

Edna St. Vincent Millay, A Poetic Privacy

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Read me, margin me with scrawling, Do not let me die!

— from *Second April* —

To spot a solitary figure so impassioned as Edna St. Vincent Millay among the high literary constellation that was the twenties and thirties of this century, is perhaps a local vision. She came into the orbit with her precocious, symbolically entitled poem *Renaissance*, now classified as 'one of the most remarkable poems of this generation' by L. Untermeyer,¹⁾ the standard anthologist, in which her romantic isolationism, which she was to uphold throughout her life, was already manifest.

She did not depart, as most of her contemporaries did, to look for 'poetry' elsewhere, because she knew poetry in the way she knew love and life as a woman. She may be considered an aborigine who ought to have been with Brownings though not with Byrons and Keats, with whom she was popularly associated. An aborigine is different from her ancestors in the fact that she has to live among her chronological contemporary with the awareness of the difference.

The characteristic feature distinguishing her poetry from others' is the elemental context in which most of her poems are presented. It is a very private kind of aesthetic situation, but as drama is bound to the stage and theatre, poems are bound to some poetic expositions, among which hers is one of the basic and most effective. She followed her feminine instinct.

Of course, the 'exposition' or the mode of encounter between the 'presented' and 'accepting' as prescribed by an author is one of the primary conditions of

1) *Modern American and British Poetry*, ed. Untermeyer, L. vol. 1. pp. 486-7, 1942.

literature, and Millay's insistence upon 'poetic privacy' for her poems appears almost reactionary in her day amidst the 'liberated' poems so exposed to the experimental vacuum.

Now almost a decade after her death, the general climate of poetry does not seem to bury her away with her poems as an instance of 'delayed phenomena' but rather to enshrine her as one who was beyond the passing temper of poetics and close to the primary poetry.

I

"Her metaphysics of passion remain personal", "The mood is rarely anything but subjective and selfperturbed", says Untermeyer in reference to the poems of *The Buck in the Snow and Other Poems*, and he also states that a later collection *Huntsman, What Quarry?* was her "effort to return to the personal lyricism in which Miss Millay is most at home."²⁾ Certainly the 'personal' note of her poetry is the first thing that encounters the reader and these critiques above are generally applicable to all the good poems of Millay.

In the most general term of the word 'personal', we may say that it is fit and propitious that a feminine poet should speak in such a 'personal' note; and as a matter of fact, we can scarcely conceive any of her poems without imagining the speaker in a feminine 'persona'. If it is consciously attempted, it is a clever choice, and if inevitable, it was, though not aesthetic, a sincere attitude.

The 'personal-ness' of poetry can be observed at various levels, and at the very basic level it will be defined by the term 'attitude', i. e., the 'metaphysics' of the poet in regards to her poems and to the potential readers of her poems.

The epithet 'personal' at this metaphysical latitude may first be distinguished from 'private-ness' of poetry. Perhaps enigmatic Dylan Thomas,³⁾ a generation younger, may present a good contrast in this respect. Thomas conceived his poetic realm so 'private' that his poems did not anticipate an audience; they existed in a nightmarish private world of his own and an exposure was simply

2) Untermeyer, L., *ibid.*

3) As for Thomas, D, ref. my essay, pp. 1-20 of the previous number of this Journal.

out of question. Thomas, through his 'persona', says sadly that his poems are:

Not for the towering dead
With their nightingales and psalms
But for the lovers, their arms
Round the griefs of the ages,
Who pay no praise or wages
Nor heed my craft or art.

The lines read like a prayer offered in secret for strangers to an unheeding God. His poems always speak alone. For a comparison, we quote from Millay. The poem is entitled *To Those Without Pity*:

Cruel of heart, lay down my song.
Your reading eyes have done me wrong.
Not for you was the pen bitten,
And the mind wrung, and the song written.

Here, the audience either supposed or actual, is an indispensable condition for this poem to exist. This, expositionally, is an addressed speech, a personal conduct in language; if it is a monologue, it at least is 'transitive' in its constitution. The particular sample here may not exemplify, yet it does fairly well represent the general tenor of her poetry. In a word, the site of Millay's poetry was that of 'dialogue'. There must always be two parties: one is constantly the speaker while the other ever remains a listener without a chance to respond.

