CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Literary Climate of the "Twentieth Century Renaissance" in America: The Lyric Year and Poetry: A Magazine of Verse as Heralders of "NEW" Poetry:

My project takes up the study of Edna St. Vincent Millay's lyrical poetry, in the dual perspective of romanticism, and poetic renaissance of the twenties. I wish to establish these two trends as the measure aspirations in Millay's poetry unified into a single vision.

The year 1912, holds a paramount significance in American poetry. It was the year when America was swept by a poetic renaissance. Several poets, whose poetry was inspired by new trends, started coming on the literary scene. These poets had discarded the traditional forms and themes, and can be called Experimentalists who gave rise to the "New" poetry. There are several causes of the flowering of this "New" poetry. It did not come
into existence all of a sudden.

These young poets had a vague vision of the Essential Truth. But they were determined to delve deep into this shadowy abstraction and make a concrete discovery themselves. They did not want to follow the well-beaten path of their predecessors. They flung off tradition, and were making new explorations in poetry. Their revolt was directed towards the Victorian age, against Victorian Morality and Optimism, and it was a break away from its stifling restrictions. The concepts laid down by Darwin, Freud and Marx appealed to this generation of poets.

Budding poets, who had been growing about in the dark, now got their share of limelight on the literary scene. These poets were Edwin Arlington Robinson, Vachel Lindsay, Carl Sandburg, Edgar Lee Masters, Robinson Jeffers, Robert Frost, Stephen Vincent Benet, William Rose Benet, Arthur Davison Ficke, Edna St. Vincent Milley etc. Books of poems flowed out from their pens, which received a warm welcome by the public. The trend which American poetry took in 1912 can be observed in Gregory Horace's A History of American Poetry. He observes:

In America the years 1912 to 1918 were spoken of as the years of a "poetic renaissance," . . . instructors in schools
and colleges and contributors to literary sections of the liberal weeklies glanced backward to that moment as though it were a golden age, not unlike the great days of Queen Elizabeth’s England or of the Medici in the 15th Century Florence. And as we look backward, the years of the “poetic renaissance” seem to have been of a day when magazines opened their doors widely and indiscriminately to all kinds of poetry, provided they were “advanced” and odd enough. . . . The “poetic renaissance” in America also included the time when Louis Untermeyer began to edit his popular anthologies of American verse and when Carl Sandburg and Vachel Lindsay of Chicago and Springfield Illinois, shattered the complacencies of a reading public who had grown accustomed to seeing the verse of Effie Smith, Charles Hansen. . . .

The lyrical activity during this period was so brisk and intense, that the lyrical impulses which were boiling in a latent form were straining for emergence.

The Lyric Year provided an outlet for this lyrical activity, and served as a safety valve for the outburst of lyrical energy. This Anthology only required a hundred best poems. But verses by ten thousand people poured in, which is a clear evidence of the great deal of poetic activity of that period.

The publication of the Lyric Year followed a storm of protests by the American readers, for not

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awarding a prize to Renascence, written by Edna Millay which they considered as one of the best poems of the volume. The readers complained that Orrick Johns had won the first prize unfairly. The poems in The Lyric Year, smacked of freshness and originality.

Poetry - A Magazine of Verse, can to a great extent be truly called the poetic renaissance in America. Harriet Monroe wrote to the poets:

First, a chance to be heard in their own place, without the limitations imposed by the popular magazine . . . this magazine will appeal to . . . a public primarily interested in poetry as an art, as the highest, most complete human expression of truth and beauty. Second . . . All kinds of verse will be considered—narrative, dramatic, lyric—quality alone being the test of acceptance.  

Harriet Monroe would say:

The new poetry strives for a concrete and immediate realization of life; it would discard the theory, the abstraction, the remoteness, found in all classics not of the first order. It is less vague, less verbose, less eloquent, than most poetry of the Victorian period and much work of earlier periods. It has set before itself an ideal of absolute simplicity and sincerity—an ideal which implies an individual, unsterotyped diction; and an individual, unsterotyped rhythm. Thus inspired, it becomes intensive rather than diffuse.  

