A GOLDEN VESSEL OF GREAT SONG

By

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CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB · 1964

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Acknowledgment is made to Norma Millay Ellis for permission to quote the poems or fragments of poems and letters included in this paper from the *Collected Sonnets*, *Collected Lyrics* and *Letters* of Edna St. Vincent Millay, all published by Harper & Brothers. The author adds his own thanks to Mrs. Ellis for her kindnesses and guidance.

A GOLDEN VESSEL OF GREAT SONG

She was found lying dead alone at the foot of the stairs; and since then, it seems everybody—except one or two boors who saw fit to kick her—has been stepping over her, ever so delicately, as if the remembered twenties, hers, ours and the century's were something rather embarrassing in view of the spacious and enlightened times to which we survivors have now progressed.

SHE, of whom these bitter words were written shortly after her death, had not always been stepped over and avoided. In fact, during much of her life she was sought after and cultivated.

In those "remembered twenties" when she and we were so very young, when the new freedom for women embraced more than a constitutional amendment and life seemed so gay in its unconventional mood—in that period which truly seemed to glitter, she shone as one of its brightest ornaments and spoke to us as its witty but tender voice.

And that voice was the voice of her art and her passion —poetry. Easily the most popular poet of her time, she

placed poetry—at least her poetry—among the best sellers for over a decade. She truly was the "solid sprite who stood alone." The little tomboy of the Maine coast—"the one with the red hair and the green eyes"—had become the golden vessel of great song—or so it seemed.

When she wrote,

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

it was a song which said almost everything that her generation, in its revolt against conventions and proprieties, wanted to say. And so the singer became the champion of all those who would break down futile conventions and unnecessary taboos, and her song was heard and listened to throughout the land.

Symbol though she became of a social revolution, she was more than a fortuitous voice which one might have expected would become silent once the age, for which it spoke, ended. She was a painstaking craftsman of her art, who produced some of her most memorable verse after the bubbles from the champagne of the golden twenties had disappeared.

She was no rider of the wave. Even the few boors who saw fit to kick her would concede that her poetry was more than a product of a period. It could be more truly said that her poetry, in a sense, invented the period.

Her literary integrity—her faithfulness to her art—was such that she worked over some of her poems for ten years before she was satisfied to have them published. Some were never published. When, in a world crisis and

prompted by a deep concern for freedom which seemed to be disappearing from our time, she was led, in her own words, "to prostitute poetry to propaganda," she suffered, as an artist, the tortures of the damned.

Within a decade of the publication of a single poem, written as a girl of twenty, she had won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry. In England, Thomas Hardy commented that the two great things in the United States were the new American architecture and her poetry. In Chicago, Harriet Monroe wrote that there were a number of her poems which could hardly be forgotten so long as English literature endures.

And yet she it was who at her death was stepped over, ever so delicately, and who died alone and for the most part forgotten in a renovated farmhouse, which for a quarter of a century she had called home, on a densely tree-grown hill in the Berkshires.

To the persistent "Why?" there can be and have been many answers. One says that "having outgrown her youth, she had outgrown the one subject she could make exciting." Again, if, in a sense, her poetry invented a period, in a greater sense, according to another, the real and only achievement of her poems is that they invented her. If this be so, did the personality which her verse created—the vessel from which the song proceeded—finally silence the song itself? Perhaps it is even simpler: the public is always hard on its heroes. Another would say that when the cult of unintelligibility and obscurity has completely captured the arts and when deep feeling belongs only on a psychiatrist's couch, who is there to remember a poet who wrote simply and lucidly and portrayed for us poignant emotion? Or who is there to cher-

ish a poem, the reading of which is a joy and not exalted drudgery? But she herself may have supplied the better answer when she wrote,

I only know that summer sang in me
A little while, that in me sings no more.

Edna St. Vincent Millay, the eldest daughter of Henry and Cora Millay, was born at Rockland, Maine, on February 22, 1892. Within a few years after the birth of their third daughter, Kathleen, Cora Millay and her husband separated, and after a time she obtained a divorce. There had never been much economic security in the family, for the father seems to have had more talent in spending money than in making or keeping it. But now the rather formidable task of providing a home and some measure of economic security for three daughters, the oldest of whom was eight, fell to Cora Millay, the rather remarkable mother of a remarkable daughter.

