

THE POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON AND
EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

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THE POETRY OF EMILY BRONKINGEN AND
EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

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CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

New England occupies only a small area of the United States of America. Its size, however, is scarcely indicative of its importance--political, social, literary--to the country. The political and social contributions of the New England states are numerous and significant, but no fewer and of no less importance are the contributions of the area to the literature of America. Many important American poets are associated with the New England area, which was either their birthplace or the place which influenced their writing most. Among these are Bryant, Emerson, Thoreau, Longfellow, Whittier, Holmes, and, more recently, Frost.

These poets, all of them men, are only a few of America's outstanding writers; men from other geographical areas of the country have produced equally fine poetry. America's women poets, however, are fewer and generally less important. But it is interesting to note that two of the major women poets in the United States are New Englanders. Emily Dickinson and Edna St. Vincent Millay were both born in this small northeastern area; there both grew to womanhood and began writing.

Emily Dickinson was born in Massachusetts, at Amherst, in 1830, where she remained most of her life in the home of

her father, Edward Dickinson. In 1847, she left home to attend South Hadley Female Seminary at Mount Holyoke, a venture which still did not take her away from her home state. Her visits outside Massachusetts were few, and those were to nearby areas: once to Washington, D. C., and once to Philadelphia.¹

Edna St. Vincent Millay, on the other hand, spent great periods of time away from her native New England, traveling in Europe in 1921 and 1922, in the Orient in 1924, and about the United States at various times.² Although her permanent home after she married Eugene Boissevain in 1923 was near Austerlitz, New York,³ it was the northeastern area of the country, including New York as well as New England, that she loved and considered her home. She was born in Rockland, Maine, in 1892, to Henry and Cora Millay.⁴ For a brief space of her childhood, she lived in Massachusetts, once at Ring's Island, once at Newburyport, shortly after her mother and father were divorced. But she returned with her mother and two sisters to Maine, and lived in Camden for the rest of her childhood

¹Jack L. Capps, Emily Dickinson's Reading (Cambridge, 1966), p. 20.

²Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay, edited by Allan Ross Macdonald (New York, 1952), pp. 109, 171, 267. Hereinafter referred to as Millay, Letters.

³Ibid., pp. 176, 195-200.

⁴Miriam Gusko, Restless Spirit: The Life of Edna St. Vincent Millay (New York, 1962), p. 2.

and early youth.⁵ In that rocky seacoast town she passed her formative years; her great love of the sea is one basis of the free and adventuresome spirit of her poetry.

Although the homes of the two poets were in the same area, and both were exposed to the unique influence of New England, the atmosphere of their separate times, as well as of their respective towns, was widely different. Amherst was, in accord with its era, a conservative place, where the church was a strict social and moral authority.⁶ Camden, a half century later, had a less rigid environment, both religiously and socially. The home influences of the two poets were also dissimilar.

Emily Dickinson's father, Edward, was long supposed to be a tyrant who ruled his family with little sympathy, but recent critics have revealed this theory to be greatly exaggerated. Being a prominent man in Amherst, a successful lawyer, a congressman in Washington for two years, and the treasurer of Amherst College for thirty-eight years,⁷ he felt keenly his responsibility to guide his family in the traditional head-of-the-house manner. He was anxious about their spiritual development,⁸ and was firm and protective in secular matters

⁵Ibid., p. 6.

⁶Rebecca Patterson, The Riddle of Emily Dickinson (Boston, 1951), pp. 59-60.

⁷Richard Chase, Emily Dickinson (New York, 1965), p. 11.

⁸Capps, p. 28.

as well.⁹ Mrs. Dickinson, rather passive and retiring, seems to have figured less in the influence on her daughter, with her largest concern for the affairs of the household.¹⁰

Edna St. Vincent Millay was strongly influenced by her mother, who was head of the Millay household from the time the poet was eight years old. Henry Millay, unlike Edward Dickinson, was a weak man, not highly concerned with family responsibility, and although he and his family remained on friendly terms after his divorce from his wife, his influence on his daughters was most likely minimal. It was Mrs. Millay who encouraged her daughter Vincent's interest in literature and other arts, provided her with literary background and experience, and stimulated her desire to develop her talents.¹¹

Whereas their similar geographic environments may account in some measure for certain likenesses in the tone and themes of the two poets' work, their different social and family backgrounds are evident in their approach to poetry. On the surface, there is no striking similarity in the writing of the two women. Millay's poetry is presented in a more ostensibly personal way than Dickinson's, which is perhaps more powerful in its objective approach. Millay lacks some of Dickinson's maturity and universality; she remains in large part a young people's poet, perhaps also a woman's poet,

⁹Chase, p. 11.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 12.

¹¹Gurko, p. 5.

while the other's work is pertinent to all ages and to both sexes. Dickinson's maturity and scope are evident in her economy of form. Her poems are usually short; each line of her verse is concise and controlled. Millay's poetry, more varied in form and length, ranges from the sonnet--at which she is perhaps the greatest American master--and simple rhyming lyrics to free verse. Her poetry is like music; her sweeping emotions parallel her rhythmical lines. Her rhyme is more conventional than Dickinson's. Although the two poets share many of the same feelings, Millay allows personal emotion to take precedence over ideas.

In spite of their differences, both are fine lyric poets whose verses appeal to the heart and to the mind. The tone of their poetry and the themes with which they were concerned are the bases of their universality and wide appeal. It is in the same two elements, tone and theme, that a similarity may be found in the work of the two women. It would seem, then, that Millay and Dickinson were akin not outwardly, but inwardly. They have a spiritual similarity which is perhaps due to their common New England background, due to the fact that they were women, but more importantly to the fact that neither was an ordinary woman. Both were acutely aware of life; both were intensely sensitive to the human passions of love and sorrow, joy and pain.

