

“. . . And Now to Introduce: Edna St. Vincent Millay!” · *W. Martin*

Clearly, when HarperCollins decides to publish a selection of Edna St. Vincent Millay’s poetry in honor of her one hundredth birthday, serious things are afoot on the American literary scene.

“Who is Edna St. Vincent Millay, anyway?”

“She wrote ‘The Harp Weaver.’”

“Oh. I remember that from my seventh grade reading class.”

“Some sonnets, too.”

“Oh.”

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At the home of some friends a few weeks ago: I knew how everyone there was very fond of Millay’s poetry, so I mentioned the new book. Michael shuffled around in a drawer full of tapes and CDs until he found the recording of a performance I vaguely remembered from a few years before. He played it: Mezzo-soprano and piano: “First Fig” and “Second Fig,” “The Philosopher,” “Never May the Fruit Be Plucked”—these were poems of Edna St. Vincent Millay’s as songs for which he’d composed music, reminiscent of Strauss or Britten, real *Lieder* . . .

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*Edna St. Vincent Millay: Selected Poems*, “edited and with an introduction by Colin Falck,” is a lovely blue hardcover; nicely designed, carefully edited, and \$18.00. This last point merits attention: in the publishers’ blurb the book is touted as “demonstrat[ing] that the finest poetry can be accessible to the ordinary reader.” Probably the ordinary reader would be more inclined towards the less expensive *Collected Poems* in paper; this book seems intended mostly for libraries, collectors, and book thieves. Another point: while the book itself is very attractive, with its matte-finish dust-cover (a photograph of trees in Millay’s garden), and the poems themselves nicely typeset and situated on the page, HarperCollins has apparently

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*Edna St. Vincent Millay: Selected Poems*. Edited and with an introduction by Colin Falck. 1991, HarperCollins Publishers, New York, NY.

decided to do what everyone else does these days: to perfect-bind even beautiful hardcover books of poetry (and on top of it to charge \$18.00). Perhaps they just didn't think the poetry fine enough to warrant a sewn binding? Or didn't think the ordinary reader would notice? (Probably both are true. And let this be a warning to you, Ordinary Reader, daily having to contend with much-loved books falling apart in your hands.)

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As far as content is concerned: this book does contain a few pieces which seem only to show why Millay has been disregarded for so long; the bulk of the selection, however, is made up of some of her best poems. It is in itself a very good introduction to Millay's work, including poems from all nine of her volumes (the first was published in 1917; the last, posthumously, in 1954), and a short bibliography at the end. Falck's introductory essay, however, despite good intentions, does not succeed in doing Millay any favors.

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Falck's introduction, "The Modern Lyricism of Edna Millay," is one of the book's salient features (in addition to its occasion and appearance). Throughout the essay Falck concerns himself with Millay's reception by contemporary readers and writers of poetry. His argument in general is well-founded: "The occulting of Millay's reputation has been one of the literary scandals of the twentieth century, and it is time we found a proper place for this intense, thoughtful, and magnificently literate poet." However, he presents his defense so inconsistently and in such an obnoxiously zealous manner, that I eventually become distrustful of him and suspicious of what he himself has in mind as her "proper place."

The circus begins right from the opening sentence: "The poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay combines spiritual intensity with intellectual sophistication in a way which may constitute an almost unimaginable unity of sensibility for present-day readers." He continues, already in the next sentence: "Millay has in the years since her death become the captive of her least poetically educated admirers; yet it seems likely that it is a fear of the very simplicity of her poetry — and of the challenge that it poses to us to experience life with something of the intensity with which earlier, and less ironic, generations experienced it — that mainly lies behind her neglect by today's highbrow readership."

*Presenting in ring number one: the lowly, “non-poetically educated admirer”! [probably the bookthief], and in ring number two (with a grand gesture): the snooty, cynical, and overeducated “highbrow reader”!*

Falck laments the fact that Millay has been written out of the canon and is rarely anthologized: “Millay is no longer a part of any trend or tendency that is seen as having helped to make American poetry what it is today (in which perception there is perhaps a good deal of ironic truth), and her distinctive achievement, like that of any poet whose work relied on lyrical directness or firmness of tone, is almost entirely incapable of being discussed within the reflexive and involuted terms of present-day critical debate.” He concerns himself throughout with Millay’s position in the American poetic tradition, particularly as regards “the Modernists.” He acknowledges, and to some extent agrees with, the reasons for her unpopularity: “A considerable part of Millay’s writing . . . is indeed marred by the kinds of naive-seeming traditionalism for which modernists have berated her.” Yet he claims that “. . . the substantial proportion . . . is sufficient on its own to entitle her to consideration as one of the major poets of the century. If we add to such essential modernity her more individually distinctive qualities . . . she becomes a poet of unusual power and significance for readers today.” He follows with some examples of her writing, which are intended to illustrate the point, and comments: “[these poems] should bring joy to the hearts of even the most hard-bitten of modernist-minded readers.”