In an era when working wives and working mothers were the exception and economic opportunities for women limited, Cora Millay went to work as a practical nurse and gave her daughters a home. It was a home that provided not only the necessities of life but also an appreciation of music and literature, for Mrs. Millay was one of those persons who consider as important, even on a limited budget, some of the impractical trimmings of a cultivated household, such as books, piano and singing lessons, concert tickets, and magazine subscriptions.

Though she spent long hours at being a breadwinner for a lively, happy family, she spent an equal effort in interesting her girls in music and literature and in encouraging them to develop whatever artistic talents they might have.

Years later when those talents, so encouraged, had resulted in more fame for her eldest daughter than Cora Millay could easily have imagined, that daughter wrote her:

> . . . the reason I am a poet is entirely because you wanted me to be and intended I should be, even from the very first. You brought me up in the tradition of poetry and everything I did you encouraged. I can not remember once in my lifetime when you were not interested in what I was working on or ever suggested that I should put it aside for something else.

In view of the strong bonds of affection which existed between Edna and her mother throughout their lives and the deep appreciation which the daughter felt for what her mother had done for her, it was entirely fitting that the "Ballad of the Harp Weaver," in which Edna memorialized her mother, should have been the title poem of the volume for which Edna Millay was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1923.

Edna or Vincent, as she was then known, wrote her first poem at five. It was six lines about a bird. It was what one might have expected from a child of five, but not much more. Scribbling was important, however, in the Millay household, and, as Vincent grew older, it became increasingly a major activity for her. She contributed essays and poems to the high-school paper of which she became editor-in-chief and began to submit poems to the *St. Nicholas Magazine*. Several won prizes. It would be fair to say, however, that no poem that she had written to this point—1910, when she was eighteen—gave any indication of the acclaim which was to be hers two years later with the publication of "Renascence."

"Renascence" was a poem which she apparently began working on after her graduation from high school in 1909. During part of that period she was employed in a lawyer's office in Camden, Maine, where the family then resided. She was still working on the poem in the spring of 1912, but the announcement of a forthcoming book of poetry, *The Lyric Year*, which was to contain the one hundred best poems written by one hundred American poets during 1912, prompted her to finish the poem. It was one of some ten thousand poems submitted in the competition. It escaped the wastebasket to which most of the offerings were quickly and finally consigned only because one of the judges who had heard the first few lines read by one of his associates pulled it out of the basket to read it all the way through because, as he said, "It didn't sound too bad."

Having read it through several times, the judges agreed that it should be included in the anthology. In fact, one of the judges was so enthusiastic about it that he promptly wrote to E. Vincent Millay, Esq., advising "him" that the poem would surely win the first prize.

However, his judgment in this respect proved to be no more accurate than his guess as to the gender of the author of the poem. It won no prize, placing fourth—out of the money.

The very real disappointment which Vincent experienced in losing the $500 prize was, however, nothing compared to the outburst of protests which followed the publication of the book in November, 1912. Critics immediately recognized the poem as outstanding and by far the best poem in the volume and vigorously criticized the award, calling it "poetry's scandal of the century."

Even ordinary readers joined in the protest. "Dear Miss Millay," one wrote, "Your poem is the only one in the book worth a hoot." The first-prize winner, Orrick Johns, received so many sharply worded letters telling him how little he deserved first place that in the end he did not even attend the award dinner. *The Lyric Year*, which was to have been an annual publication, did not survive its ill-fated 1912 edition. It became famous only for the poem that did not win a prize.

Although it might also appear that the author of "Renascence" became famous only through *not* receiving the prize, this is not entirely true. There was still the very remarkable poem which heralded the beginning of a significant rebirth of American poetry and its author—the girl from Camden, Maine—who, with the publication of a single poem, emerged as a significant poet. As one writing of the event said, "Fully armed, from the head of Jove, had sprung a new miracle. Where there had been nothing, no whisper of her, stood a whole poet."

