CHAPTER VII

SURVIVAL OF ROMANTICISM IN THE POPULAR TASTE OF THE TWENTIES

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Popular Appeal of Millay's Poetry Due Partly to its Romantic Revolt and Greenwich Village Bohemianism in Pieces Like "What Lips my Lips have Kissed."

Even though Renaissance was sweeping through America in the twentieth century, Romanticism could not be strangled. The masses continued to be swayed by romantic ideas and notions. The spontaneity of the lyrical poetry of Millay and other lyricists stirred the souls of the people.

Edna St. Vincent Millay's anti-Victorian postures and Greenwich Village Bohemianism are aspects of the feminist sensibility and revolt against orthodoxy in religion and culture is a romantic attitude.

Greenwich Village stirred Millay's creative impulses to a rich flowering of poetry which was varied and full of vitality. Perhaps in this period Millay wrote her best
works—Renaissance and Other Poems (1917), A Few Figs from Thistles (1920), The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems (1923), and The Buck in the Snow and Other Poems (1928).

Her verses flowed out naturally as there was no restraint of any kind. The free atmosphere of the Village was a congenial place for many budding artists who laid bare their heart and soul for their readers.

It was here that her feminist sensibility found its complete expression. It was only in the Greenwich Village that Millay could express the transiency and beauty of love:

What lips my lips have kissed, and where and why, I have forgotten, and what arms have lain Under my head till morning; but the rain Is full of ghosts to night, that tap and sigh Upon the glass and listen for reply And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain For unremembered lads that not again Will turn to me at midnight with a cry Thus in the winter stands a lonely tree Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,

A little while, that in me sings no more.¹

Anne Cheney's comments highlight her idea of pantheism:

She strongly suggests the idea of pantheism in the line 'My soul is all but out of me,' just as Emerson thought the 'Oversoul,' in which

¹ Millay, Collected Sonnets, p.42.
man, nature and God are inseparably inter-twined, was the universal soul of all living things.

Discarding her fear of death and belief in the more repressive elements of Christianity, Milley found solace in pantheism and the beauty of man and nature during her Village days.  

But Milley was filled with sorrow because Death snatched away love and Beauty:

The answers quick and keen, the honest look, the laughter, the love,—

They are gone, They are gone to feed the roses,

Elegant and curled,

Is the blossom. I know, But I donot approve

More precious was the light in your eyes than all the roses in the world,

Down, down, down into the darkness of the grave

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

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

I know. But I donot approve. And I am not resigned.  

Milley's poetry had a particular appeal for the readers because of its romantic qualities. The orthodoxy in religion and culture of the Victorian age had stifled and suppressed the emotions and sentiments of the people. There was no free play of emotions hence writers could not express their true feelings. Hence when Edna Milley came on the literary scene—her spontaneous lyric verse and frank expression of opinions received a warm welcome by the readers. The Greenwich Village  

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3 Milley, Collected Poems, pp. 240-41
served as an ideal and congenial place for Millay to write her verse. In the Village there were no restrictions imposed on her. The Villagers were close to nature and the instincts and urges were allowed to flower without any inhibition.

The themes in her poetry are romantic—integrity of the self, nature, love, death, melancholy, beauty—all find full expression in her poetry.

Milley's poetry was welcomed particularly because of her fresh approach and attitude towards love. No American woman-writer had come out before so openly in her frank expressions of love and sex. Milley revolted against the traditional male supremacy and demanded equal rights for women. The Greenwich Village again served as a catalyst for such frank expression of views.

The Villagers had formed their own concepts of morality. There was free association between men and women. Unmarried couples could stay together and there was complete sexual freedom.

In *Love in Greenwich Village* Floyd Dell states:

We held the same views of literature and art, we agreed in hating capitalism and war, And incidently, of course, we agree in
disbelieving in marriage. We considered it a stupid relic of the barbaric past. . . .4

Cheney further dwells upon the psychological sources of the Village life:

In his search for self awareness, the villager was intensely interested in psychoanalysis (particularly Freudianism), free association, emphasis upon deep seated emotions, recognition of unconquerable emotions and sexual impulses in women as well as in men. He believed in a Wordsworthian salvation by the child (child-like innocence), paganism, living for the moment, and Puritanism as the great enemy.5

What led Milly to revolt against tradition and revolt against male supremacy? There is a psychological reason for this. In behavioristic psychology it is mentioned that unfulfilled desires and emotions during childhood come out in the form of a revolt during adolescence and adulthood. It is noticed that those children who have a lack of affection from their parents start feeling insecure. This feeling of insecurity gives rise to rebellious tendencies in them.