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According to Harriet Monroe a poet is a prophet. She said: "The artist, big or little, is in his degree a seer, and it may be that he sees deeper than the critic who is 'obsessed' by the movements of his time."\(^4\)

In both *Poetry - A Magazine of Verse*, and *The Lyric Year*, one could perceive the changing current, in the manner of writing, and the themes in poetry. The language in these volumes was marked with simplicity, clarity, and the poems were spontaneous in their appeal.

Willard Thorp cites the importance of *Poetry - A Magazine of Verse* as the mouth-piece of the new poets:

As soon as the first issue of *Poetry* was off the press Miss Monroe's little magazine became the rallying point of the new movement in verse. She assured her subscribers that *Poetry* would be "a refuge, a green isle in the sea, where Beauty may plant her gardens, and Truth, austere revealer of joy and sorrow, of hidden delights and desairs, may follow her brave quest unafraid."\(^5\)

The Imagist movement started by Amy Lowell was to a large extent responsible for transforming the technique and ideas of poetry at that time. The two groups--the

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impressionists and the realists were trying to carve a niche for themselves in the arena of poetry. The concepts of Darwin, Freud, and Marx had given birth to their poetry. In the Victorian age sex was repressed, and was considered a taboo. Freud propounded his theory concerning the significance of sexual repression in human behavior, and this gave rise to the revolt against Victorian morality.

So this was the literary climate of the twentieth century renaissance in America. There was a marked difference between the "New" poets and the old poets of the established generation. This poetic renaissance had found its way through The Lyric Year.

Carpenter comments on the poems in this volume:

"For most among those that have - that are as fresh, clear, and timeless in their appeal as they were in 1912 - is certainly Sara Teasdale's "I shall not Care." . . . Marion Cummings Stanley's brief lyric is also simple in expression and modern in its approach to a universal question,

"Yet in this little brain is wrought," . . . And finding John Hall Wheelock's musical and moving lyric, "Confession," in these pages is like hearing the sudden silver song of a bird unexpectedly, in the darkness of a forest."

The poems in The Lyric Year are timeless in their

appeal, because all of them deal with the eternal qualities of the human soul, and have poignant emotions which are deeply felt in the human heart. These are the poems, which endure and survive the Scythe of time.

Carpenter highlights the enduring quality of lyric poetry:

Though the current scene is important and arresting, at any given moment of time, it is temporary and soon passes from the conscious memory of the individual; but the emotions experienced in his innermost heart, his age-old love, longing, joy and despair, are part of his awareness forever; the poems that sing of these are the poems that will endure. Nothing could prove this more conclusively to the reader than an examination of "The Lyric Year" of 1912.7

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Milay's Renascence, and her Affinities with the Contemporaries of the First Half of the Century Especially Robinson, Lindsay, and Sandburg; Poems of 1912-20.

Renascence, is a poem which traces step by step the spiritual development in Milay. In the beginning we see the poet feels suffocated and stifled in the narrow physical

7 Carpenter, Sara Teasdale: A Biography, p.162.
boundaries. Her soul is undeveloped, and she does not have the depth of vision to perceive the grand creation of nature by God:

All I could see from where I stood
Was three long mountains and a wood;
I turned and looked another way,
And saw three islands in a bay.
So with my eyes I traced the line of the horizon,
thin and fine,
Straight around till I was come
Back to where I'd started from;
And all I saw from where I stood was
Three long mountains and a wood.

Over these things I could not see:
These were the things that bounded me.
And I could touch them with my hand,
Almost, I thought, from where I Stand!
And all at once things seemed so small
My breath came short, and scarce at all.8

The crude imagination of the poet could not marvel at the grandeur of the sky:

The sky, I thought, is not so grand;
I 'most could touch it with my hand!
And reaching up my hand to try,
I screamed, to feel it touch the sky.