Sometime in the summer before "Renascence" was published, Edna had read the poem at an evening's entertainment for the guests at one of the summer hotels in Camden. One of the summer visitors, impressed with the poem and attracted to its author, encouraged her to think of going to college and finally made it financially possible for her to do so. And so it was that after some preliminary work at Barnard, she entered Vassar in the fall of 1913.

By this time she was about four years older than the average freshman and a celebrity who, during her stay in New York while attending Barnard, had become something of a literary lion. Poets and critics had wanted

to meet the girl whose poem had stirred such a controversy. There were many invitations and parties, including a luncheon given for her by the Poetry Society of America.

Consequently, she was not exactly a young timid freshman when she descended on Vassar. During her stay there she demonstrated considerable ability and was a better than average student, but she did it in the spirit of revolt and independence that was to be so characteristic of her later life.

It is said that she cut more classes than she attended and was late to most of those she did attend. This conduct did not exactly endear her to some of her teachers. In a sense she compounded the difficulty by usually coming up at the end of a course (taken largely *in absentia*) with a high examination grade or an exceptional term report.

The many rules and restrictions which then existed in Vassar and other schools were something she had never experienced in her own home and consequently were for her something to be evaded. And she proceeded to do so, by inventing lame excuses for not appearing in class or chapel and by escaping the smoking law by taking herself and her cigarettes to a nearby cemetery.

Even the then new young president of Vassar, Henry Noble MacCracken, did not escape encounters with her. Once when she had sent a note to his drama class that she was too ill to attend, he met her immediately after class, obviously completely recovered from her illness. When he commented on her quick recovery she replied, "At the time of your class, I was in pain with a poem!"

But MacCracken, recognizing her ability and aware

of her growing fame, was wiser than some who would have sacked her quickly and gladly. When finally it appeared that she was deliberately trying to be expelled, he called her to his office and told her that, no matter what she did, he would not expel her. "I know all about poets at college," he said, "and I don't want a banished Shelley on my doorstep." After a short silence, she replied, "On those terms, I think I can continue to live in this hell hole."

"This hell hole" she came, however, to appreciate for what it was—a stimulating and excellent school which challenged her and offered her many opportunities to develop her talents. She also learned to adjust to, though she did not fully accept, the restrictions which were indigenous to girls' schools in an era lately Victorian.

Consequently, when on the eve of commencement in her senior year she was faced with the prospect of not being permitted to graduate with her class because of an episode involving the breaking of parietal rules, she did not view the prospect with the same equanimity that she might have done earlier. Her expressed outrage was no less, but there was, for once, a slight sense of embarrassment and concern. This was particularly true in her relations with her mother to whom she rather self-consciously reported the faculty's decision, explaining that the occasion which prompted the decision resulted from her absent-mindedness.

The episode itself occurred toward the end of her senior year. On a day in May when it was "beautifully warm at last," she and some friends—"four of us in a little Saxon"—took off for a day's outing which was extended to an overnight stay at the home of one of the

girls. Since Edna was already "campused" for overstaying her spring vacation in New York City, she did not have the privilege of remaining away overnight. This "carelessness of college rules," as she described it, would, in all likelihood, have gone unnoticed except that while out motoring the next day the girls stopped for coffee at an inn where Edna signed the guest book. When a few days later someone from the college saw and reported the signature, the faculty's decision was prompt and harsh. She was suspended indefinitely. This would have prevented her taking part in the commencement exercises, a large part of which—the Baccalaureate Hymn, the words of the Tree Ceremonies and of the Marching Song—was her own contribution.

Her classmates reacted violently with petitions and letters of protest, and Dr. MacCracken, recognizing her substantial contributions to the college and perhaps remembering an earlier promise, vetoed the action of the faculty. And so was Edna St. Vincent Millay graduated from Vassar College.

From Vassar, Edna went to the Village—Greenwich Village, where, in this period, poets, writers, artists, young rebels, and reformers—"builders of palaces on the sands" pouring into New York City

> . . . Needful of a place to sleep
> Came . . . because the rents were cheap.