These poets were unable to escape their thoughts, and they found poetry to be an effective outlet for mental and spiritual turmoil. Both knew the mind can be a torturing companion, for thoughts are hard to channel and impossible to prevent. Dickinson says that the soul can be its own "most agonizing spy."¹² The emotions within the soul can cause one acute agony, as may the thoughts of the mind. Dickinson describes the uncontrollability of thought in Poem No. 556:

The Brain within its Groove
Runs evenly--and true--
But let a Splinter swerve--
'Twere easier for You--

To put a Current back--
When Floods have split the Hills--
And scooped a Turnpike for Themselves--
And trodden out the Mills--¹³

Millay faced the same mental turmoil, which often causes her pain. In "Intention to Escape from Him" she writes of thought in the same metaphor employed by Dickinson in the second verse of the preceding poem:

By digging hard I might deflect that river,
my mind, that uncontrollable thing,
Turgid and yellow, strong to overflow its
banks in spring, carrying away bridges. . . .

Dig, dig; and if I come to ledges, blast.¹⁴

¹²The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, edited by Thomas H. Johnson (Boston, 1960), Poem no. 683, p. 338. Hereinafter referred to as Dickinson, Complete Poems.

¹³Ibid., No. 556, pp. 270-271.

¹⁴Edna St. Vincent Millay, Collected Poems, edited by Norma Millay (New York, 1956), "Intention to Escape from Him," p. 350. Hereinafter referred to as Millay, Collected Poems.

Dickinson's observation is that once released, the flow of thought is like a river which has overflowed its banks. In the orderly mind, thoughts are easy to channel, but if just one splinter in the groove through which thought flows is weak, thought can go out of control and perhaps jeopardize the well-being of the whole person. Millay says in the first part of her poem that she will "shun meditation,"¹⁵ find some intriguing but disciplined mental exercise, such as learning Latin perfectly, dig hard at it, in order to make a channel deep enough to control the raging turmoil of thoughts which is likely to occur in the "spring" season of the mind, any time when a new growth of thought occurs in the sensitive soul.

Neither poet, however, was able to deflect the flow of thoughts, nor apparently, the flow of rhythm, in her soul. Each was troubled and delighted, sometimes even simultaneously, by life, by death, by human relationships. It has long been observed that the true poet is more sensitive than the ordinary man. He is aware of human pain--his own and that of others--to the extent that he is often isolated from others by his own powers of perception. Emily Dickinson's seclusiveness is one of the best-known facts about her life, but Edna St. Vincent Millay is known to be a voice of her times, a poet of involvement who was very much in contact with the world about

¹⁵Ibid.

her. Yet Millay, too, preferred the peace and freedom of her home to the rigors of active social and political life, especially after she and her husband built a permanent home, called Steepletop, near Austerlitz, New York. She wrote to Llewelyn Powys concerning Steepletop: "We have been back from New York only a few days, and nothing could be more different than our life there and our life here," adding that they had no servants: "it's so marvelous to be free of them."¹⁶ She later wrote to the same correspondent that the two were anxious to be "entirely alone" in their seacoast house on Ragged Island.¹⁷ In one letter she reminded her friend and fellow poet, Arthur Davison Ficke, "how reticent, both by nature and by taste" she was concerning her own private affairs as well as those of others.¹⁸

At times she even found it difficult to break away from her own private thoughts and write letters to her friends and literary correspondents. In a letter to Professor Herbert C. Lipscomb in 1935, she said, "It is painfully difficult for me to write a letter . . . the real anguish, the knowing that I must write a letter, and that I want seriously to communicate with somebody."¹⁹ In 1946 she wrote to him again on the subject: "The only reason I ever write a letter . . . is out of desperation, a fear that some person, whose friendship I

¹⁶ Millay, Letters, pp. 243-244.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 257.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 292.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 258.

esteem and cherish, not understanding my continued silence, may become lost to me."²⁰ (Interestingly enough, she remarked that she had read in one of Gerard Hopkins' letters that he felt the same way.²¹)

Her desire for privacy, however, does not mean that she was not fond of her friends. Vincent Sheean, who notes in his memoir of her that "at times she was so afflicted by self-consciousness and dislike for the external world that she could hardly utter a word,"²² remarks upon the number of enduring friendships she had with people who understood her need to be by herself.²³ But she gave of herself exhaustively, in her poetry writing, in reading tours, and in other projects, so much that she could not be forever at the convenience of others. The creative mind endures so many pressures from within that it must sometimes have relief from outer pressures. Millay expresses her feelings on the subject:

Desolation dreamed of, though not accomplished,
Set my heart to rocking like a boat in a swell.
To every face I met, I said farewell.

Green rollers breaking white along a clean
beach . . . when shall I reach that island? . . .
Gladly, gladly would I be far from you for a long
time,
O noise and stench of man!

²⁰Ibid., p. 333.

²¹Ibid., p. 332.

²²Vincent Sheean, The Indigo Bunting (New York, 1951), p. 4.

²³Ibid., p. 3.

But she was never very successful in her retreat, a fact she acknowledges in the last lines of the same poem:

. . . This feigning to be asleep when wide
awake is all the loneliness
I shall ever achieve.²⁴

Whereas Millay, although inclined to a love for being alone despite--and indeed perhaps as a result of--her success in both literary and social realms, never achieved that "desolation," Dickinson did attain the loneliness she sought. Doubtless it was even more necessary to her than it was to Millay, for her thoughts were further removed from the world about her, more out of accord with her time, than those of Millay. Indeed, she feared

It might be lonelier
Without the Loneliness--
I'm so accustomed to my Fate--
Perhaps the other--Peace--

Would interrupt the Dark--

She grew used to her own type of darkness, her own seclusion.

I am not used to Hope--
It might intrude upon--
Its sweet parade--blaspheme the place--
Ordnained to suffering--²⁵

Hope, then, would be an intruder in the place "ordained to suffering"--that place being the poet's own mind. She found it painful to live with her own active mind, but she grew accustomed to her mental isolation from the rest of the world.

²⁴Millay, Collected Poems, "Desolation Dreamed Of," p. 297.

²⁵Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 405, p. 193.

