

War Propaganda in Edna St.Vincent Millay's *Make Bright the Arrows: 1940 Notebook*

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Abstract

When the Second World War broke out the majority of poets followed the literary fashion of war poetry established by the First World War poets Wilfred Owen(1893-1918) and Siegfried Sassoon(1886-1967) in expressing antiwar attitudes. Unlike this trend was the attitude the American poet Edna St.Vincent Millay adopted and expressed openly in her war poems. Hence, despite the revulsion other poets expressed against Nazism and Fascism and the despicability they showed against Hitler and Mussolini they yet wrote against the destruction war brings to life and civilization. Millay, on the other hand, concentrated on the destruction Hitler already brought to Europe and life, therefore instead of being antiwar she wrote propagandist poetry that called the United States government to give up isolationism and support the European allies against the fuehrer and his army hoping that stopping him will reset order again in Europe and the world.

This paper, therefore, tries to trace the development of Millay's political interest from early youth, the time of the First World War, which was relatively weak then developed with such events as the Sacco-Vanzetti case and the Spanish war till it came to its last flowering at the outbreak of the Second War. It analyses as well the themes of most of the poems she wrote during that time and the reasons and occasions behind writing them, which shows that despite the critical acclaim they lacked the poems were yet of historical importance because they expressed the

ideas of an American majority that believed to be part of the democratic world and a growing world power.

Edna St.Vincent Millay: Life and Literary Career

Edna St.Vincent Millay (1892-1950), is a highly personal poet and one of the most important American writers of the twentieth century, who served as a living symbol of women who could live, think, and love as freely as they chose (Cheney,1). Allen Tate believes that she is 'not an intellect but a sensibility' (qtd. In Cheney,2), yet she was at her best when writing about the emotions while maintaining intellectual control of her subject. Her fine balance of the emotional and the intellectual, her capacity for ecstasy in its true Greek sense of standing outside the self, and her conviction that women should be free to love and feel deeply are best exhibited in sonnets written in her early literary career (Cheney,2). Her convictions made her the symbolic woman of her era, the 1920s, as a living symbol of freedom and spontaneous joy (Cheney,138), to the extent that the *Times* considered her a feminine Percy Bysshe Shelley(Cheney, 120), to the post-war generation she was the 'neurosis' (Richard, 150), while the egocentric young people of the age hailed her as their poet who wrote about them. She embodied, as well, the quest for new identity of many Americans (Cheney,123).

Millay was born in the small town of Rockland, Main, as the daughter of Henry Tollman Millay and Cora Buzzelle. When the parents divorced in 1900 for financial problems, the hardworking mother supported her three daughters by nursing and she encouraged them to love reading and music and to be independent. The poet, whose friends called her "Vincent," was the eldest of the three, she attended public high school and wrote for and served as editor-in-chief of the school magazine from 1905 to 1909. She also published several juvenile pieces in *St.Nicholas*

Magazine from 1906 to 1910. Her first great poem, 'Renascence,' was published in an anthology called *The Lyric Year* (1912), when a Young Woman's Christian Association education officer heard her reading this poem, helped the talented girl obtain a scholarship to attend Vassar College (Gale,1).

While there, Millay studied literature and languages and wrote poetry and plays and sometimes acted in some of her own plays, as she starred some of them, like *The Princess Marries the Page*. However, despite her frequent rebels against rules designed to protect female students at that time, she took her B.A. in 1917. That year also she published *Renascence and Other Poems*, and moved to New York City where she acted with the Provincetown Players, lived impecuniously in Greenwich Village, and got acquainted with many literary figures among whom were the novelist Floyd Dell, poet Arthur Davison Ficke and critic Edmund Wilson and published short stories (under the pseudonym Nancy Boyd) and poems in *Ainslee's* magazine. In 1919 she wrote and directed a one-act, antiwar verse play with a fairy-tale motif titled *Aria da Copa*, for Provincetown. In 1920 she gained many successes, she began publishing her works in *Vanity Fair*, a magazine catering to upper-class tastes, along with T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pond, Aldous Huxley, D.H.Lawrence and others; won a money prize for her poem 'The Bean-Stalk;' and published her second book of verse, *A Few Figs from Thistle* and *Aria da Copa*, which sold so well (Gale,1).