The Village was her home for the next four years. It was here that she began the serious task of being a poet. It was during this period that she produced that flippant verse which became the rallying cry of rebellious youth in a rebellious era. It was here that she, with her friends

Floyd Dell, John Reed, Edmund Wilson, and others, "burned the candle at both ends."

We were very tired, we were very merry—
We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.
It was bare and bright, and smelled like a stable—
But we looked into a fire, we leaned across a table,
We lay on the hill-top underneath the moon;
And the whistles kept blowing, and the dawn came soon.

During much of this period her poems were appearing regularly in *Vanity Fair* and *Ainslee's Magazine*, and she was finding that it was possible to support one's self, though somewhat meagerly, by being a poet. It helped, of course, to be a popular one. Her financial situation was helped too by the prose pieces—bread and butter potboilers—which she wrote for *Vanity Fair*. It was characteristic of her independence and of her refusal to compromise her art that she always wrote these pieces under the pseudonym "Nancy Boyd." And this was true even when she needed money badly and when the need would have been handsomely met could she have been persuaded to identify herself with something less than she thought her best.

Years later she was to write in one of her poems,

I have been sad;
I have been in cities where the song was all I had,
A treasure never to be bartered by the hungry days.

During this period her suitors were many, her interest in any permanent involvement nil.

And if I loved you Wednesday,
Well, what is that to you?

I do not love you Thursday—
So much is true.

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

Her shunning of marriage at this time was not, however, merely a tangible expression of the flippancy evidenced in the poem just quoted. She was a person who, though attractive, witty, and at times warm and loving, was essentially remote. Capable of expressing deep lasting emotion in her verse, she found it not so easily realized in her own life. It was her nature to stand aloof. Floyd Dell was one who wanted very much to marry her. When one time he pressed her, trying to understand her reluctance and remoteness, she said, "Floyd, you ask too many questions. There are doors in my mind you mustn't try to open."

Her overwhelming passion was her art, and at least at this period she saw domesticity as a threat to her poetry. She once said she thought it was nice to have a house kept in order, but if she had to live in a mess or live in a neat room and give up writing, she would prefer the mess.

The publication in the fall of 1920 of *A Few Figs from Thistles*—a collection of those bittersweet poems including the "First Fig," the famous candle quatrain quoted earlier in this paper—established her as the most popular and quoted poet of the day. When *Second April* was published the next year, she was already being hailed as the "poet laureate of the nineteen-twenties" and as the rec-

ognized "spokesman for the new woman." Although many of the poems in *Second April* struck the same notes on the theme of the impermanence of love as did the *Figs*, there was less of the casualness and defiant impudence in the treatment of the theme. There are instead somber overtones treated in a more mature and thoughtful way.

I know what my heart is like
  Since your love died:
It is like a hollow ledge
Holding a little pool
    Left there by the tide,
    A little tepid pool,
Drying inward from the edge.

This change reflected, however, something more than a growing maturity. It pointed to a malaise in her spirits which was becoming increasingly evident. She who was supposed to represent all the gaiety of the Village was writing to her friends that she was "sad so much of the time"; she who had become almost overnight one of the bright stars of a significant renaissance in American poetry appeared to her closest friends to be recurrently enveloped in an air "of doom." Finally, in an effort to find, as she expressed it, "fresh grass" for her poetry "to feed on," she decided to go to Europe. She sailed in January, 1921, and did not return until early 1923.

The year 1923 was a memorable and significant one in the life of Edna Millay. In that year she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her *Harp-Weaver and Other Poems*. She, of the witty, bright, and, at times, biting verse, had become one of America's foremost lyric poets. The

promise which many had seen in the poem of a decade before had become a reality; the prize which the young girl from Maine missed had finally been replaced by a much greater prize.

There was one other prize for her in that year. On May 30, she had written her mother, "I love him very much and am going to marry him." The "him" was not one of the many young men who had theretofore been rejected and for whom one of their number had suggested the organization of an "alumni" association. Eugen Jan Boissevain, whom Edna married on July 18, 1923, was a Hollander, born in Amsterdam, the son of the editor of one of the largest Dutch newspapers. He was twelve years older than Edna. This was his second marriage, his first wife having died in 1917.