Indeed, her loneliness sprang not so much from her physical isolation as from the distance between her thoughts and those of people with whom she associated. It is a singular type of isolation:

There is another Loneliness
That many die without--
Not want of friend occasions it
Or circumstance of lot

But nature, sometimes, sometimes
thought
And whose it befall
Is richer than could be revealed
By mortal numeral--²⁶

This loneliness is brought about not by lack of friends or the particular circumstances of her life, but by her mental nature, by her thought. Her isolation from others was essentially spiritual; her thoughts created a world for her vastly different from the conservative Amherst. Yet she understood, and in the above poem acknowledged the fact, that her inner world enriched her life, conferred upon her joys that, because they could not be shared with other beings, could not be told of in mortal terms.

Emily Dickinson began to withdraw noticeably from the social world in the years 1858 and 1859, about the same time she started to write poetry in earnest. Clark Griffith, in his study of Dickinson's tragic poetry, holds that her "seclusion was a necessary condition for creativity."²⁷ Her retreat from

²⁶ Ibid., No. 1116, p. 502.

²⁷ Clark Griffith, The Lone Shadow: Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry (Princeton, 1964), pp. 8-9.

society, he believes, was due to "a strong urge for concealment."²⁸ But it should not be assumed that mere withdrawal from other people was an adequate antidote for the poet's sensitivity. She did perhaps find it necessary, in view of her feelings to avoid contact with others, but she could not avoid dealing with her own loneliness, with her own flow of thought, and that was the hardest task of all. She realized that her thoughts were inescapable:

Alone, I cannot be--
 For Hosts--do visit me--
 Recordless Company--
 Who baffle Key--

Their Coming, may be known
 By Couriers within--
 Their going--is not--
 For they're never gone--²⁹

The hosts which could not be locked out of her life were in her mind. She could bolt the door to her room upstairs in the Dickinson house, but she could not lock her mind to the ever-advancing march of ideas. And though her inner senses recognized the coming of thoughts, she was never aware of their departure, for they never left her. Thomas Johnson remarks in his introduction to the collection of her poems called Final Harvest, "She knew that she could not pierce through to the unknowable, but she insisted on asking the

²⁸ Ibid., p. 40.

²⁹ Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 298, p. 140.

questions."³⁰ It was as though her thoughts and feelings were something outside herself, something larger than her mortal mind could contain:

Low at my problem bending,
Another problem comes--
Larger than mine--Serener--
Involving statelier sums.

I check my busy pencil
My figures file away.
Wherefore, my baffled finers
Thy perplexity?³¹

She ascribes to her thoughts the power to "baffle"--too subtle to be locked out, too complex for logical solution. In trying to puzzle out the problem of her own anxieties, she was overwhelmed by a problem which, although it did concern her, was unfathomable and some, though perhaps brought on by her original puzzlement, contained and swallowed up that now seemingly insignificant problem.

Millay also recognizes that thoughts can at times seem a force separate from unwilling man.

The mind is happy in the air,
happy to be up there with
Learning feathers, but the man
loathes it.
The mind cries "Up! Oh, up!
Oh, let me try to fly!
Look! I can lift you!" but
he smothers its cry.³²

³⁰Final Harvest: Emily Dickinson's Poems, edited by Thomas H. Johnson (Boston, 1961), "The Vision and Veto of Emily Dickinson," Introduction, p. xii.

³¹Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 69, p. 36.

³²Millay, Collected Poems, untitled poem, p. 490.

But whereas Dickinson feels that the mind simply cannot comprehend the larger thought, Millay's poem carries the idea that man will not, though perhaps he could, allow his thought to lift him. He purposely smothers its flight "out of thrift, and fear."³³

But some of the engulfment by a force larger than oneself, but from within oneself, which Dickinson describes, may be seen in Millay's youthful poem "Renaissance." This poem gives an account of the opening of the mind to infinity:

And, pressing of the Undefined
The definition on my mind,
Held up before my eyes a glass
Through which my shrinking sight
 did pass
Until it seemed I must behold
Immensity made manifold. . . .

I saw, and heard, and knew at last
The How and Why of all things, past,
And present, and forevermore.³⁴

Here the revelation of a force larger than the mortal mind is forced upon the sensitive soul. But in her immaturity, Millay ends the poem with a solution--a rebirth in which the mind comprehends that the world is "No wider than the heart is wide," and that the sky is "No higher than the soul is high."³⁵

In her greater depth, Dickinson could perceive that the soul in a mortal being could not reach the width and height of all that might be thrust upon it. Complete consciousness of

³³Ibid.

³⁴Ibid., "Renaissance," pp. 4-5.

³⁵Ibid., p. 9.

one's place in the cosmos cannot be achieved in the mortal world. Perhaps in another time:

At last, to be identified!
At last, the lamps upon thy side
The rest of Life to see!³⁶

"The rest of Life," an understanding and omniscience not granted to man on earth, may become visible in the clear light of immortality, if ever it is reached, but not until then. Yet in another poem, Dickinson acknowledges the great capacity and absorbency of the human mind.

The Brain--is wider than the Sky--
For--put them side by side--
The one the other will contain
With ease--and You--beside--

The Brain is deeper than the sea--
For--hold them--Blue to Blue--
The one the other will absorb--
As Sponges--Duckets--do--

The Brain is just the weight of God--
For--Heft them--Found for Pound--
And they will differ--if they do--
As Syllable from Sound--³⁷

Perhaps, as Milley states in "Renaissance," the world is just the width of the heart and the sky is just the height of the soul. But according to Dickinson, the brain is another matter. It can encompass the sky, or sea, and still have space left for the whole being of man. It covers the whole world. Probably "Renaissance" and "The Brain is Wider than the Sky" are not contradictory. Man's world will be contained

³⁶ Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 174, p. 83.