With an agreement to continue writing for *Vanity Fair* and a novel titled *Hardigut* that was never completed, Millay enjoyed with her mother a varied sojourn in Europe from 1920 to 1923 and visited many places there including England and France. During this time she published two more plays and a solid collection of poetry titled *Second April* in memory of a college mate. In 1923 she was honored as the first woman to be

awarded the Pulitzer Prize for poetry, published *The Harp-Weaver* and *Weaver and Other Poems*, and married the Dutch importer Eugene Jan Boissevain, with whom she went on arduous reading tours and sailed around the world in 1924. Shortly thereafter Millay created the stirring libretto for the splendid opera *The King's Henchman*, which premiered at the Metropolitan Opera of New York in 1927 and when it was published it went through several editions earning Millay \$100 a day for a while (Gale,2-3).

Social and Political Consciousness

Millay's early poems were personal, romantic confessions of a young woman who wrote about friends, love, frustration and beautiful despair (Cottrell,30). Therefore, she was passionately championed by the young women who were maturing in the 1920s, and the critic Louis Untermeyer considers her 'Renaissance' an 'untutored sincerity, a direct and often dramatic power that few of our most expert craftsmen can equal' (qtd. in Johnson, 235). Therefore, by the time that *Figs* had reached the public Millay was regarded a leading American poet (Johnson,235).

However, owing to her early love relations Millay wrote some of the most beautiful love sonnets in the English language (Cheney,68). Yet, one of her lovers, Floyd Dell, helped develop her sense of social consciousness and abhorrence of war (Cheney,70), and though she expressed antiwar attitudes towards First World War in *Aria da Copa* Millay was basically indifferent to politics during that time but she became deeply concerned with the American role in the Second World War (Cheney,64). In fact, her interest in public affairs began with the so-called Sacco-Vanzetti¹ case which broke out throughout the 1920s but reached its highest in 1927, when so many intellectuals showed high interest in the case, among them was the poet herself.

Millay was a justice-loving person who would sacrifice for the ideas she respected (Cottrell,31), therefore, when the issue of the two men attracted her attention she deserted her old personal themes and became more involved in public affairs that on August 20, 1927 she supported thousands of sympathizers with them, and two days later she led, with Dos Passoss, a demonstration for which they were both promptly arrested. Afterwards, she met the governor of Massachusetts to urge him grant clemency to the two men, wrote him a letter on the same subject, and wrote several poems on the issue where she expressed deep bitterness and a sense of loss over a government that deprives freedom of speech, belief, and action, like 'The Anguish,' 'Hangman's Oak,' 'Wine from these Grapes,' and, the most famous of all, 'Justice Denied in Massachusetts,' which was published in *New York Times* on the eve of the execution of the two convicts (Cheney,129).

Several years after the travesty of Sacco and Vanzetti Millay expanded her social consciousness to include a concern with communism, that in 1936 she completed the manuscript of *Conversation at Midnight*, which is basically a philosophical treatise on the relative merits of capitalism and communism (Cheney,131). And in 1939 she published *Huntsman, What Quarry?* which included stirring poems against the brutalities of Fascist Spain, Nazi Germany, and imperialistic Japan, where she spoke in the terse title poem about a mounted huntsman who leaves his bride at the wedding night and goes hunting. Other events, such as Italy's attacks on Ethiopia and the German-Russian nonaggression treaty, caused the once-pacifist poet to call for preparedness and then to dash off pro-British and pro-French propaganda verse as some of the poems in *Make Bright the Arrows:1940 Notebook* (1940) indicate. While the long dramatic verse narrative *The Murder of Lidice* (1942) was based on the depraved German army butchery of an entire Czech village (Gale,2).