Boissevain has been described as "handsome and muscular and bold, boisterous in conversation, noisy in laughter." But he brought more than these qualities to this marriage. He was kind, perceptive, and above all stable, a legacy from his Dutch burgher background. And he was devoted to Edna and her poetry. From the time of his marriage to his death, he dedicated his life to taking care of her and making it possible for her to pursue her writing undisturbed by household chores or domestic concerns. Before his marriage he had been a successful coffee importer, a business which he gave up in favor of his wife's career. "Anyone," he said, "can buy and sell coffee . . . but anyone cannot write poetry."

Without minimizing as a reason for her sudden marriage the very evident love which Edna had for Eugen, one must in fairness point out that she had reached a point in her personal life when she needed someone who

could care for her and guard her. What in earlier years had seemed only an involvement to be avoided now loomed as security to be sought.

She could not have made a sounder choice. He proved to be, for more than twenty-five years, exactly the kind of support she needed during increasing periods of depression which alternated with bursts of creative activity. When she was depressed, he protected her from the onslaughts of daily existence. When she craved company, he saw to it that there were parties. He was also, in fact and in truth, chief cook and bottle-washer. Gardener, chauffeur, housekeeper, business manager, he was also a loving husband and the closest friend she ever had.

Because they were together so much, there were few letters written between them and of these few not many have survived. In one, however, which did, she makes quite clear what jovial and stolid Eugen meant to her and her life: "It's wonderful," she says, "to write to you, my dearest. It takes the sting out of almost anything."

After living in New York for awhile and taking a trip to the Orient, the Boissevains bought a large farm near Austerlitz, New York, to which they moved in 1925. This was to be their home for the rest of their lives. It was here in a renovated farmhouse, in a room which came to be known as the poetry room and which had over the door in large red letters SILENCE, that Edna Millay was to write many of the poems which were to make her a truly significant poet.

Steepletop, as the farm was called, was in the Berkshires about five miles south of what is now the Berkshire section of the New York Thruway just off Route

22. The farmhouse which they remodeled was at the end of a steeply ascending road and was itself located on a densely wooded hill in an area surrounded by the mountains.

It was an isolated place, an ideal home and retreat for one who, both as a person and as an artist, was coming to require and to demand solitude. There was no telephone. Messages had to be brought from or delivered to the little village of Austerlitz three miles distant. During the winter they might be snowbound for weeks. Edna was not exaggerating when she once wrote, "Our house is an island in the snow."

It was during their first years at Steepletop that Edna wrote the libretto for *The King's Henchman*. This was the first American opera that had been produced by the Metropolitan Opera Association since 1917. Deems Taylor, then the music critic on the *New York World*, was commissioned by the Association to write the music. He asked Edna to write the libretto, and she did, basing it on a story taken out of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. Many people, when the project was announced, felt that an American opera should be based on an American subject, perhaps the American Indian. It was typical of Edna Millay's independence that she paid no attention to the suggestions. Anglo-Saxons, she said, were closer to us than the Indians, and the roots of our language were in Anglo-Saxon, not in Indian, dialects. And, having said this, the artist went to work. By careful research she made sure that no English words of Norman or later origin appeared in the text; it was written almost entirely in Anglo-Saxon words in use in tenth-century England.

The première was in February, 1927. It was a tremen-

dous success—fourteen performances in three seasons and an equally successful road tour. The libretto, when published in book form, went through three editions in twenty days. It was dedicated to Eugen Jan Boissevain.

In the ten years from 1928 to 1938 Edna Millay published the bulk of the poetry upon which her reputation as a fine lyricist and as a master of the sonnet rests.

In 1928 she published *The Buck in the Snow,* which contains as its title poem one of her finest poems. Three years later came *Fatal Interview.* This sequence of sonnets, depicting a reckless and troubled love, not only contains perhaps her finest poetry but is also now thought to be a record of an extramarital experience. Whether this be true or not, the poems are, as Harriet Monroe said in reviewing the volume, "a record of emotional experience done in terms of precise and measured beauty" and "one of the finest love sequences in the language."