The 'personal' metaphysics of poetry is also to be distinguished from 'objective' poetry as a matter of principle. The issue, however, is unavoidable since the 'personal-ness' of the condition already excludes 'objective-ness' or 'impersonal-ness' of the state of affairs concerned. It could have been true that Millay did not feel 'at home' in objective poetry for her performances, yet more likely, she could not have conceived her poems except in a personal way. Obviously, she was not interested in the artificial objectivity of poems with self-asserting personalities. Apparently, she never thought of granting her poems independence from herself, from her audience, and ultimately from the expositional context, which was what many of her contemporaries were striving to effect.

Some poems, and ironically some good ones including a few narrative poems and dramatic pieces, are expositionally impersonal and even objective, but they are only figuratively so. In many ways her *When Caesar Fell* is different from Yeats' *Long-Legged Fly*, and her *The Return* from Auden's *Our Hunting Father Told the Story*, but essentially in their actual subjectiveness. Her poems bring us to *her*, whereas their poems bring us to the *actuality*. Very few would indeed shed tears for her *Harp-weaver* if it were not for Edna St. V. Millay behind it.

Above these basic levels, the term 'personal' may connote a certain type of formal surface of poetry, i. e., the so-called expository assumption. A tentative survey of her poems and sonnets has confirmed our impression: her basic metaphysical attitude seems reciprocated in the expository mode of her poems.

In her *Collected Lyrics*, we have 224 pieces altogether, of which only 15 poems are objective and impersonal in their patent exposition; at least they do not contain such indicative clues as 'I' or 'you' or their derivatives. The remaining poems are all in some way or other 'subjective' and are expositionally 'spoken' by a 'character' or between 'characters' under each implied situation.

The second group, the subjective poems, may be further divided. Thus, 83 poems, according to my survey, are those monologues and soliloquies, all declaring or observing in either assumed or natural subjective utterances, usually through the persona indicated by 'I' or 'we' as the case may be. Then we have 62 poems which are in their expository design each an independent speech definitely addressed to a recipient, usually referred to by 'you' or insinuated by a form of question or imperative. The group is extended into two opposite directions. One is in those poems addressed to a further restricted audience, restricted in the sense that they are such figurative characters as personified ideas, mythological figures, inanimate objects, etc. This group includes 39 poems. The other extremities are found in a group of poems in which the addresses are so extensive and vague that the apparant dialogue itself has become that of open speeches, and the effect is almost impersonal. This comprises the smallest unit of 25 poems.

The proportion will be furthered if we make a similar survey of the sonnets

of her *Collected Sonnets*. We have there about 140 pieces (some repeated in the above collection), and except for a few sequels under particular headings, such as *An Ungrafted Tree*, *Epitaph for the Race of Man*, etc., which amounts to a little less than 40 sonnets, instances of impersonal and objective exposition are almost never to be met with.

Sonnets being traditionally what they are, they could have been handy tools for Millay, and her success as well as her liking to them may be considered another evidence in support of her attitudinized 'personal-ness'.

The classification above is done purely from the formal aspect of the poems, ignoring all the internal subtleties and arbitrarily designating many poems whose constitutions are complex or amphibious. As these collections are semi-chronologically compiled, a general observation was that the latter works are more subtle and varied in their expository layout.

Another powerful instrument with which Millay fortified the 'personal' situation of her poetry was the language. By 'language' we do not mean the diction; she used words and images usually ornate and far from colloquial daily uses to the extent that she almost sounded "a belated Elizabethan". By 'language' we mean, instead, the mode of the speech: her utterances are those in dialogues. Her heroines tell and speak in a dialogue situation, but seldom formulate or fabricate in a contextual void. Her poems would rather speak and tell than think and be. Compare, for an instance:

Aye, they have come to an end, the god, the lover, the friend;
They have come to an end.
The soul is alone now:
Strong, naked, full-grown now.⁴⁾

with

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.

4) "The Purification", Church, Richard

I know. But I do not approve. And I am not resigned.⁵⁾

The first quotation is from R. Church, one year younger than Millay. The lines constitute the concluding fourth stanza of a poem, which stands in queer contrast to the latter which is also the fourth and the concluding stanza of a poem from Millay.

These poems are both in colloquial diction — vocabulary and syntax, idiom and rhythm. But the first has an internal constitution that makes the whole utterance an open statement asking for a sharing of the sentiment and of the intelligence. The partial refrain is conducive to a stylized chant-like effect. The fact stated stands on itself while the poem as a performed rite or detached creation, likewise, stands alone.

