CHAPTER II

THE LYRIC VOICE OF THE REBELLIOUS GENERATION

The Nineteen Twenties witnessed a revolt against the Victorian poetry. Lyrics were pouring in from all quarters. The influence of British romanticism was beginning to shape the poetry of this time. The "New" poets or the Experimentalists were repudiating the Victorian tradition. The lyric voice of the rebellious generation manifested itself in a revolt against the verbosity of the Victorian age. There was a return to simplicity in language akin to British romanticism. This language was marked by sincerity and spontaneity.

Edna Millay was the Poet Laureate of the Nineteen Twenties. She also became the spokesman of the New Woman, and the Voice of the rebellious generation.

The Romantic Tradition in the Poetry of the Period 1920-30:

In this chapter I shall deal with the romantic perspectives in Millay's poetry revealed in A Few Figs From Thistles, and Second April. A dominant theme in A Few Figs From Thistles
is feminism. Millay's New Woman is no longer a servile companion of the male as she was in the Victorian age. Now she asserts her independence—intellectually as well as physically. The revolt of the woman against the existing male chauvinistic society is a romantic perspective in Millay's poetry.

The second theme in Millay's *A Few Figs From Thistles* and *Second April* is love. Millay was convinced about the fleeting nature and impermanence of love, but still she felt that this emotion was to be valued, and the theme of love permeates most of her poems.

Millay felt that human love, or the bonds which tie human beings together will break and come to an end. The cause may be either death, or her discovery of the hollowness of the lover.

Millay's feministic and unconventional attitude toward love and human relationships in love has a biographical background. The prominent factor was the divorce of her parents. Her father had neglected his family duties and indulged in gambling, etc. So from her very childhood, a distrust in men started shaping in her mind. Her father's character and behaviour led her to form this generalization that all men were the same and could not be trusted, and it
was basically in their nature to abandon women. So this led to a subconscious revolt in Millay’s mind which gradually became more and more firm and was consequently revealed in her poetry. Millay felt that if the men could desert, then, why should not women take the initiative.

As Millay grew up to be an attractive and intelligent girl she began to receive marriage proposals from several men of status—Witter Bynner, Edmund Wilson etc., to name a few. Millay rejected all the proposals because she felt that these men might in the end deceive her, like her father had done to her mother.

The third theme is again a revolt but this time it is directed against tradition. She scorned the advice of the elders to live frugally:

My candle burns at both ends;  
It will not last the night;  
But Ah, my foes, and oh, my friends —  
It gives a lovely light!  

This quatrain smacks of what Spiller calls "... the gamlin boldness of the Greenwich Village Bohemian ... was hailed by the young anti-Victorians as their 'Psalm of Life'."  

1 Millay, Collected Lyrics, p.95.  
Again she mocks tradition, and regards it as worthless and ugly, and considers the New poetry which she and her contemporaries were writing as beautiful:

Safe upon the solid rock the ugly house stand;
Come and see my shining palace built upon the sand.3

The mood in Second April is of grief, despair and disillusionment. This group of poems is steeped in melancholy—a romantic quality. The passing away of beauty leaves the poet grief-stricken. Life has given the joy of beauty and Death snatches it away and shatters that joy of beauty:

Death devours all lovely things;
Lesbia with her sparrow
Shares the darkness—presently
Every bed is narrow.4

The romantic held imagination to be that vital creative faculty which assimilated and synthesised the ideas and concepts into a beautiful piece of poetry.

Coleridge in his Biographia Literaria states:

The primary imagination I hold to be the living power and prime agent of all human perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I AM. The secondary

3 Millay, Collected Lyrics, p. 95.
4 Ibid., p. 56.
imagination I consider as an echo of
the former, coexisting with "conscious will,
yet still as identical with the primary
in the kind of its agency, and differing
only in degree and in the mode of its
operation. It dissolves, diffuses,
dissipates in order to recreate; or where this
process is rendered impossible, yet still, at
all events struggles to idealise and to unify.
It is essentially vital, even as all objects
(as objects) are essentially fixed and dead.

(Biographia Literaria, Agra: Lakshma Namrata, n.d. 155)

In the same way Millay also stresses on the value of
imagination in "The Beanstalk".