³⁷ Ibid., No. 632, pp. 312-313.

within his soul and his heart, and the breadth and depth of his world will be as great as his feelings are. But the brain, being composed of that uncontrollable force--thought--is often larger than the whole of oneself, as pointed out earlier in the discussion of Dickinson's Poem No. 69. And it is the force of thought that compels a poet to find a means of expression, though it may be a limited one. It is useless to try to stifle the flow of thoughts. Dickinson says that a fire cannot be put out--"A Thing that can ignite / Can go, itself, without a Fan."³⁸ Because some people have ideas and feelings like raging fires within them, we have poetry, an outlet for the active mind and heart. Although, according to Millay,

. . . the mind of man
Is desolate since its day began,
Divining more than it is able
To measure with its tiny table,

consolation can be found in the very magnitude of the mind:

Grieve not if from the mind be loosed
A wing that comes not home to roost;
There may be garnered yet of that
An olive-branch from Ararat.³⁹

In spite of the desolation of a mind that can perceive more than it can understand and give definition to, there may be some great good which springs from a mind which will not

³⁸Ibid., No. 530, p. 259.

³⁹Millay, Collected Poems, "Journal," pp. 520-521.

be orderly and fall into the proper channels. In the case of Dickinson and Millay, that great good was poetry. Because both poets were moved to create by an unrest of the soul, the poetry of the two contains thematic similarities.

CHAPTER II

DEATH

Death is a major preoccupation in the poetry of both Millay and Dickinson. Each poet had experience with death--friends and relatives died; however, their concern with it probably arises not from excessive and early contact with it, but from their sensitive view of life, which caused them to be acutely aware of the mystery which ends life. Both as adults acknowledge a time when they did not understand the implications of death, were not aware of its import and its horror. Dickinson says in her Poem No. 1149 that she noticed that people disappeared when she was a child, but "supposed they visited remote / or settled regions wild." No one had told her exactly where those people went. Later, however, she discovered the truth about death:

Now know I--They both visited
And settled Regions wild
But did because they died
A Fact withheld the little child--¹

Millay treats the subject at greater length in "Childhood Is a Kingdom Where Nobody Dies." There is more evidence in

¹The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, edited by Thomas H. Johnson (Boston, 1960), Poem No. 1149, p. 514. Hereinafter referred to as Dickinson, Complete Poems.

her poem of regret at the sharp reality of adulthood than there is in Dickinson's poem. Millay admits that children have only a vague awareness of death. For instance, cats die:

You fetch a shoe-box, but it's much too small,
because she won't curl up now;
So you find a bigger box, and bury her in the
yard, and weep.

But, she continues, you do not wake up months or years from then in the middle of the night, "And weep, with your knuckles in your mouth, and say Oh, God! Oh, God!"² Dickinson also compares the griefs of childhood to those of adulthood:

Bisected now, by bleaker griefs,
We envy the despair
That devastated childhood's realm,
So easy to repair.³

Childhood griefs, though enormous and often overwhelming when they occur, are at least shorter-lived than the bleak despair that can endure without mercy in adulthood. A little girl's tears can be dried with a new doll, or within the security of familiar and comforting arms. But little girls grow up, and learn about death--as well as about life--and if they are poets, they express their feelings about it in verse.

²Edna St. Vincent Millay, Collected Poems, edited by Norma Millay (New York, 1956), "Childhood Is a Kingdom Where Nobody Dies," pp. 286-288. Hereinafter referred to as Millay, Collected Poems.

³Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 1738, p. 705.

She vows to live to the fullest, even though death shall have her, and so "be but bones and jewels on that day," thus leaving death "hungry even in the end."⁷

Dickinson also realizes the indiscriminatory sureness of the grave. In Poem No. 390 she refers to death as "the postponeless Creature."⁸ Death takes all, regardless of "Color--Caste--Denomination," for these are time's affair, and his "diviner Classifying / Does not know they are." With "large--Democratic fingers," death rubs away all traces of what earth institutions term distinctive marks.⁹ In another poem she remarks that "Death is the Common Right / Of Toads and Men."¹⁰ Death is a certainty for all creatures on earth; no one can escape it. Both poets acknowledge this fact, but Dickinson seems to accept it more matter-of-factly. Sometimes she can even see the grave not as hard and dark, but as a tender blanket, as in Poem No. 141, in which she notes how the "thoughtful grave encloses" those "too fragile for winter winds."¹¹ She finds that the grave considerably shelters the fragile from hardships of life which might have been unbearable. In contrast to Millay, who in Sonnet CXXVI declares that she is too happy here on earth to give in to death, Dickinson

⁷Ibid., Sonnet CXXVI, p. 686.

⁸Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 390, p. 186.

⁹Ibid., No. 970, pp. 453-454.

¹⁰Ibid., No. 583, p. 285.

¹¹Ibid., No. 141, p. 66.

explores the possibility that it might be worthwhile to "put away / Life's Opportunity" for the things which death will buy, one of which is "Escape from Circumstances." In this poem she admits that giving up life may be a boon; death is a sure way of changing one's circumstances. However, she adds:

With Gifts of Life
How Death's Gifts may compare--
We know not--
For the Rates--lie Here--¹²

We cannot be certain that the escape is better than the circumstances, and the price of finding out is death itself. But to Dickinson it sometimes seems that it would be better to chance the mystery of death than to go on living. When life overwhelms the soul, when the tortured mind cannot find the ease of oblivion, death is a possible solution.

No drug for Consciousness--can be--
Alternative to die
Is Nature's only Pharmacy
For Being's Malady--¹³

Indeed, death seems a small thing in the face of life's magnitude:

The Dying, is a trifle, past,
But living, this include
The dying multifold--without
The Respite to be dead.¹⁴

Death may be painful, but the pain and terror end. Not so with the rigors of life. They go on and on. The suffering of life can be worse than many deaths. The final agony is

¹²Ibid., No. 382, p. 182. ¹³Ibid., No. 786, p. 383.

¹⁴Ibid., No. 1073, p. 487.

alleviated by its act of removing the soul from the cares of consciousness, but no such respite is offered by life. Here then is a reason for Dickinson's often submissive attitude toward death. It does not arise from fear of the mysterious quality of death, although she admits that Death is one whose antecedents cannot be discovered in his "native town."¹⁵ Her attitude possibly springs partly from hope that the mystery will contain relief from the less enigmatic but more complicated force of life.

Dickinson's apparent resignation to death may also be explained by a study of her fondness for understatement. Obviously she was disturbed by the thought of death, and while she found life hard to bear, she was no more anxious to die than most people. But her objective approach to all of her themes, which in itself indicates her awareness of their universality, prevents her from expressing her thoughts about death as personally as Millay does.