(Renascence, Stanza IV)

Then Infinity weighs heavily on the poet's soul. The awareness of the suffering and misery of the world, fills the poet's soul with great remorse. The evil in the world is illustrated by the image of a snake-bite. A huge gash

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is inflicted to make the venom bleed out. Millay sucks out the venom completely. After this her soul burns with torture. This early awareness of the evil and pain in the world is a romantic trait in Millay's poetry. In her poetry, there runs the romantic strain found in the poignant lyrics of the British Romantics, particularly Percy Bysshe Shelley who was crushed by and bled with the misery and sorrow of the world and prayed to the West Wind:

Oh, lift me as a wave, a leaf, a cloud; I fall upon the thorns of life! I bleed! A heavy weight of hours has chained and bowed One too like thee: tameless, and swift, and proud.

("Ode to the West Wind," Stanza, IV)

Now follows the great identification experience. We see the poets' identification with the suffering of mankind. She hears the groans of the tortured millions, and feels herself the pang of hunger of the starving. A stream of compassion and pity pours out from Millay's heart. Here the streak of American Transcendentalism is unmistakable, when Millay directly identifies her pity with the pity of God. Her bold assertion that man and God are one is clearly evident from this stanza:

No hurt I did not feel, no death That was not mine; mine each last breath That, crying, met an answering cry From the compassion that was I. All suffering mine, and mine its rod; Mine, pity like the pity of God.

("Renascence," Stanza XI)
Here human pity is merged in Divine pity and they become inseparable. Her thought runs parallel with the Emersonian philosophy of "The Over Soul". This neo-romantic attitude in Millay's *Renascence*, was adopted and sustained in many of her poems.

With the gigantic burden of infinity, and misery of the world, Millay was engulfed in the darkness of despair, and pined for relief in death. Now only the ugly aspect of the world was before her, and a spell of pessimism overpowered her.

In the following stanza Millay experienced spiritual death:

Long had I lain thus, craving death,
When quietly the earth beneath
Gave way, and inch by inch, So great
At last had groaned the crushing weight,
Into the earth I sank till I
Full six feet under ground did lie,
And sank no more, - there is no weight
Can follow here, how ever great,
From off my breast I felt it roll,
And as it went my tortured soul
Burst forth and fled in such a gust
That all about me swirled the dust.

(*Renascence*, Stanza XIII)

After her spiritual death for a brief while, Millay enjoyed her state of a peaceful and tranquil repose. But it was just momentary:
Deep in the earth I rested now,  
Cool is its hand upon the brow  
And soft its breath beneath the head  
Of one who is so gladly dead.

(Renascence, Stanza XIV)

But as soon as she hears the sound of the rain on her grave, the realization dawns upon her mind, that she has lost the beauties of the world. She craves to be alive, and longs to have a sight of the beautiful fragrant earth after the rain. Here we see a spiritual rebirth taking place in Millay. After her spiritual death, her senses have become refined, and her imagination has become sharp and perceptive—her soul has become enlightened. Now her optimism shines through, and she realizes the bright aspect of life on earth. She longs to be in the lap of Nature, in its joys, and sharing its mirth with the other beautiful objects. Her thirsty soul pines to drink deep the beauties of Nature:

I would I were alive again  
To kiss the fingers of the rain,  
To drink into my eyes the shine  
Of every slanting silver line,  
To catch the freshened, fragrant breeze  
From drenched and dripping apple-trees,  
For soon the shower will be done,  
And then the broad face of the Sun  
Will laugh above the rain-soaked earth  
Until the world with answering mirth  
Shakes joyously, and each round drop  
Rolls, twinkling, from its grass-blade top.
How can I bear it, buried here,
While overhead the sky grows clear
And blue again after the storm?
O, multi-coloured, multiform,
Beloved beauty over me,
That, I shall never, never see
Again! Spring—silver, autumn—gold,
That I shall never more behold!—
Sleeping your myriad magics through
Close—sepulchred away from you!

O God, I cried, give me new birth,
And put me back upon the earth!
Upset each cloud’s gigantic gourd
And let the heavy rain, down—poured
In one big Torrent, set me free,
Washing my grave away from me!