*And in the center ring, Ladies and Gentlemen, let me call your attention to the mighty Bengal Tiger, king of the jungle, known to swallow grown men whole—ferocious and untameable . . . !!!*

Throughout the essay, Falck continually sets up double standards—for Millay as well as for the reader. As is apparent in the first paragraph, he has the reader of Millay and the non-reader (in fact, all readers—ever) completely sussed: if one likes her, then he or she must not be educated enough to (really) understand poetry; if one doesn’t like her, then he or she must be “overeducated.” As for Millay, he writes: “Millay is a poet who has been buried twice over: once by the generation that needed to get modernism established, and a second time by the academically inclined critics who have interested themselves only in poetry which presents verbal and intellectual

complexities that can be discussed in professional articles or in the seminar room.” It seems very strange to me that he should spend so much time defending the “essential modernity” of Millay’s poetry while simultaneously so fiercely critiquing the “hard-bitten, modernist-minded reader.” It seems strange to me that he should be trying to reincorporate Millay into the canon — which automatically implies necessary consideration by such “academically minded critics” — and yet he criticizes them ruthlessly — and is ultimately no different from them.

*Watch as the tiger jumps through seven rings of fire at my command!!!  
Will our readers be brave enough to escape certain death should she  
escape my guiding hand?*

He sets up Millay in opposition to the very forces he would like for her to be embraced by, and in doing so appropriates her — underhandedly — for his own agenda, which is nothing less than to get back at his lit/crit-minded department colleagues for not seeing things his way. To be sure, Falck’s criticism is similar to one which Millay herself expresses in her own poems, as evident in an excerpt he refers to:

It is the fashion now to wave aside  
As tedious, obvious, vacuous, trivial, trite,  
All things which do not tickle, tease, excite  
To some subversion, or in verbiage hide  
Intent, or mock . . .

And to be sure, Falck’s critique of Millay’s situation is valid: she *has* been neglected. Yet it is doubtful that his own “using the nobler past as a stick to beat the degraded present with” will in and of itself convince anyone to listen to her anew. And then of course one must consider that, regardless of how rotten contemporary American poetry must be, if Edna St. Vincent Millay had anything to say to today’s reader wouldn’t he or she be listening?

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It wouldn’t hurt, however. Although I think Falck exaggerates, I think there are plenty of people who *do* read Millay and appreciate her deeply and *are* poetically educated — what are all of the laudatory bits on the back cover about if not to convince us of that? (And then, of course, there are those

who compose music for her poems . . . ) If not everybody appreciates and loves her as much as Falck purports to — so what? It's no reason to upbraid all of contemporary American literature; after all, Edna St. Vincent Millay isn't a value.

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But she *is* a poet. And what speaks most in favor of this book, at least from my own point of view, is that through spending time with her poems I've come to appreciate Millay in ways I hardly expected; I've even memorized one (not "The Harp Weaver," though . . . ). The general "neglect" of Millay reminds me of my German friend who feels Rilke to be tedious and clichéd. I could never understand, having always been infatuated with the incredible depth and perfect music his poems have in German. Perhaps it is, after all, a good idea to get over one's prejudices about one's own language.

And that is exactly what Falck is admonishing us to do, ultimately. The belligerent tone of his essay, however, is alienating and annoying; it conspires against what I took to be the real purpose of this book, which is not only to honor Millay on her centennial, but to reintroduce her to a contemporary audience. And for that, I think, she is very well able to speak for herself.

Never, never may the fruit be plucked from the bough  
And gathered into barrels.  
He that would eat of love must eat it where it hangs.  
Though the branches bend like reeds,  
Though the ripe fruit splash in the grass or wrinkle on the tree,  
He that would eat of love may bear away with him  
Only what his belly can hold,  
Nothing in the apron,  
Nothing in the pockets.  
Never, never may the fruit be gathered from the bough  
And harvested in barrels.  
The winter of love is a cellar of empty bins  
In an orchard soft with rot.