
Quest for real Self : A study in Edna Millay's Poems of Life and Death

Dr. Pramod Prasad (1943pramodprasad@gmail.com)

Former Professor of English, L N Mithila University, Bihar, India

Abstract

The general objective of this paper is to appreciate the subtle nuances of the poetry of Edna St. Vincent Millay, the winner of Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1923. The specific objective of this research paper is to analyse her poems critically to reveal how Edna Millay seeks to explore the identity of her true self, representing the restless spirit of the modern man, through the interaction and inter animation of the conflicting impulses of life.

Keywords: Edna Millay's Poems, Renaissance, Sonnet,

Edna Millay treats life as a journey where poetry is the main source of discovering her identity, her real self. The gusto and animation with which she has appraised the diverse facts of life in her poetry are suggestive of her conviction that life must be enjoyed in its totality. She has always been recalcitrant to fashion out a view of life in consonance with an intellectually conceived philosophy of life. As such, her whole poetic career has been devoted to highlighting not only the joyous aspects of life but also the anguish of existence. She understands, as T.S.Eliot says, "the essential advantage for a poet is not to have a beautiful world with which to deal; it is to be able to see beneath both beauty and ugliness;; to see the boredom, the horror ,and the glory."¹

In Millay's unique title poem in her first Volume Renaissance and other poems, the rhythms of life and death become intensely vibrant, of course without effecting an outburst. The awareness of the infinite dimensions of the soul finds its live counterpart in an unflinching anchorage to the down-to-the- earth reality of life. The poem records the typical human response to the opposed pulls of life, both equally strong--the will to live and the will to die. The rhythms of life and death are so poised in the poem as to remain in a state of dynamic equilibrium. The poem aims at the evocation of the setting of Millay's childhood, with all its associations of joys and sorrows, with its gusto for expansiveness as well as its limiting impact on the impressionable self of the poet. The consciousness of the world's weight of sin and suffering becomes so intense that it throws her in 'infinite remorse of soul'. The poet' sense of grief is brought to a sharp focus by the joint functioning of so many images which pervade the poem. Through the metaphor of the

“the great wound” which leads to “infinite remorse of soul”, the reader is first made aware of the wreckage caused by the force of evil in the world of human beings:

*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*²

Here the poet subtly manages to show her guilt consciousness by stressing the word ‘sin’ and by the repeated use of the ‘mine’. The word ‘mine’ which the poet uses five times in a short para of six lines very effectively suggests a state of mind rent by guilt consciousness. In such a perplexed state of mind she could exclaim in the vein of Shelley, “O lift me as a wave, a leaf a cloud, /I fall on the thorns of life: I bleed”.³

Millay uses more and more images in the lines that follow to show her state of agony and the depth of torture which has eaten into the vitals of her self. The poet’s method is to evoke a particular mood by strengthening the central image with a pile of other images:

*Ah, awful weight! Infinity
Pressed down upon the finite me!
My anguished spirit, like a bird,
Beating against my lips I heard (lines: 79-82)*

The poet’s sense of grief is so intense that he longs for the relief of death and imagines herself buried in the cool earth:

*Deep in the earth I rested now
Cool is its hand upon the brow
And soft its breast beneath the head
Of one who is gladly dead (lines-99-102)*

But soon life-instinct vigorously asserts itself and she longs to live:

*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.*

.....
*O God, I cried, give me new birth
And put me back upon the earth !*

.....
*And the big rain in one black wave
Fell from the sky and struck my Grave.*

.....
I breathed my soul back into me.

.....
I laughed and laughed into the sky,

.....
*O God, I cried no dark disguise
Can e'er hereafter hide from me
Thy radiant identity! (Lines: 115-.....190)*

The sense of triumphant affirmation of life, indeed, finds its apt rendition in the above lines. The poet's use of heavy alliteration is indeed noteworthy, for it has been harnessed towards heightening her sense of joy. The visual image of "the big rain in one black wave" which falls from the sky is highly effective. The image very subtly symbolises the force of the poet's will to live. The poet's choice of words and images to express her sense of glad awakening is really appreciable. Truly, the enchantment of art lies in the conjunction of form and idea.