To quote Brittin:

And she can assert, too, in 'The Beanstalk,' the
pride of the creator of poetry, the 'maker'.
Thus the greatness and the value of the imagination
in such a harsh world are stressed. The poet,
having 'built' the beanstalk into the sky, tells
of the dangerous but exhilarating climb to such
heights; earth seems gone, 'the little dirty
city' nothing but a 'whirling guess'. The
sensations of climbing in a cold wind are
excitingly expressed. Finally, the climber
asserts (should one say God - like?) equality
with the Giant who has created the sky.5

Millay stresses on the superiority of the imagination because
of its flexibility:

Your broad sky, Giant,
Is the shelf of a cupboard;
I make beanstalks, I'm
A builder, like yourself,

5 Norman A. Brittin, Edna St. Vincent Millay (New York:
But beanstalks is my trade,  
I couldn't make a shelf,  
Don't know how they're made,  
Now, a beanstalk is more pliant—  
La, what a climb!

Here we see Millay paralleling the human imagination to that  
divine power—another romantic assertion forming an important  
perspective in her poetry.

Her realism and her minute observation of details in  
nature are evident in her poem "Journey," from Second April.  
Her heart responds to the beauty of nature and feels that her  
drooping spirits will be rejuvenated with the tranquilising  
effect of nature. The objects of nature are vividly described:

Eager Vines  
Go up the rocks and wait; flushed apple-trees  
Pause in their dance and break the ring for me;  
Dim, shady wood-reades, redolent of fern  
And bayberry, that through sweet baysies thread  
Of round-faced roses, pink and petulant;  
Look back and beckon ere they disappear;  
Only my heart, only my heart responds.7

This romantic mood in Millay's poetry is reminiscent of  
the British romantic poets, especially Wordsworth to whom  
nature was the balm which helped to restore his troubled  
spirits when he was sadly disillusioned by the French Revolution.

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7 Millay, Collected Lyrics, p.51.
This is the American version of Wordsworthian anthropomorphism and humanization of Nature:

To her fair work did Nature link
The human soul that through me ran;
And much it grieved my heart to think
What Man has made of Man

Through primrose tufts in that sweet bower,
The periwinkle trail'd its wreaths;
And 'tis my faith, that every flower
Enjoys the air it breathes.

("Written in Early Spring," stanzas ii-iii)

"Elegy Before Death", "To a Poet that Died Young"—an
elegy to Shelley, and the towering "Memorial to D.C." all
stress upon the elegiac mood that pervades Second April.
The feelings of the poet are expressed in a poignant vein
specially in the last elegy—which was an important form of
expression in the hands of the romantics. "Memorial to D.C."
is a beautiful elegy to a Vassar friend who had died of
pneumonia and with whose death a beautiful voice was lost
forever in the realms of silence:

But your singing days are done;
But the music of your talk
Never shall the chemistry
Of the secret earth restore.
All your lovely words are spoken.
Once the ivory box is broken, 8
Beats the golden bird no more.

8 Millay, Collected Lyrics, p. 92.
Atkins explains the centrality of pain in Millay's lyrics:

... her awareness of grief for her dead friend makes the unconsciousness of an automaton inconceivable. Much in her nature was changeful as time itself. Yes, she knew that. Her heart, she said, was 'a house where people come and go.' But this pain caused by the first incursion of death into her life did not change, except with the change of a tree striking its roots deeper and deeper and growing in complexity and significance. Perhaps it was the piercing insistence of grief that was her salvation in this critical and destructive time. Whatever else was an insane illusion in a world of nothingness, that, she knew, was real. Pain is the one unarguable reality. Acadia may be confused with nullity, but agony may not. And so pain became a solid rock on which to base her conviction of her own self-hood and on which to build her poetry.\(^9\)

So it is now gradually becoming evident that though there was a great impact of the twentieth century renaissance on Edna Millay's poetry, her firm romantic convictions assume a new rebellious tone in her poetry of the Nineteen Twenties. I have taken up for study in this context her two major works of this period: A Few Figs From Thistles, and Second April, to illustrate my point of view.

Critical Study of *A Few Figs from Thistles*; Second April

In *A Few Figs from Thistles*, published in 1920 Edna Millay has articulated her innermost thoughts and emotions unrestrained by Victorian taboos on the weaker sex. In these poems sparkling with wit and humour, Millay has paved the road to feminism. A woman's protest against the male chauvinistic society runs as a leitmotif through these poems. The poems are pieces of satire with irony flowing in between the lines from the pen of a woman.

Love has been dealt in a very sincere and honest manner in these poems. Her deep conviction was that human love was fleeting and transient, but still it was an emotion to be valued. She thought that if men could be fickle and leave the woman they loved, then why couldn't a woman do the same?