Any resignation Millay shows toward death is bitter, angry, never expectant. Though in "Dirge Without Music" her cry was "I am not resigned!"¹⁶ there are times when her poetry indicates a certain submission, but not a submission like that of Dickinson. In "The Shroud" Millay begins, "Death, I say, my heart is bowed / Unto thine, O Mother."¹⁷ This meekness

¹⁵Ibid., No. 153, p. 72.

¹⁶Millay, Collected Poems, "Dirge Without Music," pp. 240-241.

¹⁷Ibid., "The Shroud," p. 43.

arises not from eagerness to escape life or even from hope for what death holds, but from listlessness, a kind of giving-up attitude. Occasionally she agrees with Dickinson that death may be a refuge from life, as in poem VI from "Theme and Variations," where she defines the grave as a quiet refuge for men with "their hot rivalries-- / The plodding rich, the shiftless poor."¹⁸ At this point Millay can see death as rest from the hardships of life. In "Lethe" she displays the same attitude:

Ah, drink again
This river that is the taker-away
of pain,
And the giver-back of beauty!¹⁹

In mythology, Lethe is a river of the underworld which causes those traversing it to forget their lives in the mortal world. Millay describes it as cool and soothing.

But most of the time Millay's poetry about death shows little likeness to that of Dickinson. Though she is aware that death is beating in the door each day she lives, as she says in "Siege," and that we are mad to gather baubles around us in the face of the inevitable force;²⁰ though she admits that "Death comes in a day or two,"²¹ she remains for the most part death's great enemy. Rarely does she see the

¹⁸Ibid., "Theme and Variations," Poem VI, p. 364.

¹⁹Ibid., "Lethe," p. 253. ²⁰Ibid., "Siege," p. 191.

²¹Ibid., "Mariposa," p. 99.

tenderness Dickinson finds in death, as seen in Poem No. 141, discussed above, and in Poem No. 1065:

Let down the Bars, Oh Death--
The tired Flocks come in
Whose bleating ceases to repeat
Whose wandering is done--

Thine is the stillest night
Thine the securest Fold
Too near Thou art for seeking Thee
Too tender, to be told.²²

Dickinson here portrays death as a gentle shepherd, protective, enfolding. Whereas Millay admits that there is a certain peace in the grave in "Moriturus," which begins

If I could have
Two things in one:
The peace of the grave,
And the light of the sun;

in the same poem she says that though death is called a thief, a monster, a devil, he is less than these. He is "nothing at all." And again she resolves,

Withstanding Death
Till Life be gone,
I shall treasure my breath,
I shall linger on. . . .

With all my might
My door shall be barred.
I shall put up a fight,
I shall take it hard.²³

Millay is not willing to give up the vividness of life for the peace of the grave. Any tenderness she believes that

²²Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 1065.

²³Millay, Collected Poems, "Moriturus," pp. 199-207.

death might afford is in its oblivion. In "Renescence" she says of the grave

Cool is its hand upon the brow
And soft its breast beneath the head
Of one who is so gladly dead.²⁴

Perhaps Dickinson's strong concept of immortality, though second to her belief that death is an escape from the burdens of life, accounts in some part for the accepting attitude which pervades her death poetry. Although her letters show that she refused to accept the "salvation" her friends found in orthodox religion, keeping the Sabbath, as she indicates in her well-known Poem No. 324, staying at home while others went to church,²⁵ she nevertheless included a rather conventional concept of immortality in much of her poetry. Her background and environment were conducive to a belief in an after-life, and although she rejected many of the teachings of the conventional church, she was never able to abandon completely that tradition of immortal life. In Poem No. 976, which begins, "Death is a Dialogue between / The Spirit and the Dust," she reveals her belief that the spirit has "another trust" and surrenders only its "overcoat of dust" to death.²⁶ At times her view of immortality seems in keeping with conventional religion. In one poem she writes that Jesus said that

²⁴Ibid., "Renescence," p. 8.

²⁵Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 324, pp. 153-154.

²⁶Ibid., No. 976, p. 456.

"Death was dead,"²⁷ a statement which she believes allows no room for argument or contradiction. In another poem, she calls death the "easy Miracle" by which people are "admitted Home."²⁸ At another time she deems a coward the man who is afraid to venture upon the road of death, which Christ trod first, a "Tender Pioneer." She continues that though we know nothing of death, "Christ's acquaintance with Him" justifies him; Christ's "own endorsement" is sufficient to make death trustworthy.²⁹

Despite her outward attitude toward immortality, however, something in the tone of Dickinson's death poetry indicates that she is doubtful about the bliss heaven has to offer. In Poem No. 964, a dialogue between Christ and, supposedly, the poet, she protests that she does not know where Paradise is, that she has no conveyance for such a long distance, that she is small and spotted. Though Christ reassures her, the poem leaves the reader with a feeling that the poet cannot completely accept the reassurance.³⁰

Nevertheless, Dickinson does not deny the idea of the immortal soul, although she is at times unsure of the circumstances of immortality. One of her most significant poems shows her great concern for the question. It begins with a

²⁷Ibid., No. 432, p. 207. ²⁸Ibid., No. 499, p. 242.

²⁹Ibid., No. 698, pp. 343-344.

³⁰Ibid., No. 964, p. 451.

statement in which she seems to have no doubt: "This World is not Conclusion." The remainder of the poem, however, shows her perplexity about what "stands beyond" the present world. The riddle puzzles scholars, but "Philosophy--don't know," and "Sagacity," in the end, "must go." The puzzle is like a "Tooth / That nibbles at the soul." Immortal existence is

Invisible, as Music--
But positive, as Sound--

Although the eternal quality of the soul, this continuance of life under new conditions after life on earth, cannot be explained, the idea of it remains. It has enticed men to bear "Contempt of Generations / And Crucifixion."³¹ Here Dickinson indicates a profound idea--perhaps Christ himself had no certain knowledge of what was to follow his death, but with a supreme act of faith, allowed himself to be put to death so that other men would be sure of the thing he believed in so strongly.