(Rezanescence, Stanzas, XV—XVII)

The "Rezanescence" of Milley’s soul takes place. Now we find
a complete transformation of her spirit and senses. The
 correspondence between resurrection in Nature and the soul’s
revival with its corollary resuscitation of the sense—
perception is now close and consummate. Her grave is washed
away by a torrential rain, and an incredible spiritual
rebirth take place in the poet. Gradually her senses return.
The sense of smell returns, then the sense of hearing, then
the sense of touch:

I felt the rain’s cool finger—tips
Brushed tenderly across my lips,

(Rezanescence, Stanzas, XX)
Last of all, the sense of sight returns:

Laid gently on my sealed sight,
And all at once the heavy night
Fall from my eyes and I could see! —
A drenched and dripping apple-tree,
A last long line of silver rain,
A sky grown clear and blue again.

(Renascence, Stanza XX)

The beclouded soul, like the misty earth, is drenched in Nature's vision, and slowly unfolds with a sense-touch the "magic casements" of the sense. This restoration of the sense, earlier benumbed by spiritual suffocation, tunes perception to the beauties of Nature.

Her spiritual rebirth is followed by an ecstatic participation in the beauty and joy of life and nature. Her exultation is reminiscent of John Keats who was filled with rapturous delight when he beheld the beauties of nature.

Milloy in her exultation over the beauty of nature laughs and weeps together. It is now that the Apocalypse takes place. She concludes with great affirmation that in spite of the evil pervading the world, the presence of God is everywhere. Her sixth sense is awakened and like a poet, a true "Seer Bleet", her imagination penetrates the thick veil of materialism, and the transcendent reality of the omnipresence of God can be beheld clearly.
Millay cries out:

I God, I cried, no dark disguise
Can e'er hereafter hide from me
Thy radiant identity!

(Renascence, Stanza, XXII)

Millay has achieved her goal which is the true purpose of poetry; her soul has become enlightened with the new knowledge of God.

Millay's pantheistic mysticism is prominent in the following lines, and reminds one of the mysticism of Blake:

Thou canst not move across the grass
But my quick eyes will see Thee pass,
Nor speak, however silently,
But my hushed voice will answer Thee.
I know the path that tells Thy way
Through the cool eve of every day;
God, I can push the grass apart
And lay my finger on Thy heart!

(Renascence, Stanza, XXII)

In the last stanza, Millay's thought culminates into the transcendental principle which, among its diverse sources, had the Hindu scriptures prominently for their appeal to Emerson. In the Hindu scriptures the individual soul is a spark of the divine, its source is God, and in the end the soul merges into God—the "Atman" merges into the "Paramatman" which Emerson had called the "Over Soul". So our soul has the divine potentialities. In some individuals, these divine
potentialities are in a latent form. To realize these divine potentialities, one has to sharpen one's physical senses as well as imagination. Wordsworth's theory of the realization of the divine powers of the soul was that the transcendental reality could be beheld through communion with Nature. This communion with Nature was possible by surrendering the self in a state of wise passiveness to Nature. Then the imagination would be kindled, and the senses refined and one could behold the Ultimate Reality. In *Tintern Abbey*, Wordsworth employs Nature as a medium of communion between human soul and God. Since Nature is an epitome of God, the soul that is deadened and benumbed by the mundane affiliation, awakens in communion with Nature to a new awareness of divine presence:

   And I have felt
   A presence that disturbs me with the joy
   Of elevated thought: a sense sublime
   Of something far more deeply interfused,
   Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
   And the round ocean and the living air,
   And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
   A motion and a spirit, that impulse
   All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
   And roll through all things.

   (*Tintern Abbey*, lines 93-102)

So after reading the poem *Renascence*, one may affirm that Millay had imbibed the Wordsworthian philosophy, may be unconsciously. When she is spiritually dead, she realizes that the earth must be looking very beautiful after the rain,
and pines to be back to exult in the beauties of nature. Her soul drinks deep the beauty of nature, and by this joyous experience her imagination is kindled, and her soul becomes a "living soul". Like Wordsworth Millay too appears inclined to recognize in nature:

The anchor of my purest thought, the nurse,
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul
Of all my moral being.

(Intern Abbey, lines 109-11)

It is Nature alone which has enlightened her formerly "flat" soul, and has made her realize the omnipresence of God, and her mind beholds the transcendental reality. According to Millay the individual soul is all powerful—has divine powers.