Oh, think not I am faithful to a vow! Faithless am I save to love's self alone. 10

Gurko quotes Edmund Wilson to reinforce her statement about Millay's attitude towards love. She observes:

It is the love itself which is important and which she celebrates, not the objects of that love. 'What interests her,' observed Edmund

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Wilson, "is seldom the people themselves, but her own emotions about them. . . . A variant of this idea is that love itself is always valid and to be valued, despite its impermanence. 11

So despite its transiency, love was to be cherished, and valued:

After all, my erstwhile dear,
My no longer cherished,
Need we say it was not love,
Just because it perished? 12

In the sonnet "Oh, Think not I am faithful to a vow!"
Edna Millay plays the role which was only played by males in the Victorian era. In other words, we can say that there was a reversal of roles. The protagonist in her poetry tells her lover that she would leave him and find another one. This type of poetry, especially that written by women, was unheard of in those days. Millay's frank expression of her "desires" and "threats" opened a new chapter in the history of feminism. In the Victorian era women were dumb domestic creatures—a plaything in the hands of men. Edna Millay's poetry had changed this concept of the role of women. She

12 Millay, Collected Lyrics, p. 57.
cares a tuppence for her lover. This type of flippant attitude on the part of Millay, gave rise to a stream of criticism from various quarters. But at the same time it applauded her courage and guts to voice the opinion of the New Woman:

Oh, think not I am faithful to a vow! Faithless am I save to love's self alone.\(^\text{13}\)

Defiance is a dominant Millay theme. The young feminists of Greenwich Village showed defiance towards their lovers because they felt their probable faithlessness:

So wanton, light and false, my love, are you, I am most faithless when I am most true.\(^\text{14}\)

Jean Gould comments:

These impudent love sonnets, of a much higher caliber than the other poems in the volume, possess the classical seriousness of Mozartian gaiety in Don Giovanni, tuned to the undertones of tragedy in the brevity and impermanence of love even while celebrating its intrinsic value.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{13}\) Millay, *Collected Sonnets*, p.10.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., p.10.

In the sonnet given below Millay tells Love that he is powerless to evoke desire as well as to draw out pain:

Love, though for this you riddle me with darts,
And drag me at your chariot till I die,-
Oh, heavy prince! Oh, pandorer of hearts!—
Yet hear me tell how in their threats they lie
Who shout you mighty: thick about my hair,
Day in, day out, your ominous arrows purr,
Who still am free, unto now querulous care
A fool, and in no temple worshiper!
I, that have bared me to your quiver's fire,
Lifted my face into its puny rain,
Do wreathe you Impotent to Evoke Desire
As you are powerless to Elicit Pain!
'Now will the gods, for blasphemy so brave,
Punish me, surely, with the shaft I crave.'

Edna Millay in a wanton mood tells Love that by speaking irreverently of him, and desecrating him by impious talk, she wishes that he would make her his victim, and punish her in this manner, because at present love is a great distance from her. The imagery of arrows and fire is very suggestive. Love's arrows are called ominous, i.e., foreboding evil or inauspicious. In this way Millay is also warning the readers that the consequences of love are evil. The loss of love is certain though the causes may differ in each case. But in spite of knowing this fact she enjoys this transient emotion which lasts for a brief interlude and craves to enter into a love relationship. This dare-devil attitude to Cupid subtly suggests a sly craving for love.

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16 Millay, Collected Sonnets, p.8.
Karl Yost comments on this sonnet sum up the Sonnet-form in Millay's poetry. He states:

And one notes here not only the manipulation of the form, but also certain qualities which are to become increasingly characteristic of the author's sonnets: the classical allusions, the ellipsis of the pronoun, the inverted phrase order, the Shakespearean tonal echoes, and a certain weight of line rhythm that, allied to a profounder theme, gives in later sonnets a remarkable dignity and sonority. 17

Feminism dominates the sonnet "And If I loved you Wednesday." Here it is evident that a woman has an equal right to leave her lover according to her free will just like a man. This heartlessness, and impudence was found in the poetry of the rebellious generation and quoted by the young feminists:

And if I loved you Wednesday,
Well, what is that to you?
I do not love you Thursday --
So much is true.

And why you come complaining
Is more than I can see.
I loved you Wednesday, -- yes -- but what
Is that to me? 18


18 Millay, Collected Lyrics, p. 96.
Her utter unconcern for her lover, whom she leaves after a brief love interlude, is to be marked here. This was the voice of the New Woman. This sonnet is a testament for future Women's Liberation Movement.

Millay's approach to love and sex exhibits great honesty and frankness. She held the opinion that women also should exercise their freedom of expression like men. If women suppressed the genuine emotions pouring from their heart, then they were strangling the neck of poetry. Genuine and great poetry according to Millay was the spontaneous and frank expression of the true emotions and sentiments.