So if we trace back to Edna Millay's childhood we observe that a lack of a father-figure in the household must have had a great effect on her sensitive mind. This

4 Quoted by Anne Cheney, _Milly in Greenwich Village_, p.37.
5 Ibid., p.37.
subconsciously gave rise to a feeling of insecurity inspite
of the affection she received from her mother. This feeling
of insecurity must be gnawing inside her. All this led
to a deep distrust in men and also to a great dissatis-
faction with the prevailing trends and traditions. The
atmosphere of Greenwich Village was ideal for the expression
of this revolt. Hence in her poetry we see the revolt
against the tradition of a male-dominated society and
Victorian Orthodoxy in culture. Here we see a woman
abandoning her lover when she discovers his hollowness—
She finds her lover to be—

...just one other mound
of sand, where on no green thing ever grew.  

Here was a woman admonishing her lover when her intruded
into the personal realm of her thoughts;

And you did so profane me when you crept
Unto the threshold of this room tonight
That I must never more behold you face,
This now is yours. I seek another place.  

These frank expressions on the part of a woman and the
revolt against male-chauvinism is a romantic approach in
Millay's poetry which received a warm welcome by the

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6 Millay, Collected Sonnets, p. 16
7 Ibid., p.6.
literary masses.

The Greenwich Village Bohemians were leading an experimental life under the influence of Socialism, Freudianism and Feminism. Milley highlighted new ideas and notions but held to the old traditional romantic forms of the sonnet, the lyric, the elegy in expressing them. To these forms she made her own innovations to suit her own lyrical purposes.

It was in the Greenwich Village that Milley's concept of religion underwent a great transformation. In her view true religion was an all-embracing love for mankind—a truly romantic approach—akin to the British Romanticism of Wordsworth and Shelley. According to Millay Religion was not a code or a creed on a matter of show. She did not follow the conventional tenets and canons of religion. Her sympathetic understanding penetrated into the heart of the common man. In the poem "Alma" she says:

I loved the beggar that I fed,  
I cared for what he had to say.

This is reminiscent of Wordsworth whose romanticism consisted of his return to the common man.

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8 Milley, Collected Lyrics, p.67.
Edna Millay’s poetry was a fresh breeze for the American Bohemians.

Jean Morris Petit contrasts transcendentalism with Greenwich Village Bohemianism:

Following World War I there developed a disease among so-called Greenwich Villagers known as Ethisiomania. The roots of the disease apparently had their soil in the attitudes of equality of the sexes.

The real Bohemian did not indulge in the eccentricities to attract attention. He was honestly a child of impulse and of nature. He was not seeking publicity.

The Greenwich Village in which these poets lived was indeed a long way from the village of Concord, Massachusetts, heart of an older tradition. The subjects of conversation were not those of the excited atmosphere of Transcendentalism. They grew out of Freudianism. They were of Oedipus complexes and Narcissism. They had to do with behavioristic psychology. It was a time of ruthless self-analysis, free association, emphasis upon underlying emotions, recognition of ‘unconquerable emotions,’ and stressed importance of sexual impulses in women as well as in men. The Village became a kind of symbol, actually a legendary or mythological symbol of a flourishing of art or without a care; . . .

Till the time of Edna Millay women could not express what they really felt. They adhered to the conventional way of writing poetry which was a great hindrance in the

expression of lyrical poetry. Some times they resorted to pen-names to conceal their identity. It was Millay who stripped off these age-old conventions and whose poetry marked the sincerity of emotion.

Edna Millay's poetry blends realism with idealism. She struck a golden mean between the two. Her poetry was neither colored with the stark reality of life nor was she exclusively an idealist.

Thin Sentimentalism in Her Response to the European and International Problems of the Late Thirties

Millay's Bohemianism bears a similitude to aestheticism in its escape from Society. Her poetry is steeped in lyricism. It does not show any major concern for and a direct awareness of the contemporary social and political events in America, Europe, and the world as does Lindsay's and Sandburg's. The renaissance of the 'twenties was a second flowering of the American literature after the renaissance of the previous mid-century. Lindsay's "General William Booth enters into Heaven" and "Abraham Lincoln Walles at Midnight," for example, have a direct source in National
history, but Millay's lyrical inspiration was too
conzentrated to be diffused in external events. In her
Bohemian vein she writes about the tower of her poetry in
"I too beneath your moon, almighty Sex":

Though it was reared To Beauty, it was wrought
From what I had to build with; honesetbone
Is there, and anguish; pride; and burning thought
And lust is there, and nights not spent alone

(Huntsman What Quarry? Sonnet 1)

Her three sonnets in tetrameter in Huntsman, What Quarry?
touch upon the horrors of war. She addresses God in "See
how these masses mill and swarm":

If no prow cuts your arid seas,
Then in your weightless air no wars
Explode with such catastrophes
As rock our planet all but loose
From its frayed mooring to the sun.