It is the soul which leads us back to God:

The world stands out on either side
No wider than the heart is wide;
Above the world is stretched the sky,—
No higher than the soul is high.
The heart can push the sea and land
Farther away on either hand;
The soul can split the sky in two,
And let the face of God shine through.

(Renascence, Stanza, XXIII)

The last two lines culminate in the Emersonian Transcendentalism. Millay's concept of the divine potentialities of the soul are akin to Emerson's "The Over-Soul". Emerson states: "Let man, thus, learn the revelation of all nature
and all thought to his heart; this, namely; that the Highest
dwells with him; that the sources of nature are in his own
mind. . . ."¹⁹

So Millay's Renascence, is steeped in English romanticism,
transcendentalism, and their common source—Platonism.
Milley's poetry, predominantly romantic in theme and form and
Renascence as her major work, stand out as a testament of
American romanticism.

Louis Untermeyer wrote of Renascence:

And suddenly, beneath the descriptive
rapture, one is confronted by a greater
revelation. Mystery becomes articulates.
It is as if a child playing about the room
had, in the midst of prattling, uttered some
shining and terrific truth.¹⁰

Norman Brittin has rightly commented on the technical
aspects of Renascence:

Though the poem contains many examples of
effective run-on lines, the enjambment is
especially fine in the succeeding passage,
the stresses falling on the key words.¹¹

⁹ Ralph Waldo Emerson, The Complete Prose Works

¹⁰ Louis Untermeyer, The New Era in American Poetry

I cite the following to illustrate the renowned lines:

All sin was of my sinning, all
Atoning mine, and mine the gall
Of all regret, Mine was the weight
Of every brooded wrong, the hate
That stood behind each envious thrust,
Mine every greed, mine every lust.

(Renascence, Stanza, VII)

Brittin further comments:

After the prayer — "And let the heavy rain,
down-poured / In one big torrent, set me
free—" the answer comes in terms of several
implied metaphors: the "rush / Of herald
wings," "the vibrant string / of my ascending
prayer," "the startled storm — clouds reared
on high" — until at the tremendous climax,
the feeling heightened with heavy alliteration,
spondaic feet, and assonance, "... the big
rain in one black wave / fell from the sky and
struck my grave." 12

For writing Renascence Milley chose iambic tetrameter,
and this poem is an outflow of simple words; its language
reminds one of Coleridge's The Rime of the Ancient Mariner.
The lines just flow into one another like the flowing water
in a river. The last words of the couplets add greater
vigor, and the language becomes more forcefully lyrical,
and ultimately the philosophy more convincing.

Brittin rightly comments:

The secret of the poetic power of Renascence
is not its philosophy but its language —

12 Brittin, Edna St. Vincent Milley, p.72.
a truism as obvious as that musical power is
a matter of notes, though a surprising number
of people feel it is belittling to think
that a poem's magic is "just a matter of
words." 13

Floyd Dell had said that the second part was a "suicide
fantasy." 14 I vehemently disagree with this statement.
In spite of the misery in the world, the poet was too much
in love with life to even dream of committing suicide.

The poet did once have a narrow escape from death.
Once she was swimming in a river in Maine where she saw a
lovely green islet. She swam to reach it. When she tried
to stand on it, she realized that it was a mass of floating
seaweed. She felt herself sink, and with great difficulty
she managed to swim ashore. When she reached the ground
she must have embraced it as she hugs the apple-trees in
*Renascence*. This experience has been narrated in Jean
Gould's, *A Biography of Edna St. Vincent Millay*. So this
experience can explain her thought of sinking six feet
under-ground which she had nearly experienced in reality.

A brief survey of critical interpretations of *Renascence*
is quite in order here.