The tension between the poet's will to live and the will to die, which has been communicated so effectively in "Renaissance" is never ultimately resolved, and, in fact, Millay's poetry owes its force to this tension. As a true poet of life, Edna Millay has always been recalcitrant to fashion out a view of life in consonance with an intellectually conceived philosophy. Millay's method of back and forth movement, the withdrawal from and involvement in life by which she hopes to explore the identity of her true self is suggested not only in her individual between 1 poems, but also reflected in the structure that emerges after a critical study of her poetry as a whole. Thus, in poems, as in "Interim", "Spring" and

“Suicide”, her joy of cosmic awareness, so succinctly expressed in *Renascence*, fritters away when she has to face the shock of death. In *“Interim”*, she is poignantly struck by the sense of the meaninglessness of the universe. In the morbid state of mind, the protagonist broods over the aimless immensity of space. She sees the universe unrolled before her like a scroll and reads thereon

*Chaos and doom, where helpless planets whirl
Dizzily round and round and round and round
Like tops across a table,.....(lines:187-189)*

The cosmic imagery of the celestial bodies drawn from the vast astronomical space is very subtly employed to suggest the triviality and the meaninglessness of the existence of planets and human creatures. The poet’s awareness of the appalling spectacle of “helpless planets” operating blindly echoes Tennyson’s reflection on the stars that “blindly run.”⁴ Millay views in her lyrics, again and again, the earthly existence as transitory, meaningless and painful product of a blind necessity. In *“Spring”*, she records her moments of pensive melancholy under the pressure of the poignant awareness of the fading rhythms of life. The poem gives the picture of “the brains of man/Eaten by maggots”(lines::11-12), shocking her readers into an awareness of the basic nothingness of life: “Life in itself/Is nothing/An empty cup, a flight of uncarpeted stairs.”(lines:13-15)

The poem in its nihilistic note reveals the impact of Dadaism on Millay’s poetry. Dadaism is one of the most representative moments of the decade which gave rise to considerable intellectual stir in Zurich in 1916. It is likely that in her darker moments nihilistic notes of Dadaism have crept into her poetry.

Under the grip of her darker moments, she begins to curse life in *“The Suicide”*:

*Ah, but I go not as I came, ---no trace
Is mine to bear away of that old grace/
I bought ! lines 17-19)*

Clearly the consciousness of sin that afflicted her soul in *“Renascence”* has still its hold on her. Her conception that the process of life, its drift towards meaninglessness and psychic vacuum affects even the innocent beings, chilling their fervour, shows the essential realization of a great

poet. Tennyson voices the similar regrets about life in one of his sad moods. So does Vaughan in “The Retreat” where he regrets how his earthly sins have deprived him of his “glorious training,/From where the enlightened spirit sees/That shady city of Palme trees”⁵.

The bitter realities of life induce in Millay a sense of loss to poignant to be borne. This leads to the act of suicide which finally brings the protagonist to the house of God. But in God’s house, she is at once struck by her sense of shame. She begins to hesitate to face God with her polluted soul. This unwillingness to meet God in “unlovely garb”, however, lasts only for a moment. Soon she finds herself able to subdue her scepticism. Amidst her thoughts of negation, her life instincts secretly creeps in, and she becomes conscious of her oneness with the divine. In her “Father’s house”, she gets all she “lacked so long and lived so well”. There she remains completely free from entanglements of the mundane world; she has nothing to do but to luxuriate in the sense of stillness that has dawned on her under the divine pressure. But Millay, unlike Shelley, shows her reluctance to be lost in the ethereal world of inaction. A realist to the core of her being, the impulse to lapse into this shadowy nowhere of heavenly bliss cannot make her forgetful of the life of action. Soon, therefore, she seems to be surfeited with the idle life of heaven, and she grows “weary” of her “lonely ease”.

A similar idea grips her mind in “Dirge without Music”. She feels that she need not bother about “the shutting away of loving hearts in the hard ground” for “They are gone to be feed the roses”. The blossom that is ‘elegant’ and ‘fragrant’ might be satisfactory substitute for the wise and the lovely who are gone. But Millay cannot approve of this idea of ‘transformation of energy’. To her, “More precious was the light in your eyes than all the roses in the world”. Millay might be brooding over her witty and lovely friend, Elinor, who was seriously ill at the time of writing this poem. Such practical experiences lead her to contemplate on the wasteful pattern of existence:

“ A formula , a phrase remains,---but the best is lost.”(line-9)

The best is lost in the “Undiscovered country from whose bourn/ No traveller returns”. As such, Millay cannot approve of the peace of the grave. She again and again shows, in her poetry, her unwillingness to embrace death as a means to escape the entanglements of the mundane

existence. In one of her sonnets from Huntsman, What Quarry? Which begins with the like “Thou famished grave, I will not fill thee yet” she gives a succinct expression to her joy in living:

“ my heart is set/On living- I have heroes to begel/ Before I die”(Sonnet no.9-lines:4-6)

This is followed by her triumphant declaration to suck the juice of life drop by drop so that on the last day death would get her bones only and nothing else :