Unlike the majority of Second World War poets who wrote either against the war or depicted specific moments of human suffering in the battlefield, however, Millay wrote pro-war poems. Yet, what she wrote was not a whole collection dedicated to war but a few poems, about 16 ones, collected in her book *Make Bright the Arrows* which tackled the theme of war from certain points of view, all of which tried to express the public tendency that was highly spread in the United States when Hitler attacked Poland and began to expand in Europe. At that time, many Americans felt responsible towards Europe for many reasons, political as well as economical, and saw that the States should take a decisive role in the conflict and not remain neutral. Therefore, in some of her poems Millay deplores the European capitals and cities that were in direct confront with Hitler, and some were already fallen in his hands when she wrote her poems.

In 'Memory of England: October 1940,' for example, Millay expresses deep sadness about the beautiful places she and her mother used to visit in the English countryside when they went to England moving from one village to another walking alone. The poem begins with the sad note that the mother is dead now and Millay says that it is much better for the old lady to be dead now than to see what is happening to the once-pleasant country places they both visited in the past:

I Am glad, I think, my happy mother died
Before the German airplanes over the English countryside
Dropped bombs into the peaceful hamlets that we used to know--(1-3)

She complains that one of those places, Romsey Abbey, for example, which is under bombs now is a valuable place of historical significance for the Americans for its 'aging records' which show that Romsey, who first built Massachusetts in America, came from this village:

[The Germans] Dropped bombs on Romsey Abbey, where the aging
records show
(Or did a little while ago)
In faded ink and elegant fine hand
The name of a boy baby christened there
In 15-- (I forgot the year)
Later to sail away to this free land
And build in what is now named Massachusetts a new Romsey
here. (9-15)

She remembers how they used to walk for miles till they would get 'dog-tired' only to reach Romsey and then get back to Shillingstone:

How many miles we walked I now I now forget, dog-tired at night
Spying an inn's warm light
Through small-paned windows thrown,--
To Romsey, and then back to Shillingstone. (36-9)

She remembers these little adventures with grief now because the places came under bombing and the inhabitants of these villages who are part of their beauty came also under the same threat:

So gravely threatened now
That lovely village under the Barrow's brow,
Where peering from my window at dawn under the shelving thatch
With cold bare feet and neck scratched by the straw
I saw the bounds go by;
So gravely threatened the kind people there
She in her neat front flower plot,
He like as not
Up in the 'lotment hoeing,
Or come home to his supper of beer and cheese,
Bread and shallots. (40-9)

Therefore, she repeats as if crying the idea that it was better for her mother to die earlier than knowing what was going on to such places under war:

These thoughts...
And thoughts like these...
Make me content that she, not I,

Went first, went without knowing. (50-3)

While in 'I Forgot for a Moment July 1940' she dreams of Holland, her husband's homeland, at peace, the place where she was happy and loved its people and things:

I lived for a moment in a world where I was free to be
With the things and people that I love, and I was happy there. (2-3)

A place that was so lovely that seems just like a dream:

I lived for a moment in a world so lovely, so inept
At twisted words and crooked deeds, it was as if I slept
and dreamt.

It seemed that all was well with Holland--not a tank had
crushed
The tulips there.
Mile after mile the level lowlands blossomed--yellow
square, white square,
Scarlet strip and mauve strip bright beneath the brightly
clouded sky, the round clouds
and the gentle air.
Along the straight canals between striped fields of tulips in the
morning sailed
Broad ships, their hulls by tulip-beds concealed, only the
sails showing. (5-12)

And she dreams that even England and France were still well to some extent:

It seemed that all was well with England—the harsh foreign
voice hysterically vowing,
One more, to keep its word, at length was disbelieved,
and hushed.

It seemed that all was well with France, with her straight roads
Lined with slender poplars, and peasants on the skyline
ploughing.(13-16)

But in 'I dreamt the Lowlands,' which is dedicated mainly to Holland, Millay feels sorry for that country which fell in the hands of Hitler by treachery despite the three dykes set to protect it from any inundation. She dreams, with deep sorrow, that the country was still free:

I DREAMT the Lowlands still were free.
That the big wind-mill and the pollard willow, the knotwillow tree,
Beside the still canal, that the knot-willow still was free.(1-3)

But much to her disappointment these dykes, the Sleeper, the Watcher, and the Dreamer could not protect Holland, 'the Lowlands,' from the Germans who were 'more ruthless than the sea':