("Three Sonnets in Tetrameter,
Sonnet 1")

But her lack of direct concern for contemporary national
and international events does not detract her poetry from
a deep awareness of the spirit of the age. In "Upon this age,
that never speaks its mind," she remarks:

Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour,
Rains from the sky a meteoric shower
If facts ... they lie unquestioned, uncombined,
Wisdom enough to leach us of our ill.
Is daily spun; but there exists no loom
To weave into fabric; undetiled
Proceeds pure Science, and has her say, but still
Upon this world from their collective womb
Is spewed all day the red triumphant child

(Huntman What Quarry? Sonnet, 16)

Milay embodied in her poetry most of the qualities of romanticism. She held rigidly to her views, defied convention and tradition, showed great love for truth and beauty. Like a child of the renaissance she had a great zest for living.

Milay told Elizabeth Brenner that readers liked her poetry because she wrote of things that most people had experienced such as love, death, nature and the sea. "My images" she said are "homely right out of the earth. . . ."

The works of the English romantics like Keats and Wordsworth influenced her. It seems unconsciously she imbibed the qualities of their poetry. At a very early age she became socially conscious of the evils which were polluting the society. But she tempered the romantic elements with her own personality and convictions. In her poem Renaissance, the epitome of her poetic achievement, she identifies the human spirit with the "Over soul" and her complete philosophy culminates in the "American Transcendentalism."

10 Miriam Gurko, Restless Spirit, p. 220
Millay's poetry had a particular appeal for the women because she was the spokesman of the "Modern Woman." The women wanted a release from the stifling atmosphere of the Victorian age. Millay's poetry advocated a break-away from the conventions and traditions of the Victorian age.

The Greenwich Village with its unconventional atmosphere was ideally suited for the young feminists. Here the women could freely voice their liberated and feminist views. The demands of the women were right to vote, to get equal salary as men on the same post. Greenwich Village provided careers which could not be pursued in other cities. Hence Millay's poetry had a popular appeal because of its Greenwich Village bohemianism.

**CONCLUSION**

Therefore in conclusion I must say that Millay's poetry was predominated by romanticism and finely blended with the traits of renaissance and above all tempered by her own views and imagination.

Though romanticism is too vast to be defined yet critics have given various satisfactory definitions. Norman Foerster has attempted to include the basic concepts of Romanticism which can serve as a yardstick to analyse Millay's poetry. He said:

... it includes a recovery of the past as an effort to broad emotional and imaginative
outlook; the revolt against tradition and authority in whatever area of human concern; humanitarian sympathy including new interests in humble life and assertion of individual rights; a fresh perception of nature; the renaissance of wonder; and in general an ascendency of feeling and imagination.\footnote{Norman Foerster, The Reinterpretation of American Literature (New York: Russell and Russell, 1959), p. 120.}

Most of these we can apply in testing Millay's poetry in classifying it as romantic.

Millay focuses herself on the important elements of romanticism: revolt against tradition and authority; humanitarian sympathy and assertion of individual rights; a fresh perception of nature; the renaissance of wonder; and in general an ascendency of feeling and imagination. Her strong assertion for the individual rights for women holds a prominent place in her poetry.

Edna Millay had expressed the core of her philosophy in her very first poem \textit{Renaissance}, culminating in the Emersonian Transcendentalism:

\begin{quote}
The soul can split the sky in two,  
And let the face of God shine through.  
\end{quote}

\textit{(Renaissance, Stanza XXIII)}

Millay was a child of the renaissance and the two nature's of the pagan and Puritan were constantly at war within herself. If at one moment she was glorifying the flesh the other...
moment she would be praising the other-worldliness. Her
love of beauty, individualism, and passionate love of
freedom—physical and intellectual emancipation—are all a
fine blend of romanticism and renaissance. Millay expressed
in her poetry her genuine feelings and emotions shaped by
her creative imagination with great spontaneity. Her
subjective utterances are revealed in eloquent lyrics;
Her appeal to the people to immortalize her crystallizes in
the following lines:

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 II  

Edna Millay's poetry voices the best in the fast-fading
romantic tradition and recaptures with a sharp awareness
the new poetic trends of the twentieth century renaissance
in American Poetry, but her poetry is predominantly
romantic in spirit and form.

12 Millay, Collected Lyrics, p. 63.