13 Elizabeth Atkins, *Edna St. Vincent Millay and Her

14 Quoted by Jean Gould in *The Poet and Her Book: A
Biography of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Dodd, Mead
Karl Yost states:

For a parallel to ‘Renaissance’ we must go back to the poets of the Seventeenth Century, to Herbert, Vaughan and Crashaw, or earlier, to Southwell. These men record mystical experiences, but they are the calm, profoundly religious ecstasies of maturity. ‘Renaissance’ is a cry of amazed joy, of terror and delight, youthful, fresh, and untutored, one feels, by any religious or literary training what so ever. It is unique among Miss Millay’s poems, though echoes of the same feeling sound in ‘God’s world,’ and somewhat diminished, in ‘The Blue-Flag in the Fog.’ The poem itself and its chronological position in Miss Millay’s work provide a striking example of Wordsworth’s ‘Vision splendid’; one ‘perceives it die away’ as the poet grows older, and finally ‘Fade into the light of the common day.’ This special ‘vision’ fades and the accompanying ecstasy becomes less and less poignant, but the love of nature which inspired it and the passion which carried its crescendo movement to a climax remain to supply homely or noble background and emotion to later work.

One marvels again and again at the extraordinary spontaneity of the poem; it would be difficult indeed to trace any line in it to a source outside the poet’s own personality. 15

I agree with Mr. Karl Yost that Renaissance, is the best and most splendid piece of work written by the poet at the tender age of nineteen. It is really phenomenal how this young girl from Maine had put forward such a profound philosophy. While Wordsworth’s Prelude was composed in retrospection or “recollected tranquillity,” Milly’s Renaissance

culls the youthful insight of the poet contemporaneously. Therefore its verve and ardour is not chilled under the effect of retrospective thought.

Gorham Munson writes of Renascence:

The poem is about 'rebirth'. I use inverted commas to indicate that it is not the second birth of the great religions the poet means by renascence. Renascence bursts with the appreciation of the beautiful in nature as reported by our senses in our present state of consciousness. Quite clearly, it's not about the nature of things as one would feel it in a higher state of consciousness on true rebirth.

In Renascence the beholder has a heightened sense of living. But the mystic has a heightened sense of the living universe.16

After illustrating Gorham Munson's comments on Renascence, I feel it is wrong not to call Renascence a poem of "true rebirth". Millay in Renascence undergoes a complete transformation of her senses, imagination and spirit. It is rebirth in the superconsciousness, and not merely of the bodily perceptions. The mystic utterance is clearly visible in the lines:

God I can push the grass apart
And lay my finger on thy heart.

(Renascence, Stanza, XXII)

The mystic strain in Millay is a direct legacy of Wordsworthian nature mysticism and pantheism which was transmitted to Emerson who holds on to the British legacy. His poetry and essays display a profound pantheism. In his essay "Nature" he writes:

We can foresee God in the course, and as it were, distant phenomena of matter . . . the noblest ministry of nature is to stand as the apparition of God. It is the organ through which the universal spirit speaks to the individual, and strives to lead back the individual to it. 17

Again in "Nature" pantheism in its climactic moment turns into monism:

I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the universal being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. 18

Alfred Kreyborg sums up the qualities of Renascence:

Renascence is remarkable for its blending of naivete and insight, its identification of the body and soul with the rounds of the earth, its mystical rapture, and most of all, for the absolute ease of its craftsmanship. The language has slightly archaic tinge, partly reminiscent of Irish and Elizabethan balladry. 19

18 Ibid., p. 1005.
Thus Renascence has both the traits. It embodies a two-fold tendency—the romanticism of the last century and the neo-romantic and modernist tendency of the 1920 poetic renaissance. Millay's poetry is like an old deep-rooted oak whose vernal impulses heralds a period of fresh bloom and verdure. "God I can push the grass apart / And lay my finger on thy heart," has the mystical appeal of Emersonian pantheistic mysticism which culminates in monism.