Poured into now, now inundated from the dykeless side,
By Germany, more ruthless than the sea,
For the sea, though stem and cold, had never lied.(8-10)

While in 'Ballade of Lost Cities,' she deplores many of the cities that were under war, European and non-European, like Rotterdam, Warsaw, Prague, Bucharest, Vienna, Istanbul, Cairo, Hong-Kong, Singapore, etc. Therefore, she begins her poem with such a bitter questioning as: 'WHERE is the proud, the ancient town/ Prosperous once, now sore distressed?' Some of such 'once prosperous' towns that turned by now to be 'sore distressed' are, for example, 'Antwerp and Brussels, Ghent and Brest,' of which she wonders 'Tamed or destroyed at whose behest?' And she raises her tone of sadness when she mentions such lovely and gay cities as Paris and Vienna:

Leyden, Louvain in her new gown,
Rheims and Rouen, and Lourdes the blest
Vichy, in shameful shirt of brown,
Paris, of cities loveliest
Bitterly now in mourning dressed;
Deauville, Vienna once so gay,

Calvados, where the cider's best, -- (9-15)

Moreover, she keeps repeating throughout the poem in the form of a refrain the question: 'Where are the towns of yesterday?' The poem, however, turns at the end to be propagandist. After expressing sadness at the fall of all the cities of the world mentioned here, the poet discloses her real intention behind writing this poem: urging the United States government to give up its isolationism and fight with the Allies against Hitler lest the American cities face the same destiny of the world cities:

President, why the lack of zest?--
 Washington's safe--who'd dare assay
 Boston, New York, the Middle-West?
But where are the towns of yesterday?(25-8)

This sense of responsibility towards the rest of the world, mainly Europe, was not Millay's only. It was a kind of public mood; therefore, the poet tries to show in 'Overheard at a Bar' that the Americans believe that if England loses the war the entire democratic world, 'we,' will be at risk. The poem depicts a group of men chatting about the possibilities whether England may lose the war or not and what the western world will lose then, as one of the conversants, A, wonders:

A: Supposing England doesn't win the war! (l,13)

Another conversant, B, tries to dismiss the worry that if England loses the war it (war) might not get to them:

B:....if England didn't win the war, why it might get 'round to us!--

But he does not want to have such a thought: "Good God, it's blasphemous!" Yet, the third party of the group, C, who represents those who are reluctant to get involved in the war claims that the States cannot 'police ' its two sides at the same time, the Atlantic (Hitler) and the Pacific (the Japanese):

C: That's right, my boy: we can't police two seas...(1,13)

But when their conversation turns to be more serious about the issue they all express great concern about their own future if England loses. Therefore, conversant B, for example, breaks down at the thought:

A: And if England loses this war—

B: But she *can't! It's impossible!* Don't you see,
For God's sake, if England lost this war, where WE
Would be?(24-6)

One reason behind this American concern is the fear about the democratic system, as Millay indicates in 'There are no Islands any More.' She attacks those isolationist officials who prefer to keep the United States away from joining the war:

Dear Isolationist, you are
So very, very insular!
Surely you do not take offense?
The word's well used in such a sense.
'Tis you, not I, sir, who insist
You are an Isolationist. (1-6)

Then she tells such believers that though she herself likes the sense of loneliness and wishes to be left away alone sometimes she yet would not hesitate to offer help when others would need that, not to mention 'stabbed Democracy':

...few the pleasures I have known
Which equaled being left alone.
Yet matters from without intrude
At times upon my solitude:
A forest fire, a dog run mad,
A neighbor stripped of all he had
By swindlers, or the shrieking plea
For help, of stabbed Democracy.(15-22)

She confirms that if the call for help came from democracy in particular she would give more in order to save it:

....If democracy's at stake,
Give more, give more than I can make;
And notice, with a rueful grin,
What was without, is now within.(29-32)

But what this global war will bring, as Millay predicts, could be even worse, because it is not only the democratic system that will be afflicted but human freedom as well, as she maintains:

Not France, not England's involved, what's involved,
Not me,--there's something to be solved
Of grave concern to free men all:
Can freedom stand?--Must Freedom fall?(83-6)