In Millay's stanza, the first three lines are not much different perhaps from Church's with a somewhat similar type of anaphora, but for the last line in three curt sentences. The last line turns the whole stanza to a personal utterance not because of the diction or the content of the statements, but because of the invoked situation. The lines, especially because of the last line, bring us, not to the *fact stated*, but to *her*. Similar trope, if it is a trope, is found in such concluding lines of sonnets as in :

I might be driven to sell your love for peace
Or trade the memory of this night for food.
It well may be. I do not think I would.

A long Keats-like *Ode to Silence* ends also in :

But as for me, I seek your sister wither she is gone.

Traditionally, sonnets were a convention not only of the form and topics but of the exposition, and there is good reason that Millay' found sonnets so germane to her.

Another factor that makes a poem or poems 'personal' is the subject of the poetry, i. e., what is being said by a poem at its language surface, either

5) "Dirge without Music", Millay,

cognitive or descriptive. Obviously her main theme of poetry ever since her initial Renaissance, much like D. Thomas, was herself, the source of all the experience, though she was subtle enough to speak about herself “in character”. Whether she pretends to talk about a ‘witch-wife’ or a ‘rabit’ or a ‘fawn’ or a ‘lady from over the sea’, it usually is obvious that there is a personal insinuation as to what is the actual topic.

An awkward comparison may be attempted. These two quotations each have a definite topic:

The mind has a thousand eyes,
 And the heart but one;
 Yet the light of a whole life dies
 When love is done.⁶⁾

and

Pity no longer, arm-in-arm with Dread,
 Walks in that polished hall.
 Joy, too, is fled.
 But no man can have all.

The first, by a Victorian, F. W. Bourdillon, is a concluding stanza: the second by Millay, a full poem with the first two lines eliminated. Unless we have an understood situation where the poem has one more unexpressed line to say “And you neither!”, the second poem cannot stand; the ‘you’ designating the person with whom the reader is to identify himself.

The ‘personal-ness’ is not in the topics but in the insinuated situation. We shall not, therefore, go into the actual survey of the poems in an effort to obtain side-evidences to support her ‘personal-ness’ in her poetic topics.

After all, when the utterances themselves are already personal, the topics therein are personal in one way or other, and what is to be recognized is the fact that in Millay’s poems, we are dramatically convoked to a dialogue-scene as the silent partner.

6) “The Night Has a Thousand Eyes”, Bourdillon, F. W.

II

“We must always suppose *a* speaker for the poem, a *dramatis persona*. It is a fairly normal movement of the imagination to establish *the* speaker of the poem as the terminus of our devotion.” says W. K. Wimsatt.⁷⁾ Whether Millay herself was aware or not, her instinct somehow seems to have compelled her to the ‘poetic privacy’ for the site of her poetry to avail itself of the best advantage of this ‘normal movement’.

Her success, therefore, depends much upon the degree of ease and willingness with which her masked speaker is accepted by the audience and we may say, she was intuitively deft at it throughout. In a way she “dramatized herself”. Scarcely a poem exists without an overt designation of ‘I’ or an implicit presence of the first person singular feminine.

Evidently this distinguished her from her contemporaries who were attempting, at the time, to present “imaginary gardens with real toads in them” in a belief that “A poem should be palpable and mute/As a globed fruit”. It is simply through the ‘conditioned acceptance’ on the part of traditional readers that the majority of her subjective monologues register with least of resistance, and for such cases we shall not need particular quotations.

Yet, the process as stated by Wimsatt is an eternal condition of all the literary situations conceivable, and she seems merely to have taken the passage, often like a bee, and less often like a mouse. For both the poet and the reader, the establishing of the first focus of identification in the ‘speaker’ or the ‘voice’ of the poem is as natural as it is lazy. At its ebb, we often confront an excessive insistence on the ‘persona’ in a cavalcade of ‘I’s, thus :

That other men may hope, as I once did ;
 That other men weep, as I do now.
 I am beside you, I am at your back
 Firing our bridges, I am in your van :
 I share your march, your hunger ; all I lack

7) Wimsatt, Jr., W. W., *The Verbal Icon*, p. 265, 1954.

Is the sure song I cannot sing, you can.

You think we build a world; I think we leave

Only...⁸⁾

Being in a sonnet context, perhaps there is some design or justification for all this, but we fail to see the merit. This may be one of such “a horrible example of poetry gone mawkish in good cause” as criticized by S. Rodman,⁹⁾ and perhaps some portion of the failures may be ascribed to the expositional blunders above mentioned.