One of the best known of her sonnets is in this sequence —a poem in which she is at her best in portraying poignant emotion in utter simplicity:

> Love is not all: it is not meat nor drink
> Nor slumber nor a roof against the rain;
> Nor yet a floating spar to men that sink
> And rise and sink and rise and sink again;
> Love cannot fill the thickened lung with breath,
> Nor clean the blood, nor set the fractured bone;
> Yet many a man is making friends with death
> Even as I speak, for lack of love alone.
> It well may be that in a difficult hour,
> Pinned down by pain and moaning for release,
> Or nagged by want past resolution's power,
> 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.

In 1934 *Wine from These Grapes* was published and in 1937 *Conversation at Midnight*. The latter work reflected Edna's concerned social conscience about the state of the world. Although written as a narrative poem, it is, in reality, an absorbing play and will perhaps be best remembered as such. It is also remembered for the fact that, after the original and only manuscript was destroyed in a hotel fire in Florida, she, with her phenomenal memory, was able to reproduce the book for publication, a volume of about one hundred and twenty pages. The last important volume of poems which she published before enlisting her poetry in the war was *Huntsman, What Quarry?* which came out in 1938.

This was the decade of her mature work, where "there is more passion and less wit, more thoughts and less bright ideas." It was also the period, however, in which her popularity began to lessen. If this seems a strange phenomenon, one must remember that it was mainly the saucy wit and the impudent bright ideas which made her so popular in the first place. And in a sense she was never able to escape from that image. She had after all, as someone has said, been taken up by the smart people to whom the figs were popular and the thistles were relished. And when these edibles and inedibles were gone, she seemed to be less nourishing, even though the diet was far richer and more balanced.

It took a war to restore some measure of that popularity. But service in that war also undermined and made less bright, when it was over, the reputation of a poet

of painstaking craftsmanship. Because of her grave concern that the rising tide of Fascist and Nazi aggression would engulf freedom not only abroad but in this country and that, accordingly, we had no choice but to fight in order to remain alive and free, she "enlisted," as she said, "her poetry for the duration."

The careful artist who could work for years on the same poem and who in producing it in final form followed a careful and deliberate process, which she compared to a "painful kind of sculpture," now produced at great haste and under a deep sense of urgency propaganda which went under the name of poetry. Those of us who eagerly bought first editions of *There Are No Islands Any More*, *The Murder of Lidice*, and *Make Bright the Arrows* were under the impression that these poems were good poetry. She, however, had no such illusion. For her the poems were only "acres of bad poetry" written at great speed and at the risk of her reputation as a poet—produced only because, as she said, she felt it her duty as a poet to work "for the perpetuation of a world in which poetry still could be written."

Once when her mother was concerned about the reception Edna's sister's first book might receive, Edna had written to her: "A person who publishes a book wilfully appears before the populace with his pants down. If it is a good book nothing can harm her. If it is a bad book, nothing can help her." She knew even before the critics had their say that, with the publication of these poems, nothing could help her. But she felt compelled by her deep concern to speak out. This, however, did not make it any easier for a sensitive, careful artist who had theretofore been unwilling to compromise her art.

The final result of sending her poetry to war was what she later described as "a very handsome and all but life-size nervous breakdown." Later, in explaining her stay in the hospital to one of her friends, she wrote:

> For five years I had been writing almost nothing but propaganda. And I can tell you from my own experience that there is nothing on this earth which can so much get on the nerves of a good poet as the writing of bad poetry. Anyway, finally I cracked up under it.

She found, however, when she returned to Steepletop after months in the hospital, that there *was* something worse than writing bad poetry, and that was not to be able to write any poetry. This is a disturbing experience for any artist; for Edna Millay it was an agonizing one which drove her deeper and deeper into seclusion and retreat. These were the days when Eugen's stolid character and innate stability counted most. Max Eastman describes his visit to Steepletop during this period: "On entering Steepletop, one felt that some fragile piece of china, inestimable in value, was in unstable equilibrium upstairs. . . ." Vincent Sheean, who saw her during the same period, described her as "very frightened, small and withdrawn."