In an outwardly different approach to immortality, the strange Emily who could not agree with her friends on conventional matters is also present in the death poetry. In Poem No. 489 she ridicules the human attitude toward heaven. "We prate--of Heaven," she says, and when neighbors die we relate at what hour they fled to heaven. But, she asks, "Who saw them?" and why do we say "fly?" "Is Heaven a Place--a Sky--a Tree?" She answers that there is no geography for the dead.

³¹Ibid., No. 501, p. 243.

Heaven is "State--Endoval--Focus."³² She opposes the tradition that heaven is a place with the idea that it is a condition, a state of mind, an intangible essence. In a poem expressing a similar concept, she seems to contradict even her frequently stated idea that death will bring about relief from earthly duress. She says that eternity will simply isolate the fundamental laws which life has followed.

To die is not to go--
On Doom's consummate Chart
No territory new is staked--
Remain thou as thou art.³³

Here she implies there will be no new kind of existence after death. There is no frontier after the grave, but a continuation of the state of the soul in life.

Occasionally Dickinson speaks of heaven with a tongue-in-cheek tone, almost mischievously preferring life on earth to what she has heard of heaven. Although she comments that this life is just a primer to a book yet unopened on the shelf, she is so satisfied with the primer that she has no desire to open the greater book.

Might some one else--so learned--be
And leave me--just my A--B--C--
Himself--could have the skies.³⁴

In one poem she writes as though troubled about being barred from heaven because she is too insignificant for a place of

³²Ibid., No. 489, p. 235. ³³Ibid., No. 1295, pp. 564-565.

³⁴Ibid., No. 418, pp. 199-200.

angels and white robes. She might sing too loud there, or cause some trouble.³⁵ This timid attitude implies that heaven is a rather austere and forbidding place, like an aloof palace is to a cat who has come to look at a king. A little bolder in another poem, she looks at heaven from the viewpoint of a restless child who shuns pomp and splendor. She confesses that she will not feel at home "in the Handsome Skies." She knows she will not like Paradise because it's always Sunday and there is no recess, and God is always watching. She would just run away from it all if she could, "But there's the Judgment Day!"³⁶ Immortality, then, is an inescapable fate, though not necessarily a desirable one.

Millay shows a similar attitude toward immortality, that of a child in an unfamiliar place. In "The Blue-Flag in the Bog" she pictures a mortal's reaction to finding himself in heaven, having left his "loved Earth to ashes."

Heaven was a neighbor's house,
Open flung to us, bereft.

Gay lights of Heaven showed,
And 'twas God who walked ahead;
Yet I wept along the road,
Wanting my own house instead.

The mortal weeps a farewell to all the lovely things of earth; the blessed road of heaven is a bitter road to her, and she questions God in her heart. In a conventional interpretation

³⁵Ibid., No. 248, pp. 113-114.

³⁶Ibid., No. 413, p. 197.

of the end of the world by burning, the mortal now become immortal is unconventionally allowed to slip back to earth, where the only living thing remaining in the ashes is a blue-flag in a bog. She salvages the flower, and after a treacherous climb back to heaven, is allowed to replant the blue-flag from earth in paradise, thus making a strange place seem more like home.³⁷

But in spite of the youthful, optimistic view of heaven seen in "Blue-Flag in the Bog," which appeared in Second April, one of Millay's earliest collections, little optimism about immortality is seen in her later works. Lacking the religious background of Dickinson, she is not always sure that anything immortal exists under that clay overcoat. After the death of her mother, Cora Millay, in 1931,³⁸ the poet wrote a series of poems in her memory. The first of these, "Valentine," contains a bitter view of life after death. Death would be a "Shining town" if she knew her "buried love" would draw breath there; heaven would be her "native land" if her mother should wake there. But she feels that heaven is merely "Death's kinder name." And she writes of her mother: ". . . you are nowhere: you are gone / All roads into Oblivion."³⁹

³⁷Millay, Collected Poems, "Blue Flag in the Bog," pp. 55-65.

³⁸Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay, edited by Allan Ross Macdougall (New York, 1952), p. 244. Hereinafter referred to as Millay, Letters.

³⁹Millay, Collected Poems, "Valentine," p. 283.

Unlike Dickinson's concept of the grave as a tender blanket in Poem No. 141, Millay's picture of the grave is austere and cold in the series commemorating her mother. "In the Grave No Flower" stresses the alienation from life that death brings.

Here dock and tare
But there
No flower.

. . . here
Dandelions,--and the wind
Will blow them everywhere.

Save there.
There
No flower.⁴⁰

From Millay's viewpoint, man's hope for fulfillment is contained in his life on earth, however short that span may be, since death is inevitable and after death there is only oblivion.

There is a hope for a kind of immortality, however, seen in "Journal," a long poem from a posthumous collection of her verse entitled Mine the Harvest. In this poem Millay muses about various actions of her life, knowing they will be dissolved in death. She wonders what it would be like to die, to lie knowing nothing, "the keen mind / Suddenly gone deaf and blind,"⁴¹ not even having the power to know that it knows nothing. She prescribes her epitaph:

⁴⁰Ibid., "In the Grave No Flower," pp. 284-285.

⁴¹Ibid., "Journal," p. 514.

where my irrelevant ashes lie
 write only this: THAT WHICH WAS I
 NO LONGER HOLDS ITS LITTLE PLACE
 AGAINST THE PUSHING LEAGUES OF SPACE.⁴²

Yet she confesses that there is a resurrection of the mortal part of her. The dust of the body will rise again in dew and roses, will put forth leaves. The cycle of life never ends. And there is yet another bid of the poet for immortality. At the beginning of the poem, she writes,

This book, when I am dead will be
 A little faint perfume of me.⁴³

People who knew her will read it and think of her. Although she confesses that she does not write the book to survive her mortal self, it pleases her to know that it will remain when she is gone. Though it cannot preserve the flesh, it can reveal the spirit. In an earlier poem she makes a similar plea for immortality:

Stranger, pause and look
 From the dust of ages
 Lift this little book,
 Turn the tattered pages,⁴⁴
 Read me, do not let me die!