The feminist ethics, conflicts with the traditional view. Millay's poetry is a bold statement of this new attitude:

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\text{And, 'One thing there's no getting by -}
\text{I've been a wicked girl,' said I;}
\text{But if I can't be sorry, why, I might as well be glad.}\]

If men could be wicked then why not women? And there is no repentence for that wickedness.

Yost sees these sonnets in a correct perspective:

\footnote{Millay, \textit{Collected Lyrics}, p. 104.}
These poems . . . have been heartily abused by some critics, and some what over praised by others; they have shocked, and they have delighted. Their author was accused of being pagan, of being a nun, of being both at once; she had no conscience at all, or so much that it was constantly pursuing her; she was disgracing her talent, or she was exposing a new, light, and amusing aspect of it. What the book really did was to prove that Miss Millay was a very normal young person who, having been disappointed and exasperated, was having a quite giddy little fling in the face of her foes. Insufficient money, a heady life in Greenwich Village after a somewhat troublous graduation from Vassar, a very keen sense of humour, and a youthful delight in her own virtuosity—all these combined to produce from the thistles of her daily existence these winy little figs. 20

Now I will critically examine the poems in Second April.

All romantic poetry contains an inner tragic note—its major preoccupation being the theme of death. Melancholy runs through most of the poems of Second April. The poet has become grief-stricken, and is disillusioned with life. She exhilarates in the joy that beauty offers, but is saddened when the intruder Death snatches away that beauty and leaves her bound by the darkness of despair:

I know that Beauty must ail and die,
And will be born again, — but ah, to see
Beauty stiffened, staring up at the sky!
Oh, Autumn! Autumn! — what is the spring to me? 21

20 Karl Yost, A Bibliography of the Works of Edna St. Vincent Millay, pp. 76-77.
21 Millay, Collected Lyrics, p. 78.
The cult of beauty in Millay, like in Keats, leads to the funereal note because of its transitoriness. Beauty is a solace in this world of misery, but its transitory lustre fills the poet with the utmost grief.

In *The Blue Flag in the Fog*, a small child is rescued after a conflagration on the earth. The child gets all she wants in heaven, but she sadly pines for the beauty of the earth, which she remembers with great nostalgia. When God was not looking, the child wanders back to the Earth which had been very beautiful before the Great Fire, and wants to take back something as a keepsake which will remind her of its beauty. At last she finds a beautiful blue flower, which she will take back to heaven and her delight knows no bounds on spotting it. This tri-petalled iris is the symbol of Beauty:

All my heart became a tear,
All my soul became a tower,
Never loved I any thing
As I loved that tall blue flower.22

She takes the flower back to heaven and exclaims:

All’s well and all’s well!
Gay the lights of Heaven show!
In some moist and Heavenly place
He will set it out to grow.23

23 Ibid., p.50.
The child was born and bred on the earth, and had become deeply attached to it. She essentially belongs to the earth, and is not at peace in heaven which is perfection. But now the blue flower which symbolizes the earthly beauty will help her to adjust in heaven. The conflagration on the earth symbolizes the war, misery, and suffering in a nihilistically destroyed universe. The beautiful blue flower symbolizes the beauty and love which is a great hope for mankind and which makes the sorrow strangely endurable. Beauty and love are a compensation for the misery and make the imperfect earth better than the perfect heaven.

Homely imagery and simplicity are the keynotes of this poem which echoes the romantic tradition:

Heaven was a neighbour's house,
Open flung to us, bereft.24

"Lament", is another poem with a marked simplicity and stark realism. A poor woman suppresses her despair, and gathers courage, when she sees that she has to raise her two children single-handed:

Listen, Children!
Your father is dead.
From his old coats
I will make you little jackets;

24 Millay, Collected Lyrics, p.42.
I'll make you little trousers
from his old pants.
There 'll be in his pockets
Things he used to put there,
Keys and pennies
Covered with tobacco; 25

The simplicity reminisces Wordsworth, but the style is
different. Brittin writes:

Though the manner is not Wordsworthian,
here is a simplicity that Wordsworth would
have approved a situation from humble life
in which 'the essential passions of the
heart' are poetically revealed. 26

Edna Millay's realistic detailed observations of nature
are revealed in "Elegy Before Death." The phenomena of nature
will continue undisturbed even though the lover is dead. The
first stanza has a Keatsian richness of detail:

There will be rose and rhododendron
When you are dead and under ground;
Still will be heard from white syringas
Heavy with bees, a Sunny Sound;

Still will the tamaracks be raining
After the rain has ceased, and still
Will there be robins in the stubble
Gray sheep upon the warm green hill 27

25 Millay, Collected Lyrics, pp. 75-76.
26 Norman A. Brittin, Edna St. Vincent Millay, p. 86.
27 Millay, Collected Lyrics, p. 53.
The minute observation and portrayal of nature is so realistic, that the reader is transported to the realms of this beautiful peaceful landscape, and can feel the warmth radiating from the green hill.