One cannot help remembering the gay elf of Greenwich Village of earlier years. It was during this period that Edna and her friends, John Bishop and Edmund Wilson, had exchanged poetic self-portraits. This was hers:

> Hair that she still devoutly trusts is red.
> Colorless eyes, employing
> A childish wonder
> To which they have no statistic
> Title.

A large mouth,
Lascivious
Asceticized by blasphemies.
A long throat,
Which will some day
Be strangled.
Thin arms,
In the summer-time leopard
With freckles.
A small body,
Unexclamatory,
But which,
Were it the fashion to wear no clothes
Would be as well-dressed
As any.

In time, protected by Eugen, encouraged by her friends, and refreshed, as she always was, by summers on Ragged Island off the coast of Maine, she recovered and began to write again. The Boissevains had purchased Ragged Island some years before. Fifty acres of scrub forest and rock, located in lower Casco Bay, with no electricity or plumbing, it was a retreat even more isolated than Steepletop. It had always proved a tonic for Edna's spirits, and so it proved now. In one of the first poems which she was able to write she said of it:

There, thought unbraids itself, and the mind becomes single.
There you row with tranquil oars, and the ocean
Shows no scar from the cutting of your placid keel;
Care becomes senseless there; pride and promotion
Remote; you only look; you scarcely feel.

Death, an ever recurrent theme in her poetry, became a reality to grapple with when, on August 30, 1949,

Eugen died after an operation in Deaconess Hospital in Boston. Her friends had fearfully speculated on what would happen if he should die before Edna. And now it had happened. In the summer of his death, she had again been writing a great deal and with considerable enthusiasm and in the joy that work produces. This work, with her life which it encompassed, now came to an abrupt halt.

It was resumed only after several months in the Doctors' Hospital in New York. When she went back to Steepletop, she went alone and remained there alone. Assisted by neighbors and John Pinnie, who had been a helper on the farm for many years, she slowly resumed a normal life—as normal, that is, as it could be without Eugen and the steadying bulwark that his care and love provided.

Ever concerned with death in her poetry as something to fear, to struggle against, and to try to best in the encounter, she learned in these months what was for her a new dimension and a new attitude. Thus, she could write in one of her last notebooks these fragmentary lines:

> I will control myself, or go inside.
> I will not flaw perfection with my grief.
> Handsome this day: no matter who has died.

When the shock of her loss was over, she also found it possible to return to the work which it seemed at one time she might never finish. The poems on which she had been working and to which she now returned were, however, not published until after her death in her last volume of poetry—*Mine the Harvest*.

On the evening of October 18, 1950, she had worked into the night and early morning going over the proofs of Rolfe Humphries' translation of the *Aeneid*. Apparently about dawn she started up to bed. On the landing, where the stairs turn to go up to the "poetry" room, she apparently felt faint and sat down on the steps, carefully placing the wine glass she was carrying on the step above her. There she was found by John Pinnie that afternoon, alone on the stairs.

And so we reach the place where we began. The wheel has come full turn: "She was found lying dead alone at the foot of the stairs."

I would add but a brief postscript. After Edna's death, her sister found among her papers the draft of a letter which Edna had written but never sent to Edmund Wilson. Wilson was one of those who in his youth had qualified for Edna's "alumni" association. She had written:

> I miss you very much. I wish I could see you and talk with you. Not see you just once and pour out my heart to you, nothing like that. I wish I could see you every once in awhile and talk with you, not about war and peace and depressing things like that but about poetry which is never depressing because no matter how many people have done it badly, a few have done it well and you can't get around that.

I risk the judgment that she, herself, was one who has done it well.

THIS PAPER WAS WRITTEN FOR THE CHICAGO LITERARY CLUB AND WAS READ BEFORE THE CLUB ON MONDAY EVENING, MAY THE EIGHTEENTH, NINETEEN HUNDRED AND SIXTY-FOUR. THIS EDITION OF THREE HUNDRED COPIES WAS PRINTED BY THE CLUB FOR ITS MEMBERS IN THE MONTH OF DECEMBER, NINETEEN HUNDRED AND SIXTY-FOUR.

PRINTED IN U.S.A.