Millay's awareness of the brevity of her own life and her plea that it have some enduring significance indicate her consciousness of the vastness of time and space. Much of her poetry is influenced by the classics which she read avidly, and many of her works concern the eternal quality of the basic needs and

⁴²Ibid., p. 516.

⁴³Ibid., p. 507.

⁴⁴Ibid., "The Poet and His Book," p. 84.

emotions of mankind. In "If Still You Orchards Bear" she acknowledges that man will have the same cares in ten thousand years that he has now, that he has had for ten thousand years past.⁴⁵ This awareness, which lifts her writing to a universal plane, also affords her a hope for immortality--through her poetry.

This awareness of the continuity of the past and the future is not so evident in Dickinson's poetry. Poem No. 856 indicates that she does understand the smallness of man's time on earth. She speaks of the "finished feeling" which is "Experienced at Graves." The "bold Exhibition" of death shows us more precisely what we are that our lives enable us to comprehend. It enables us to "infer" something of "the Eternal function."⁴⁶ By eternal function she is probably referring to the workings of the cosmos, not men's separate functions in eternity. Still, she does not here exclude the thought of eternal life for man.

Although her chief hope for immortality seems to be in the possibility of an after-life for the soul, she occasionally indicates the earthly kind of immortality--the essence of man which lives on in the hearts of those who knew him. She expresses this idea not about herself, as Millay does, but about others she has known:

⁴⁵ Ibid., "If Still Your Orchards Bear," pp. 308-309.

⁴⁶ Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 856, p. 410.

That Such have died enable Us
 The tranquiller to die--
 That such have lived,
 Certificate for Immortality.⁴⁷

Perhaps she is writing of men who have died long ago, but are kept alive by history. The endurance of their names testifies to a type of immortality, which we, too, may obtain. Another poem, a rather inscrutable one, seems to contain the same idea.

A Death blow is a Life blow to Some
 Who till they died, did not alive become--
 Who had they lived, had died but when
 They died, Vitality begun.⁴⁸

It is difficult to ascertain the precise meaning of the poem, but in an application to the theme of immortality, it becomes a tribute to those whose contributions to mankind have made them famous only after their deaths. Dickinson's own work did not receive its due notice until many years after her death.

Millay's "To a Poet that Died Young" contains the idea of the death of a poet giving immortality to his works.

Many a bard's untimely death
 Lends unto his verses breath;
 Here's a song was never sung;
 Growing old is dying young.⁴⁹

The idea here is that the world mourns the death of a promising young artist, praising his works and lamenting the fact that he did not live to produce the even greater things he had the potential for, thus immortalizing his name. However, had he

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, No. 1030, p. 472. ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, No. 816, p. 397.

⁴⁹ Millay, *Collected Poems*, "To a Poet That Died Young," p. 91.

lived and produced no greater works, the world would have been disappointed with him, and in growing old, his name would have "died young."

Millay sees yet another way that a seemingly untimely death preserves the good qualities of persons who are not artists. For instance, a lover who dies while his love is still new and ardent will never pale or waver in his affections. In "Keen" Millay blesses death, who took her love "and buried him in the sea," where no lies or bitter words "will out of his mouth at me." Others may grieve his death, but she will praise death, which "cuts in marble / what would have sunk to dust." She ends the poem with the lines:

And I'd liefer be bride to a lad
gone down
Than widow to one safe home.⁵⁰

Dickinson also knows that sometimes we can keep what is lovely and delightful only by losing it:

To disappear enhances--
The Man that runs away
Is tintured for an instant
With Immortality

She goes on to say that death's "sternest function" is to enable us to gather securely "the fruit perverse to plucking."⁵¹

Despite the ability of death to freeze an hour of delight or a lovely relationship in time and preserve it forever, both poets are acutely aware of the grief brought by the death of a

⁵⁰Ibid., "Keen," pp. 173-174.

⁵¹Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 1209, pp. 533-534.

loved one. Dickinson remarks on the strictness of the grave in Poem No. 408. It admits only death and the dying person, and has only one seat--for the dead one. But while death is lonely for the dying, it is also lonely for those left behind the dead.⁵² Dickinson describes a feeling of incompleteness which returns again and again after loss through death:

Each that we lose takes part of us;
A crescent still abides,
Which like the moon, some turbid night
Is summoned by the tides.⁵³

Millay's often-anthologized "Lament" is told from the viewpoint of a widow who calls her son and daughter to her side: "Listen children: / Your father is dead." She knows that "Life must go on, / And the dead be forgotten," but she is bitter and purposeless, and cannot recall just why the living must go on.⁵⁴ "Interim" is one of her earlier poems concerning grief. It is a rambling and lengthy poem, but the core of its message is contained in a few poignant lines:

. . . I can make
Of ten small words a rope to hang
the world!
"I had you and I have you now no more."⁵⁵

Like Dickinson, Millay recognizes that part of one's world is gone when a loved one dies.

⁵²Ibid., No. 403, p. 194. ⁵³Ibid., No. 1605, p. 663.

⁵⁴Millay, Collected Poems, "Lament," p. 103.

⁵⁵Ibid., "Interim," p. 19.

Often the memories of the dead are haunting ones. Millay says of a dead friend:

She had a look about her
That I wish I could forget--⁵⁶

But the look cannot be forgotten. Her "Memorial to D. C." is a group of five poems written as a tribute to Dorothy Coleman, a college friend who died young. Millay includes in her memories of the dead girl details of her clothing, her "fragrant gowns" on their padded hangers, her "narrow shoes" on the closet floor; details about her person: her "big eyes," her "thin fingers," her "fair, soft, indefinite-coloured hair."⁵⁷

Dickinson also knows the sharpness of personal memories about the dead. She says "If anybody's friend be dead," the mourner spends much time remembering how he walked, his Sunday costume, the way his hair looked, the pranks he played. The thing that causes the woe to pierce to the quick is that although the mourner remembers his friend, the dead one is now far away and does not remember those he left on earth.⁵⁸ Dickinson implies that the reason the dead are unable to recall earth is that they now inhabit a grander space, a time far away. Millay, however, in "Memorial to D. C.," confesses her belief that the total being of her dead friend lies in the grave. She cannot see or smell the roses heaped upon her

⁵⁶Ibid., "When the Year Grows Old," pp. 49-50.