"Journey," is another poem of her realistic description of natural details. The poet is very tired in the "Journey of Life," and looks for a repose in the lap of Nature:

Ah, could I lay me down in this long grass
And close my eyes, and let the quiet wind
Blow over me—I am so tired, so tired
Of passing pleasant places! All my life,
Following Care along the dusty road,
Have I looked back at loneliness and sighed;
Yet at my hand an unrelenting hand
Tugged ever, and I passed. All my life long
Over my shoulder have I looked at peace;
And now I fain would lie in this long grass
And close my eyes. 28

Millay is confident that nature will provide peace to her weary and care-worn self.

"Song of a Second April," is a song of despair, of loss, and of sadness which has engulfed the poet. April comes again with the spring season, as the last April but with a great difference. The loss of love, with the death of the lover, has drowned the poet in a sea of melancholy:

28 Millay, Collected Lyrics, p. 51.
April this year, not otherwise
Than April of a year ago,
Is full of whispers, full of sighs,
Of dazzling mud and dingy snow;
Heptacias that pleased you so
Are here again, and butterflies. 29

In Second April, the elegiac note in Millay's poetry is stressed. "Memorial to D.C." is an elegy of surpassing poignancy. This was written in memory of Dorothy Coleman, a Vassar friend, who had died of pneumonia. Dorothy had a melodious voice and the poet bemoans the loss of this voice which is hushed for ever:

But the music of your talk
Never shall the chemistry,
of the secret earth restore.
All your lovely words are spoken.
Once the ivory box is broken,
Beats the golden bird no more. 30

Walter Giersch's comments on the last two lines are illuminating:

Perhaps the 'ivory box' should be taken to mean skull, and 'golden bird' to mean singing voice, though 'beats' seems at first a strange substitute for 'sings'. But the bird (voice) no longer beats against the cage (skull) to escape in song; in 'no new way at all' Ever will be heard again the voice which has at last permanently escaped in death. Isn't there in these last two

29 Millay, Collected Lyrics, p.60.
30 Ibid., p.92.
lines a fairly strong allusion to Ecclesiastes, XII, 6-7; 'Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it? There are in 'Elegy' not only echoes of 'golden' and 'broken,' but the idea of water and of dust returning to the earth. An interpretation of the silver cord as the cord by which the golden bowl lamp was suspended leads to the obvious metaphor for death in the loosing of the cord and the shattering of the light-giving lamp-bowl: a parallel to the death theme in the 'Elegy'. 31

In 1923 the Pulitzer prize was awarded to Edna Millay, and the Dial prize was awarded to T. S. Eliot for his The Waste Land. In 1920 when Millay had written Aria Da Capo she was seeing the world with Eliot's eyes in his Waste Land. But now Millay's vision of the world had completely changed, and both those poets were voicing two contradictory philosophies. This is probably what Atkins had in mind when she wrote about the contradictory philosophies of Eliot and Millay. She observes:

T.S. Eliot was leading a flock of followers straight on into the desert of nihilism, among the cacti and Joshua trees of symbolism, marquetry, obscurantism, and caricature, whereas Millay was walking the Maine Seacoast of her childhood, finding in her unshaken love of earth and ocean and the noble aspirations of past ages an impregnable defence against the

disintegrating forces of her time; and she was meeting all the devastating logic of nihilism with the proud cry, rather like that of Descartes, 'I care, therefore I am.'

So despite of sometimes being clouded in melancholy; deep in Millay's mind was embedded her intense love of the earth. This deep love for the earth, was rudely shaken from time to time, and Millay couldn't suppress her pangs of grief. In these dark moods, this beautiful earth would be painted with a dark melancholy, and the poet longed for an escape into some happier realms. This mood is revealed in "Ode to Silence," in which Millay utters, "I long for silence as they long for breath."

In this ode, the poet longs for a "dreamless death," just like Keats longing for "dreamless ease," in "Ode to a Nightingale." Just as Keats escapes to the land of the nightingale because he is utterly depressed in this present world of misery; Millay escapes into the realms of divine order and refreshment. But there is a difference. Keats is rudely brought back to the present world, and his escape to the ideal world of the nightingale has been temporary. But even this temporary escape has provided some relief to the grief-stricken and benumbed heart.