*And thou shall have me; but I dare defend
That I can stave thee off, and I dare say,
What with the life I lead, the force I spend,
I'll be but bones and jewels on that day
And leave thee hungry even in the end.(lines:10-14)*

This is, indeed, a very forceful affirmation of life against the background of the awareness of the shattering and avalanching power of death. Rarely has this confidence in the face of death been put forth in a work of literature with such a remarkable poetic ease. Besides this lyric, even John Donnel’s famous sonnet “Death be not proud” sounds like a more whimsical speculation on death since, while Millay accepts death as the fact of life, Donne rejects it with the abandon of a spiritual quester. Millay’s choice and handling of images in this poem also throw adequate light on her consummate craftsmanship.

Edna Millay in her poems of life and death shows the poise of a real artist of life who seriously wants to understand life in its entirety in order to explore the identity of her true self. The impulse to move away from the realities of life is thus sharply balanced against the impulse to get grounded in the earthly concerns. Her growing concern with the theme of death naturally balanced against her sense of joy in living. In “Moriturus, her impulse to move away from the realities of life is sharply balanced against the impulse to get grounded in the earthly concerns. She starts repudiating the peace of the grave and gives out her determination to resist death. Optimistic thoughts dawn on her, and she begins to realise that life, even at its ugliest, is worth embracing. Life, even with all its complications and constrictions, seems to her preferable to death’s “nothing good”. Towards the end of the poem, she draws a suggestive picture of the helpless old age “dependent / On a chair propelled/By a surly attendant. Even the awareness of such negative aspects of life in no way diminishes her sense of joy in living. She declares that

she would rather suffer life at its lowest ebb “Than go with Death.” So deep is her love of life that all her resentment against life fades in a moment and a zest for life asserts its claim more vigorously than ever before.

*I shall bolt the door
With a bolt and a cable,
I shall block my door
With a bureau and table;
With all my might
My door shall be barred.(lines:137-142)*

The idea of blocking death’s way ‘with a bureau and a table’ is, indeed, an original concept.

Millay, like E.A.Robins, seems to maintain that there is something within man which prevents him from drifting towards pessimism. This realization has given her sufficient strength to confront death to the finish even when she finds herself one day physically ill and helpless:

*I shall put up a fight,
I shall take it hard
With his hand on my mouth
He shall drag me forth,
Shrieking to the south
And clutching at the north.Lines: 143-!48)*

This reflects Millay’s bold assertion of her sense of identity with the universe. She cries with her full strength to the south and the north as if they are her own kith and kin. Ludwig rightly observes that “in all literature this cry has scarcely been uttered with a more tragic tone.”⁶ Her determination to put up a fight with death might be contrasted to Emily Dickenson’s approach to the theme of death. Dickenson does not accept death as distinct from life. She believes that life and death are the two facets of the same coin. Man’s potentiality in life is one thing, but he has greater potentiality in death. Puritanism has taught Dickenson that this world is a mere phase, “a test for life eternal”, and it is only after death that one begins to live, death opening up avenues to a rich spiritual life. As such, in Dickenson’s poem there are no signs of struggle, violence or defiance”. In fact, we discern in Dickenson’s poetry an attempt to merge the issue of life and death in to a fresh imaginative structure. Millay, on the other hand, makes no effort towards

reconciling these opposed poles of experience. She endeavours passionately to establish the identity of these disparate strands of life, so that they do not fade into each other. Such a poetic instance of life, as opposed to the philosophic one in which the note of discordance in completely stilled, conduces to the creation of a work of art which proves exciting from the aesthetic point of view. A really great work of poetry is steeped in the realities of life; and the realities of life being so various, the business of the poet is to reflect them as they are, not as something encompassed within an intellectually wrought structure.

The poems already discussed in the preceding pages show that Millay in her quest for the identity of her real self always resists the temptation to reduce life to a joyous mood only. She understands clearly that man's life stands at the confluence of the antagonistic forces. So, if poetry has to remain faithful to life, it must encompass within its structure its various strains, often discrete, of a composite human personality.

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About the Author

Dr. Pramod Prasad (b.1943) teaches at Christ Academy Institute for Advanced Studies, Bangalore. He is a former Professor of English, L N Mithila University (India). He was also Professor and Chairman of the Dept. of English, Faculty of Arts, Hodeidah University (Yemen). He obtained his Ph.D. from Bihar University and PGDTE from Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages (now known as EFLU). Two of his current books on How to learn Phonetics and Spoken English and Fundamental Concepts of Phonetics have been published by MPP House, Bangalore in January, 2018.