It is thus a paradox that some of her better poems are those less egotistic ones...to name a few, *Euclid alone has looked on beauty bare*, *On Hearing a Symphony of Beethoven*, *The Return*, *Bluebeard*, *Never may the Fruit be Plucked*, etc., and some songs and ballads perhaps.

Now, did we not notice in the above quotation, an insistence upon ‘you’ and ‘your’ (as well as ‘we’), no less upon ‘I’s? In the preceding section we have pointed out, as an essential characteristic of her poetry, this personal ‘dialogue-situation’ Millay invokes for her poetry.

The protagonist presupposes the antagonist. The term ‘personal’ defines the status between or among persons. Electric energy is charged between the poles. According to Paul Valéry, “when we speak of works of the mind, we mean either the terminus of a certain activity or the origin of a certain activity, and that makes two orders of incommunicable effects, each of which requires of us a special adaptation incompatible with the other. What remains is the work itself, as a tangible thing. This is a third consideration, quite different from the other two.”¹⁰⁾ And we are to reinstate the two ‘incompatible and incommunicable activities’ frozen in the ‘object’ of the third consideration, i. e., the actual poems.

In the preceding paragraphs we have acknowledged the ‘speaker’ or her representative in a poem as one of the termina and as the usual object to which

8) Sonnet cxxxvi, Collected Sonnets of E. St. V. M. p. 136.

9) Intro. to *100 American Poems*, ed. Rodman, S., p. 21, 1948.

10) Valéry, P., as quoted from “The Course in Poetics” in *The Creative Process* ed. by Ghiselin, B., p. 97, 1955.

we customarily attach our sympathy and identification. But now we have the secondary object for our imaginary identification, by which we, as the audience, are to be represented in the poem. We find ourselves in a stereoscopic situation of a borrowed reality.

As static forces, these two activities will remain 'incommunicable' inasmuch as a poem is such an artifact, and not an 'act'. If we further follow Valéry, "It is the performance of the poems which is the poem" and the "works of the mind exist only in action"¹¹⁾, i. e., in the mental act called 'imagination' or 'willing suspension of disbelief'. In short, the tacitly acknowledged dialogue situation established as the site for the encounter has two focal points: the first, being the 'speaker' as identified with the poet, when sympathetically identified by the audience; the second, the intra- or extra-textual audience, with whom the reader identifies himself whenever necessary and possible.

Very few perhaps have insisted upon and clung to this dual exposition as did Millay, which has been the main contention of the present essay. Did she simply inherit 'preliminary convention' for her poems as sonnets traditionally presuppose, or did she know something more than the Romantic definition of a poet? "What is a Poet? To whom does he address himself?... He is a man speaking to men...", so goes Wordsworth's declaration on poet-hood.

In the actuality of her poems, however, the status of the receiving party of the dialogue is always of a ready-made agent (with a varying degree of aesthetic projection).

Some of these voiceless conversants of her poem are often so clearly designated and tangible that one can easily grasp and identify himself with them, while others are quite subtle. At any situation, the intensity and the clarity of the expressive voltage and amperage vary according to the relative state of the two termina in the load of personal charge. A poem informally begins thus:

There at dusk I found you, walking and weeping
Upon the broken flags,¹²⁾

11) Valéry, P., *ibid.* p. 98.

12) "There at Dusk I Found You", *Collected Lyrics, ops. cit.*

and a devotional reader will presently recognize 'I' above as the masked speaker, and, perhaps with a little less degree of readiness and awareness, will identify himself with the other dramatis persona referred to by 'you'. As the situation is not definitely set for these terms at this stage, the reader is adrift a while, feeling for the focus for his self-projection. The poem, after thirty lines of meandering reflections, however, ends in these words:

Speak! Are you blind? Are you dead?
 Shall we call him back? Shall we mend him?

and one will be a very irresponsible reader if he should find himself not looking for some plausible reply. A similar case may be found in *Short Story*, which after two initial lines, runs thus:

I built a house for the wren that lives in the orchard, And a house
 for you.

After fourteen lines, we come to the last stanza:

But you, foolish girl, you have gone home
 To a leaky castle across the sea,—
 To lie awake in linen smelling of lavender,
 And hear the nightingale, and long for me.¹³⁾

The immediate response will be that one is sorry for having come home and it would be an after-thought to know that the actual situation insinuated is that the speaker is the 'girl'. In this sense the exposition is a degree more complex than the one before.