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32 Elizabeth Atkins, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Her Times, p. 114.
Atkins observes on the ode:

of sheer, unadulterated poetry, perhaps the purest example in the book is the 'Ode to Silence'. Yet, if I am not mistaken, it is the least known of Millay's poems. It has been a bit too pure even for her warmest admirers in our journalistic age, for it holds no scrap of interest for any one indifferent to beautiful cadences and fresh and lovely imagery. It is as unhuman in its beauty as Shelley's Queen Mab. Yet it is a revulsion from the same noise-racked and dizzy world that called forth Eliot's Wasteland, and its mood is, if possible, more depressed than Eliot's, for it is a cry after utter annihilation, a longing for a final and dreamless death, where in the noises of the world shall at last cease to jingle in the brain. And there is irony here as truly as in The Wasteland. Only here the irony is that which pervades so much great and sad poetry, in that the expression of despair is for the poet wings away from all sorrow into the realms of divine order and refreshment. 33

In Second April, the poet stresses on the futility of physical love. She calls physical love small and feeble and not worth pursuing. She states that she can't waste her time in the game of love because she has got higher and nobler functions to perform. By "the Singing Mountains's memory" and "The silent lyre that hangs upon me yet," Millay means poetry, and the poetic inspiration, which is present in her in the form of a latent talent. She has to strum the strings of this "Silent Lyre," and generate a beautiful

33 Atkins, Edna St. Vincent Millay and Her Times, pp. 93-94.
melody in verse. She should devote her full time to this immortal task which has been entrusted to her. Millay's strong conviction is that Poetry which as art has permanence whereas physical love, though it offers a momentary pleasure, is fleeting and evasive. So why pursue this temporary love? Her devotion to art can immortalize her so it is a worthwhile and noble pursuit:

Cherish you then the hope I shall forgot
At length, my lord, Pieria? - put away
For your so passing sake, this mouth of clay.
These mortal bones against my body set,
For all the puny fever and frail sweat
Of human love, - renounce for these, I say,
The Singing Mountain's memory, and betray
The silent Lyre that hangs upon me yet?34

This same idea of immortality or permanence through art is expressed in Keats' "Ode on a Grecian Urn." In this ode Keats observes that in this world where everything is fleeting and transitory, immortality can be achieved through art. By art, Keats means the beautiful Grecian urn:

O Attic shape! Fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens over wrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form! dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Though shalt remain in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
Beauty is Truth, Truth beauty! - that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

("Ode on a Grecian Urn," Stanza, V)

34 Millay, Collected Sonnets, p. 23.
Milloy's lyricism exhibits an acute awareness of the paradox of transiency and permanence, mortality and immortality. Her poetry in its moment of lyrical concentration brushes shoulder with Keats' great Odes. The core of this paradox of transiency and permanence in Keats is "... a state of perpetual indeterminacy. The spirit of irony ... derives from its recognition that these concerns and questions that matter most to us, however pressing or however intently we pursue them, are the ones that cannot be brought to any final determination."35 Keats' Odes deal centrally with this theme. In "Ode to a Nightingale" the poet extols Nature while focusing upon human paradox:

Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and spectres thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despair
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond to-morrow.

("Ode to a Nightingale," Stanza, III)

These lines of "Grecian Urn" highlight the poignancy of human paradox of denial of consummation in love which the Greek sculpture immortalized—an art motif:

Bold Lover, never, never canst thou kisst,
Though winning near the goal—yet, do not grieve;
She cannot fade, though thou hast not thy bliss,
For ever wilt thou love, and she be fair!

("Ode on a Grecian Urn," Stanza, II)

Behind the human paradox that tantalizes consummation and permanence and fuses them with denial and transiency, there is the human aspiration for fulfilment and permanence as a projection of the soul and the moorings of the paradox. Keats' "I cry your mercy—pity—love!—aye, love!" projects the human aspiration for consummation:

O! let me have thee whole—all—all—be mine!
That shape, that fairness, that sweet minor zest
Of love, your kiss,—those hands, those eyes divine,
That warm, white, lucent, million-pleased breast—
Yourself—yourself—in pity give me all,
Withhold no atom or I die,

"Sonnet to Fanny," lines 5-10

Yet another sonnet attempts to capture the human quest for intransiency:

No—yet still steadfast, still unchangeable,
Pillow'd upon my fair love's ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft fall and swell,
Awake for ever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender taken breath,
And so live ever—or else swoon to death.

"Sonnet written on a blank page in Shakespeare's poem"

The repetition of "ever" underlines the quest for a state of changelessness.