Millay's Renascence thus epitomizes the spirit of romanticism described by Theodore Watts-Dunton as "renascence of wonder in poetry" or as "addition of strangeness to beauty" by Peter and summed up symbolically by Harriet Monroe as "a refuge, a green isle in the sea where Beauty may plant her gardens." 20

Wordsworth's naturalism was an attempt to reconcile matter with spirit in the background of the predominant materialism of his times. Millay too faced a similar challenge from the scientific realism of her times which posed a menace to the poetic imagination fed upon medieval romances and myths of antiquity. The reaction of the two poets was almost alike in returning to Nature. Wordsworth's naturalism was condemned by humanists like Paul Elmer More and Irving Babbitt as sentimental egotism, and described by later critics of Wordsworth, like Beach and Basil Willey, as an illusion. It was not

20 Willard Thorp, American Writing in the Twentieth Century, p.29.
until Wordsworth's ideas on nature found support in modern works on philosophy of nature of A.N. Whitehead, James Jeans, Edington, Julian Huxley and Lecomte du Nouys that his poetry of nature commanded credibility. To interpret infinite within the finite and express in poetry the eternal reality of the paradoxical and enigmatic relationship between matter and spirit was a stupendous task. Wordsworth achieved the feat of metamorphosis of the perceptible world into transcendental reality and vice versa, of commonplace simplicity bordering on naivety into sublimity. Critics like Stelknecht and Wilson Knight restored respectability and convincibility to Wordsworth's poetic philosophy.

The American transcendental poets like Emerson and Thoreau had an easy job considering the British legacy of their predecessor. The spiritual crisis that Millay experienced in face of scientific realism and industrial urbanization, resembles the challenge that Wordsworth faced from the materialism of his times. Millay's discovery of the "myriad magics" of nature's beauty, while she was "sepulchred away" in a spiritual crisis resulted in a resurrection and "renascence"of spirit:

O God, I cried, give me new birth,
And set me back upon the earth!
Upset each cloud's gigantic gourd
And let heavy rain, down-pour
In one big torrent, set me free,
Washing my grave away from me!

(Renascence, Stanza, XVII)
Making allowance for the repetitive tone and modality of their poetry, did not Wordsworth experience sublimity in that vision of the "huge peak" in the adventure of a stolen boat one summer evening described in Prelude? It unraveled to him the paradoxical relationship between the world of matter and spirit. Wordsworth experienced a spiritual resurrection. Addressing the "Wisdom and Spirit of the Universe" he said:

By day or star-light thus from my first dawn
Of childhood didst thou intertwine for me
The passions that build up our human soul
Not with the mean and vulgar works of man,
But with high objects, with enduring things—
With life and Nature, purifying thus
The elements of feeling and of thought,
And sanctifying, by such discipline,
Both pain and fear, until we recognize
A grandeur in the beatings of the heart.

(Prelude, lines 405-14)

Thus Wordsworth and Millay arrive at a similar sublimity in their experience of nature in poetry. Spiller sums up Millay's debt to the Romantics regarding treatment of nature in Renascence:

Miss Milay's 'Renascence' (1912) heralded her arrival at Vassar from Maine, and already contained the essence of what was to make her popular: an innocent freshness toward nature, which is none the less compounded out of the attitudes of the English romantic poets.21

Millay's affinities with Robinson, Lindsay, and Sandburg are equally strong and spontaneous. She shares with them and other poets of the pre-war and post-war generation (1918-45) the creation of a new literature marked by revolt and originality, by expression of physical and psychological realism, by spiritual enlightenment expressed in symbolic primitivism, and by an attack on the contemporary social order. Their concern was not, like the humanitarian critics of the previous century, sentimentally focused upon the individual, but directed toward the entire society. Their attack on social order and its institutions was forthright. The new poets were not strict adherents of Zola's naturalism but their poetry is preoccupied with avenues of human escape from the clutches of heredity, environment, and the determinism of fate or fatalism. This generation of the pre-war and post-war period shared a vast disillusionment with old ideals, a spiritual unrest, and a skepticism toward old values. If many of them were not nihilistic, their poetry does not offer ready solution to baffling problems of human destiny. Robinson writes in The Man Against the Sky:

If after all that we have lived and thought,  
All comes to Nought, ——  
If there be nothing after Now,  
And we be nothing any how,  
And we know that, —— why live?  
'Twere sure but weaklings' vain distress
To suffer dungeons where so many doors
Will open on the cold eternal shores
That look sheer down
To the dark tideless floods of Nothingness
Where all who know may drown.22