shining crowd
 Tattered and dark I entered, like a cloud,
 Seeing no face but his; to him I crept,
 And "Father!" I cried, and clasped his knees, and wept.
 Ah, days of joy that followed! All alone 95
 I wandered through the house. My own, my own,
 My own to touch, my own to taste and smell,
 All I had lacked so long and loved so well!
 None shook me out of sleep, nor hushed my song,
 Nor called me in from the sunlight all day long. 100

I know not when the wonder came to me
 Of what my father's business might be,
 And whither fared and on what errands bent
 The tall and gracious messengers he sent.
 Yet one day with no song from dawn till night 105
 Wondering, I sat, and watched them out of sight.
 And the next day I called; and on the third
 Asked them if I might go,—but no one heard.
 Then, sick with longing, I arose at last
 And went unto my father,—in that vast 110
 Chamber wherein he for so many years
 Has sat, surrounded by his charts and spheres.
 "Father," I said, "Father, I cannot play
 The harp that thou didst give me, and all day
 I sit in idleness, while to and fro 115
 About me thy serene, grave servants go;
 And I am weary of my lonely ease.
 Better a perilous journey overseas
 Away from thee, than this, the life I lead,
 To sit all day in the sunshine like a weed 120
 That grows to naught,—I love thee more than they
 Who serve thee most; yet serve thee in no way.
 Father, I beg of thee a little task
 To dignify my days,—'tis all I ask
 Forever, but forever, this denied, 125

I perish.”

“Child,” my father’s voice replied,
“All things thy fancy hath desired of me
Thou hast received. I have prepared for thee
Within my house a spacious chamber, where
Are delicate things to handle and to wear, 130
And all these things are thine. Dost thou love song?
My minstrels shall attend thee all day long.
Or sigh for flowers? My fairest gardens stand
Open as fields to thee on every hand.
And all thy days this word shall hold the same: 135
No pleasure shalt thou lack that thou shalt name.
But as for tasks—” he smiled, and shook his head;
“Thou hadst thy task, and laidst it by,” he said.

Vita

Jenna Lewis was born in Orlando, Florida to David and Thrina Lewis. She graduated from University High School in May 2006. In May 2013 she was awarded the Bachelor of Arts degree for studying English with a concentration in creative writing at Appalachian State University. In August 2015, she earned a Master of Arts degree for studying English at Appalachian State University.