Another poem from her later works runs for eight lines describing a decaying tree in a sickly forest, then suddenly it ends in the two personal lines:

You and I have only one thing to do:
 Saw the trunk through.¹⁴⁾

13) "Short Story", *ibid.*

14) "Not So far as the Forest", *ibid.*

Similar, but more subtle is the poem, *The Fitting*, in which the entire poem is a subjective description of the slice of life in the “stream of consciousness” type of writing except for the chance mention of ‘you’ once, a few lines from the conclusion. In contrast to these rather advanced uses of dialogue-situation, an earlier experiment may be quoted. A slender poem, *Kin to Sorrow*, keeps asking if the speaker is kin to sorrow. The reader subconsciously asks himself ‘Who is being asked to answer?’, and almost willingly takes up the role himself. The last three lines, however, run :

Are we kin?
That so oft upon my door—
*Oh, come in!*¹⁵⁾
(Italic original)

And now who is being asked to come in?

Leaving the second focus indefinite or astray in the dialogue-situation may prove a success or a failure according to the other factors involved. Yet, we can consider the merit and demerit of a poem in terms of the state and handling of the second focus... the tacit object into which the reader is invited to project himself.

When misused, the genuine representation is replaced by stocks of vulgar personifications such as in *Mortal Flesh*, *Spain*, etc., while elsewhere the character of ‘you’ is nondescript and indefinite to such an extent that one finds it hard to know his part. One would feel only confused by such a sudden invocation as :

Wisdom, heretic flower, I was ever afraid
Of your large, cool petals without scent!¹⁶⁾

which follows a soliloquy conducted at the sight of a beautiful bird. Not seldom the focus is transferred from, say ‘mind’ to ‘April’. Another early poem *Wild Swans*, which strangely reminds one of Yeats’ *Swans at Coole*, concludes with

15) “Kin to Sorrow”, *ibid.*

16) “Pueblo Pot”, *ibid.*

the four lines in which we have one 'you', but it is suspended in the air unable to fly, or throb, or stay locked :

Tiresome heart, forever living and dying,
 House without air, I leave *you* and lock your door.
 Wild swans, come over the town, come over
 The town again, trailing your legs and crying !

Perhaps for the western mind, to address inanimate objects, abstract ideas, etc., may still be a natural act, but to many today, the supposition is only too unnatural and it sounds like a mere rhetoric, a dispensable luxury to the sincere and effective language.

Another variation of the dialogue-situation is found in dramatized poems in which the second party is given a verbal role. In such poems the contortion of a 'personal-situation' is spent and the sense of 'participation' on the part of the reader is reduced to the disinterested observation. *The Concert* may be considered in this respect, an exception, and solid in exposition in spite of its dramatic layout, simply because there the antagonist's voice is inaudible.

While there are a few strictly dramatized poems, we have another group of poems whose design and character designation are obscure or loose. The poetic merit of such poems of indeterminate exposition is one thing, and verifying such evaluation in relation to the mode and effect of the expositional factor is another. The above quoted *Kin to Sorrow* may be an exception, yet its merit is in the daintiness, but not in the straightness of poetic sincerity and power. Consider also the complex exposition of a poem *Wraith*, which begins thus :

"Thin Rain, whom are you haunting,
 That you haunt my door?
Surely it is not I she wanting...
Someone living here before!
 "Nobody's in the house but me.
 You may come in if you like and see."
 Thin as thread, with exquisite fingers,—

Ever seen her, any of you?

(Italic original)

where there are at least four levels of voices, two characters addressed by 'you' and the reader must find for himself where to accommodate himself. *Spring Song*, likewise, is performed at three levels of speech and ironically ends in a statement, "You can get accustomed to anything"!

We have so far analysed some of the states of affairs concerning the two parties, the two foci of the situation, in terms of their mutual relationship and their respective relationship to the author and to the reader. And as an attempt, the merit and demerit of the actual poems are partially explained in terms of expository integrity.

A personal dialogue situation is a specified aesthetic context, either imposed or induced by the poems for their acceptance and performance, but with special weight upon the second focus of the self-projection prescribed for the reader. Her poems demand of the readers the indulgence to come to her terms, which is very 'personal' a conduct for an aesthetic attitude.