The pessimism about the future of the world threatened by Hitler is expressed more openly in 'An Eclipse of the Sun is Predicted,' where the poet compares the coming war to 'a total eclipse' and calls it 'the black new comer' that will destroy life for a very long time, a fact which she realizes to be devastating and obvious:

I am at war with the shadow, at war with the sun's eclipse,
Total, and not for a minute, but for all my days.
Under that established twilight how could I raise
Beans and corn? I am at war with the black newcomer. (9-12)

She puts the blame for this war, however, on the shoulders of the pacifists, mainly England and France, whose blind belief in peace and the heavy burden of the bitter memories of the First World War made them believe that the world is not ready for a new bloody enterprise, which gave the foe in turn a good chance to win time and get prepared, as sonnet I in the collection indicates:

Longing to wed with peace, what did we do?--
 Sketched her a fortress on a paper pad;
 Under her casement twanged a lovesick string;
 Left wide the gate that let her foemen through. (11-4)

Hence, it was the laziness of the two greatest European powers that did not let them get prepared to war, to face a ferocious enemy that was thirsty for bloodshed, as indicated in sonnet IV:

Men wide-awake, men well-equipped, well-fed
 On certainty, attack the slumbering towns;
 Blood was their breakfast, conquest is their goal:
 But men asleep can stumble out of bed
 And pull their trousers on, and find their guns,
 And fight, to save from rape the human soul. (9-14)

However, while the older ones were either tired of the memories of World War I or loved life as sonnet VII shows:

Longing to wed with Peace, what did we do?--
 Sketched her a fortress on a paper pad;
 Under her casement twanged a lovesick string;
 Left wide the gate that let her foemen through. (11-4)

the young were more than ready to fight the new enemy, as sonnet V claims:

Only the young, who had so much to give,
 Gave France their all; the old, whose valorous past
 (In anecdote not only: in bronze cast)

Might teach a frightened courage how to live,
 Wheedled by knaves, from action fugitive,
 Sold their son's hopes, to make their porridge last.(9-14)

When war broke out, however, and the disaster occurred, Millay joined the majority of the Second World War poets and began to dream of the peace of the past and expressed longing for the days when life was more peaceful², as she shows in sonnet II 'Gentlemen Cry, Peace':

There is no Peace; had we again the choice
 Whether to build our sinews to such force
 None dare affront us, or to seek divorce
 From the blunt, factual time, and with soft voice
 Blandish the past to give us back our toys
 Faded but still so dear,—we should of course
 Forego tranquillity without remorse,
 Gird us for battle ... and in peace rejoice.(1-6)

Yet, she realizes that ordinary people do not have enough power by now to force peace any longer,:

But now ... what power to bargain have the poor?
 And, in those iron values which alone
 Pass in our time for legal currency,
 Minted by savage chieftains to insure
 Shut mouth, shut mind, hushed sobbing, swallowed groan
 And punished laughter—who so poor as we?(7-12)

Hence, Millay's attempts to convince her government to get involved in the war were not meant to be for war's sake, rather she did that out of her, and her fellow people's, sense of responsibility towards her country as part of the democratic world and her sense of belonging and love for Europe and humanity in general. Her collection, criticized for its weakness from the artistic point of view though, is still one that expresses the general thought of a good majority of Americans at the time as the

wide publicity and fame the collection, as well as some of its poems, achieved when it was published.

"Make Bright the Arrows," therefore, was a natural outcome for a poet who always believed in the sense of freedom and justice to the extent of extremism, and in a nation that considers itself the protector and godmother of liberty and democracy in the world. One that cannot give up its European origins nor wants to, as the Marshall Plan³ to save Europe after the end of the Second World War indicates.