Milay's sonnets harbour the human paradox of transiency and change like Keats' sonnets to Fanny more on a personal level rather than purely universal level of his Odes. "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why," expresses this paradox of love. The symbolic image of a lonely tree
in the winter is designed to convey this import:

Thus in the winter stands the lonely tree,
Nor knows what birds have vanished one by one,
Yet knows its boughs more silent than before;
I cannot say what loves have come and gone,
I only know that summer sang in one,
A little while, that in me sings no more.\(^{36}\)

The lyrical poetry at its climax, both in Keats and Millay, captures that rarest moment of luxury of pain, that fusion of agony and ecstasy which renders death itself a source of sensuous luxury:

Now more than ever seems it rich to die,
To cease upon the midnight with no pain,
While thou art pouring forth thy soul abroad
In such an ecstasy!

(Ode to a Nightingale, stanza, VI)

Millay's "Here is a wound that never will heal I know" dwells upon a perpetual state of mixed pleasure and pain bestowed upon her sensibility by "a love turned ashes and the breath / Gone out of beauty ..." Her sensibility reacts to it in the last lines of the sonnet:

But that a dream can die, will be a thrust
Between my ribs forever of hot pain.\(^{37}\)

In their objective moment of inspiration, lyricism both in Keats and Millay crystallizes the human paradox into a

\(^{36}\) Millay, *Collected Sonnets*, p. 42.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., p. 32.
sharp image, rare in its precise outline and shape:

She dwells with Beauty - Beauty that must die;
And Joy, whose hand is ever at his lips
Bidding adieu; and aching Pleasure nigh,
Turning to poison while the bee-mouth sips:

(Ode on Melancholy, Stanza, III)

Millay's awareness of the paradox materializes into no less
a crystal imagery:

Love is no more
Than the wide blossom which the wind assails,
Than the great tide that treads the shifting shore,
Strewing fresh wreckage gathered in the gales;
Pity me that the heart is slow to learn
What the swift mind beholds at every turn. 38

(The Harpweaver sonnet VI)

This idea of permanence through poetry is again
reminiscent of Shakespeare's sonnets which he had addressed
to his lover Mr. W.H.

Shakespeare said:

But thy eternal summer shall not fade,
Nor lose possession of that fair thou ow'st,
Nor shall death drag thou wander'st in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou grow'st;
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

(Sonnet X V III)

Manichoean dualism is in this sonnet:

38 Millay, Collected Sonnets, p.29.
Love in dealt with more honestly, even though cruelly, in another poem, the concluding sonnet of "Second April"—in which the poet repudiates with cold anger the lover's mouth of clay, these mortal bones against my body set, and 'all the puny fever and frail sweat of human love. In this fierce manic seems denunciation of the body and the poor joys it has to offer, we find the real attitude that underlies these frivolities—and it is far from being a frank acceptance of the facts of life. It is not modern, . . . it is a belief in something beyond this mortal life—the immortality, in this instance, of art. And it is not as a woman that the poet speaks here, but as a human being and a creative artist. Her mortal lover, with his dream of a warm earthly happiness to which she as a woman must minister, is pushed aside.

Millay felt that love and sex were fleeting and transitory, and therefore devoting one's valuable time to them would be futile. To leave "foot-prints on the sands of time," one should be devoted to something more valuable and enduring. Millay felt that poetry which is a branch of fine arts was her forte. It was more enduring, offered greater joy, and would immortalize her. So she showed a revolt against sex:

Ah, but indeed, some day shall you awake,  
Rather, from dreams of me, that at your side  
So many nights, a lover and a bride,  
But stern in my soul's chastity, have lain,  
To walk the world forever for my sake,  
And in each chamber find me gone again!

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40 Millay, Collected Sonnets, p.23.
So Millay has disillusionment because of the transiency of human life, love, beauty, joy of life—all come to an end with death:

And you as well must die, beloved dust,
And all your beauty stand you in no stead;
This flawless, vital hand, this perfect head,
This body of flame and steel, before the gust
Of Death, or under his autumnal frost
Shall be as any leaf, be no less dead
Than the first leaf that fell, —this wonder fled,
Altered, estranged, disintegrated, lost.41

This sonnet was addressed to Arthur Ficke, whom the poet had loved passionately throughout her life, and who served as Millay's ideal for love.

So it is a bitter fact that Death snatches away the beautiful in life. This romantic attitude forms a major perspective of most of her poems in _Second April_:

It is in such poems as these, in which the thought of death makes life more sweet more beautiful, and more to be cherished moment by moment that Edna Millay is at her best and loveliest. She has the gift of seeing things as though with her last living look.42

So how can Millay ward off this mongrel Death? It is an inevitable end which she will have to face like all mortals.