III

Millay could be called, thus, a limited poet, or at least she needed more versatility to be otherwise. Yet it remains true that she selected the most effective and immediate way to express herself. Her poetry exists in the personal 'situation of confidence'; the reader must first accord his indulgence in order to participate and enjoy it. The degree of the engagement may range from that of being a mere passive audience of a dramatic soliloquy to that of direct discourse as the actual receiver of the verbal message, and in between, lie the graded steps of 'willing or induced suspension of disbelief'. Though not in a direct ratio, yet we may state that the closer the engagement, the more possibility there is for a poem to be effective. The personal dialogue-situation to which Millay clings may well be a matter of taste but is definitely a logical short-circuit for the impact.

The personal exposition is contrasted to the objective presentation in the sense that the former is an exploitation of language as language. Language is

used in its full advantage as such but not beyond or below its proper capacity. The irony she presents today is the fact that she somehow exhibited that poetry can be as well accomplished through subjective or even private 'engagement' as it is done by a modernistic sublimation of language to a state of self-existing icon or by subjugation of language to a depersonalized tool of pragmatic communication.

Poetry cannot exist as sculpture or music does, and is an affair that takes effect in a willingly maintained imaginary situation, insomuch as literature itself is an affair of a conventionalized 'exposition' different from those of other genres of art and culture

If we recall E. E. Cummings¹⁷⁾ as the instituter, or attempter, of the physical exposition analogous to objective arts, and Dylan Thomas as the eliminator of the public, ready-made expositions, Millay seems to represent the position of a preserver or a reviver of the traditional poet-poem-reader continuum, though in the limited realm of 'poetic-privacy'. If, however, poetry should expand, all these possibilities towards its autonomy and fulfillment must be fully employed and improved.

Genre-conscious poetry is subsequent to the division of the indiscriminate vital culture into epic, lyric and other branches of oral literature. Some poems are communal in their exposition even today, whereas others are private in their standing — traditionally, sonnets are of this type and odes, lyrics, epics, ballads etc. may be said to be of the former type.

It seems that while communal poetry performed a ceremonial function in its original status, private poetry has long served as sublimated personal speeches, and perhaps the dialogue-situation under consideration does belong to this latter line of poetry, at least in its expository convention. As readers and audience, we have outgrown the stage of primitive identification. A poetic effect may depend upon its effected privateness to the reader, yet we know it is valid only in a borrowed actuality. We sustain the impact in the realm of conscious make-believes, and if such an experience is held significant to our actual life, it

17) As for Cummings, E. E. Ref. my paper pp. 9-21 of the present Journal Vol. 7, 1957.

is because we respect the valid relationship between the two realms of our mental experience.

Basically no poem could be conceived without anticipating the reciprocity, and the ultimate effect on the part of the reader is only accomplished by completing the reciprocity from his side. This is not because language is the tool of communication but because poetry is the basic human act that presupposes the communicability between and among men.

A personal dialogue-situation, as a previously conceded context in which the reader exposes himself to a poem, may be an affair extraneous to the poems themselves, (no less than the exposure of the poet in the poems), but what counts is the fact that the context persists throughout and within the poems read, and is made one of the essential conditions of the exposition of the poetry.

This is an internal affair of each poem, and must be, therefore, strictly differentiated from what is called 'dramatic monologues', as of Browning, where the reader enters the poem having already or extraneously worked himself up into the proposed aesthetic situations. There the poetic intensity is borrowed not from the actuality, but from the established 'stage effect', so to speak, which is already and in itself a make-believe. The personal exposition borrows its force from the actual situation of discourse, the actual and personal conducts of our life.

The obvious uses of Millay's poetic language may appear odd in the light of her insistence upon dialogue-situation, but upon second thought, it seems to have some justification: it is not the state of affair invoked, but the exposition itself that is analogous to the actuality. A mimetic presentation of the actual speech will be more or less an incidental choice left to the discretion of the poet for each occasion. Millay simply preferred the poetic for its refinement and taste besides the sheer aesthetic effect. The racy dialect E. E. Cummings set in mosaic for the un-real effect of his poems is a curious antithesis to the highly ornate language of Millay in the exactly opposite expository assumption. We may also do well to recall the matter-of-fact language of Marian Moore, her matching contemporary.

T. A. Eliot in his *The Music of Poetry* says that “The dependence of verse upon speech is much more direct in dramatic poetry than in any other. In most kinds of poetry, the necessity for its reminding us of contemporary speech is reduced by the latitude allowed for personal idiosyncrasy¹⁸⁾”, and Millay’s preference, we think, is within the latitude allowed to her discretion.