Notes

1- The Sacco-Vanzetti case: in 1920, the two anarchists Nicola Sacco (1891–1927) and Bartolomeo Vanzetti (1888–1927), both Italian-Americans, were convicted of robbery and murder. Although the arguments brought against them were mostly disproven in court, the fact that the two men were known radicals prejudiced the judge and jury against them. On April 9, 1927, Sacco and Vanzetti's final appeal was rejected, and the two were sentenced to death. For more than six years the Sacco-Vanzetti case has been before the courts of Massachusetts. In a state where ordinary murder trials are promptly dispatched such extraordinary delay in itself challenges attention. The fact is that a long succession of disclosures has aroused interest far beyond the boundaries of Massachusetts and even of the United States, until the case has become one of those rare famous cases which are of international concern. (Felix Frankfurter, 'The Case of Sacco and Vanzetti,' *ATLANTIC MAGAZINE* (March 1927, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1969/12/the-case-of-sacco-and-vanzetti/6625/>, retrieved 12/09/2010).

2- See for example 'An Exercise against Impatience' by Keith Douglas, 'Today and Tomorrow' by Roy Fuller, and 'Absent with Official Leave' by Randall Jarrell.

3- The Marshall Plan: Officially known as the European Recovery Program (ERP), was intended to rebuild the economies and spirits of western Europe primarily which was devastated by years of conflict during World War II. The program was initiated by the American Secretary of State George Marshall who was convinced that the key to restoration of political stability lay in the revitalization of national economies. Further, he saw political stability in Western Europe as a key to blunting the advances of communism in that region. Sixteen nations, including Germany, became part of the program and shaped the assistance they required, state by state, with administrative and technical assistance provided through the Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA) of the United States. The European nations received nearly \$13 billion in aid, which initially resulted in shipments of food, staples, fuel and machinery from the United States and later resulted in investment in industrial capacity in Europe. The Marshall Plan funding ended in 1951 and the Marshall Plan nations were assisted greatly in their economic recovery. From 1948 through 1952 European economies grew at an unprecedented rate and the trade relations led to the formation of the North Atlantic alliance, economic prosperity led by coal and steel industries helped to shape what we know now as the European Union. (<http://www.marshallfoundation.org/TheMarshallPlan.htm>, retrieved in Feb. 26, 2011)

خلاصة

عندما اندلعت الحرب العالمية الثانية سار اغلب شعرائها في ركب الموجة التي بدأها شعراء الحرب العالمية الأولى ولفريد أوين (1893-1918) و سيغفريد ساسون (1886-1967) بالتعبير عن آراء مناهضة للحرب. لكن وعلى عكس هذه الموجة تبنت الشاعرة الأمريكية إدنا سينت فنسنت ميلاي نمطا آخر مغاير. فبالرغم من الكراهية التي عبر عنها الشعراء الآخرون ضد هتلر و موسوليني، إلا أنهم كتبوا ضد الدمار الذي تجلبه الحرب على الحياة الإنسانية والحضارة. أما ميلاي فقد ركزت على الدمار الذي جره هتلر على أوروبا وعلى الحياة بشكل عام، لذا فقد كتبت هذه الشاعرة شعرا تعبويًا يدعو حكومة الولايات المتحدة إلى التخلي عن انعزالياتها الاختيارية ودعم حلفائها الأوروبيين بوجه الزعيم الألماني وجيوشه آمله بان الوقوف بوجه طموحاته التوسعية سيعيد النظام ثانية لأوروبا والعالم.

لذا يحاول هذا البحث أن يقتفي تطور الاهتمام السياسي لهذه الشاعرة منذ مرحلة الشباب المبكر عندما عاصرت الحرب العالمية الأولى والذي كان اهتماما ضعيفا نسبيا، ثم تطور مع قضايا مهمة مثل قضية الفوضويين الايطاليين ساكو وفانزييتي مرورا بالحرب الاسبانية حتى وصل إلى مرحلة ازدهاره الأخيرة عند اندلاع الحرب العالمية الثانية. ويحاول أيضا تحليل المواضيع التي تناولتها اغلب القصائد التي كتبتها ميلاي خلال فترة الحرب دعما لها ومعرفة الأسباب التي دعت لكتابتها، والتي تدل على انه وبالرغم من القصور النقدي الذي واجهته هذه القصائد إلا أنها كانت ذات أهمية تاريخية لأنها عبرت عن أفكار غالبية من الأمريكان الذين كانوا يؤمنون بأنهم جزء مهم من العالم الديمقراطي وبأنهم قوة عالمية نامية في ذلك الوقت.

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