41 Millay, _Collected Sonnets_, p. 19.

But she feels in the Shakespearean vein that her poetry can immortalize her. What can help her to write true poetry to achieve this end? Well, the power of creative imagination which she feels in divine can help her to achieve this task in "The Beanstalk", and "The Blue Flag in the Bog"—both reveal the power of imagination which is divine. In "The Beanstalk," the poet states that a powerful and creative imagination can take you to great heights in the realms of poetry:

No, Giant! This is II
I have built me a beanstalk in to your sky!
Le,—but it's lovely, up so high!43

This imagination in a human being is divine, and is the creator of sublime poetry. Millay's theorizing on poetry approximates the romantic or Appollonian theory of poetic inspiration. She seems to be indebted to Coleridge for her ideas on imagination. But her poetry is not indebted to any exterior borrowing; it arose from her own genius and experience. When Arthur Ficke asked Millay whether Renascence had been done in imitation of The Ancient Mariner, Millay replied in a letter to him:

I have read Coleridge, of course; but not for years. And I never even heard of William Blake. (Should I admit it, I wonder?)

43 Millay, Collected Lyrics, p. 54.
As to the line you speak of—'Did you get it from a book?' indeed! I'll slap your face. I never get anything from a book. I see things with my own eyes, just as if they were the first eyes that ever saw, and then I set about to tell, as best I can, just what I see.

And I have an idea that there are vastly fewer 'accidents of composition' than one might think.

But I will answer honestly, as you bade me. I did see it, yes. I saw it all, more vividly than you may suppose. It was almost an experience. And it is one of the things I don't talk about easily. All of my poems are very real to me, and take a great deal out of me. I am possessed of a masterful and often a cruel imagination.44

This letter sums up the romantic attitude i.e., subjectivity in Milley's poetry without reference to any external source whatsoever. Milley wrote what she saw and felt, and this experience was shaped into a thing of beauty, by her masterful imagination.

In "The Poet and His Book," Milley appeals to the readers to immortalize her through her poetry.

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 1145

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45 Millay, Collected Lyrics, p.63.
This is reminiscent of Shakespeare in his sonnets, who was confident that he would be immortalized through his poetry.

In this poem Millay makes a strong assertion that only the body can perish, and mix with the dust, the soul is imperishable and immortal and it will survive:

Saxton, ply your trade!
In a shower of gravel
Stamp upon your spade:
Many a rose shall ravel,
Many a metal wreath shall rust
In the rain, and I go singing
Through the lots where you are flinging
Yellow clay on dust!

This is again uttered in the transcendental vein which is the root of romanticism. This romantic assertion occurs again and again in Millay's poetry. The spirit is the essential "self" which the mongrel Death cannot snatch away. This thought also forms a recurrent theme of British Romantic poetry. An example is Adonais, where Shelley laments in the first part of the elegy on Keats' physical death, then rejoices in the second part because Keats is not really dead. His spirit has merged in God, and is shining from afar and beckoning him.

Her scientific knowledge and realism, though macabre, is clearly evident in these lines:

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46 Millay, Collected Lyrics, p.66.
When these veins are weeds,
When these hollowed sockets
Watch the rooty seeds
Bursting down like rockets,
And surmise the spring again,
Or, remote in that black cupboard,
Watch the pink worms writhing upward
At the smell of rain. 47

It is a macabre sight to imagine one's body being eaten
by worms after death, but it lends realism to poetry.

Karl Yost sums up his views on Second April:

Second April, represents, to some degree, a
reaction. Gaity and impudence are replaced
by a delicate melancholy; the atmosphere of
Greenwich Village bohemianism gives, way to a
nostalgia for the simplest country side; the
taunting daring of the earlier sonnets
becomes here a romantic grief for the passing
of love, the death of lovers. . . . And we
have here, too, for the first time definitely
exhibited, the images and symbols which are
to distinguish so much of the poets' subsequent
work. These are drawn almost entirely from
nature, images of the sea, and of stony upland
meadows predominating. . . . They illustrate,
they never confuse, either by being inaccurate
symbols of the emotion to be conveyed, by a
multiplicity, which (as was the case, ironically
enough, with the Imagists) outweighs the thought
and defeats its purpose by use of mutually
destructive metaphor or simile. . . . Miss
Millay, even in Second April, was too good a
poet to be lured into the use of elaborate and
meaningless figure. An early example of her
restraint and its poignant effectiveness is to be
found in 'Elegy before Death', in which a
character, the 'you' of the poem, is unmistakably,
though obliquely, painted by the symbolical
use of imagery. 48

47 Millay, Collected Lyrics, p. 64.
48 Karl Yost, A Bibliography of the Works of Edna St.
Vincent Millay, pp. 20-22.