However, the personal situation of her poetry is in some way comparable to the dramatic situation in which poetry is being spoken, not recited, with some prescribed effect. Talking about plays produced in verse, Eliot says again in *Poetry and Drama* that “it will appear that prose, on the stage, is as artificial as verse; or alternatively, that verse can be as natural as prose¹⁹⁾”.

If thus, dramatic poetry is the drama where poetry is employed as natural expression for a heightened dramatic situation, perhaps the same may be said of dialogues in poetry; thus, we may say that some highly dramatic diction may be quite natural in a highly poetic situation, which in turn is after an intense personal encounter. The mimetic copying of reality is one of the possible artistic tropes, while detached language and broken imagery is another. The fact has been there since the beginning of literary arts, but only recently it has come to be questioned.

The literary situation is, if we recall, divorced from the actuality. We willingly and deliberately take upon ourselves the roles assigned to be assumed in the prescribed imaginary situation, but we usually do not confuse the issues.

Poetry is an art whose milieu is language, not the things or the state of affairs thereby stated or implied; and since language is a system of symbols for communication, it behaves most vital and germane when used as speech under the relevant situation of communication. Language is independent and concrete, though within its own limitations, when it is used in its proper and full capacity as language, and the dialogue situation is necessarily the site where language can perform fully and assume an auto-logical, self-asserting existence. Perhaps next to the pragmatic actual speeches we are engaged in daily, and

18) Eliot, T. S., *T. S. Eliot Selected Prose* ed. John Hayward, pp. 60, 61, 1955 (from “Music of Poetry”)

19) Eliot, T. S., *idib.*, p. 70 (from “Poetry and Drama”)

among the simulated situations fabricated in language, the dialogue-context may be the most vivid and persuading.

Poets are not usually fixed in their predilection of expository manners, rather they look for the unexpected and variety, whereas some exhibit decisive ideosyncrasy or significant selection with overt or covert principles. E. E. Cummings and others have experimented in the transfixing and freezing of the situation in the physical context, (the actual impact of the poems upon the reader's whole perception,) and ended up in a show of artificiality. The Imagist movement was in a way an effort to banish from poetry all the pre-poetic and extra-poetic conditions. Their poems, as signs, designated bare facts by means of connotation-free linguistic formations. T. S. Eliot seems to go back into the most comprehensive and elemental type of exposition, i. e. drama.

While modern poets and critics departed from the land they inherited, in search of ultimate poetry, Millay was not particularly idle and complacent at home. She reminds us of the basic exposition for poems to be conceived, to be composed, and to be enjoyed. She simply did not feel it necessary to go abroad for a thing which she already had at home, namely, the primary poet-poem-reader continuum.

IV

Genres of literary arts have been established traditionally rather than according to a set of a priori criteria. We do not mind the complexity of the actual products and the situation, but we certainly cannot afford to have the very norms, the criteria by which we not only distinguish but also evaluate, left vague and indefinite.

One of the main probable terms of differentiating literary genres is the nature of the site where the attempted events are to be accomplished. We may call the condition that so engages the creator, the creation and the audience, the 'exposition' for literature in general.

If the 'willing suspension of disbelief' is one of the essential assumptions for literature, what is the basic expository assumption for poetry?

The beauty of a song may be partially ascribed to the singer's voice, but

the merit of the verse sung is independent. Inasmuch as the use of voice, an objective factor, distinguishes the singing from other musical performances, the voice, a physical factor, becomes one of the criteria for evaluation. In the same token, the differential criteria for poetry become necessarily the evaluative criteria of actual poems.

It is fortunate that poetry has some physical properties, as songs do, and its topology does usually conform to the conceptual idea 'poetry', yet essentially speaking, poetry, for its autonomy and independence, should be distinguished and evaluated according to the status of its exposition.

Accordingly, as the personal exposition of uniliterary dialogues performed in poetic privacy does distinguish Millay's poems, the same factor was made one of the essential criteria by which to assess and criticise the poems so distinguished.

The creator-creation-audience continuum is thus a major issue for literature and especially for poetry, and in this context, Millay's insistence upon her personal expository manners, though private, seem to be justified and perhaps even significant under the circumstances.

20) Texts for the present study were *Collected Lyrics of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, Harper, 1939, New York and London, 5th ed. and *Collected Sonnets of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, Harper, 1941, 5th ed.