⁵⁷Ibid., "Memorial to D. C.," pp. 120-123.

⁵⁸Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 509, pp. 247-248.

grave not because her senses have flown to some immortal continuation of life far removed from earth, but because she is dead. Nothing remains but the dust.⁵⁹

For both poets, however, there is something that can transcend death--love of mortal beings for one another. The fact that one has lived makes him permanent to somebody. Dickinson says that two people's awareness of each other will endure past death. It is a "Discovery not God himself / Could now annihilate."⁶⁰ Poem No. 611 has a similar theme. Here Dickinson begins "I see thee better--in the Lark--" and continues in another verse, "And in the Grave--I see Thee best." For those who love, the distance between life and death is not too remote, the darkness of the grave is not too black.

What need of Day--
To Those whose Dark--hath so--surpassing
Sun--
It deem it be--Continually--
At the Meridian?⁶¹

Here she indicates no thought of the two sharing love in a life-after death; she instead pictures a love strong enough to conquer death. But in another poem, she deals with a meeting of lovers in a place beyond earth.

Think of it Lover! I and Thee
Permitted--face to face to be--
After a Life--a Death--We'll say--⁶²

⁵⁹ Millay, Collected Poems, "Memorial to D. C.," p. 118.

⁶⁰ Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 1260, pp. 551-552.

⁶¹ Ibid., No. 611, p. 301. ⁶² Ibid., No. 577, pp. 281-282.

The thumb that set the hollow just
 that way
 In your full throat and lidded the
 long eye
 So roundly from the forehead, will
 let lie
 Broken, forgotten, under foot some day
 Your unimpeachable body, and so slay
 The work he most had been remembered by?

She replies to her own question that such levelness will not
 be lost,

But, cast in bronze upon his very urn,
 Make known him Master, and for what
 good reason.⁶⁵

Still, there is no direct reference to conventional immortality.
 Here the question is the immortality of physical beauty, not
 of the soul. However, another sonnet seems to indicate that
 neither physical beauty or mortal love will foil death.

And you as well must die, beloved
 dust,
 And all your beauty stand you in
 no stead. . . .
 Nor shall my love avail you in
 your hour. . . .
 It mattering not how beautiful
 you were,
 Nor how beloved above all else that
 dies.⁶⁶

Again Millay's realization of the inevitability and finality
 of death is evident. Although the bitterness may be softened
 and grief may be controlled, the fact remains that we must
 lose our loved ones in death and, finally, ourselves submit to
 death. Both poets, though differing in their outlooks on

⁶⁵Ibid., Sonnet XXXV, p. 595.

⁶⁶Ibid., Sonnet XIX, p. 579.

immortality and submission to death, realize that it will come. Dickinson's Poem No. 1256 might sum up the attitude of Millay as well as Dickinson:

Not any higher stands the Grave
For Heroes than for Men--
Not any nearer for the Child
Than numb Three Score and Ten--

This latest Leisure equal lulls
The Beggar and his Queen;
Propitiate this Democrat
A Summer's Afternoon--⁶⁷

Although Millay might be more likely to refer to death as a tyrant than as a democrat, she nevertheless shares Dickinson's attitude that he exerts a force over all living.

It seems fitting to refer to death as "he" when speaking of Millay's and Dickinson's attitude toward it. For both poets are fond of personifying death. Dickinson's Poem No. 712, "Because I could not stop for Death / He kindly stopped for me," is perhaps the most famous of her personifications. Death appears in a carriage, knowing no haste.⁶⁸ But Millay hears him, in the same type of personification, hurrying about his business, in "Conscientious Objector": "I hear him leading his horse out of the stall; I hear the clatter on the barn floor."⁶⁹ And she does not enjoy the ride in his carriage as does Dickinson, who terms his call a "Civility."⁷⁰ Millay says

⁶⁷Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 1256, p. 550.

⁶⁸Ibid., No 712, p. 350.

⁶⁹Millay, Collected Poems, "Conscientious Objector," pp. 305-306.

that she will not hold the bridle while he clinches the girth. She will go with him, but not willingly. Here again is Millay's idea of death as an unwelcome intruder as opposed to Dickinson's view of death as a force which must be accepted with submission and perhaps expectancy.

The same viewpoints are apparent in their consideration of death as a visitor, sometimes as a lover. Dickinson says "The Soul should always stand ajar" so that death (heaven, she calls him here) should not "be obliged to wait" or be made "shy of troubling her" and so depart before the soul can unbolt the door "To search for the accomplished Guest" and find that he is there no more.⁷¹ Millay does not wait so patiently and obediently for the expected guest. She vows to be untrue to him before he comes:

Wine from these grapes I shall be
treading surely
morning and noon and night until I die.
Stained with these grapes I shall lie
down to die. . . .

Death, fumbling to uncover
My body in his bed,
Shall know
There has been one
Before him.⁷²

The grapes she refers to in this poem are the fruits of life, which she believes one should harvest as long as he is able, as steadily as he can, and thus perhaps manage to cheat death in a small way.

⁷¹Ibid., No. 1055, p. 481.

⁷²Millay, Collected Poems, "Line from These Grapes," p. 234.

Dickinson is not always anxious to accept the advances of the persistent suitor. In Poem No. 1445 she calls him the "supple suitor," pointing out that he always wins in the end, beginning with a "dim approach" but finishing with bravery and bugles, bearing away in triumph the mortal he has won. But she remarks that the dying person is born away to a "Troth unknown," and to "Kindred as responsive / As Porcelain," perhaps a fate to be dreaded rather than looked forward to with hope.

Both poets have various other personifications of death, Dickinson more than Millay. The former frequently refers to death as "he" and "him," as in Poem No. 718, when, speaking of some unnamed "Her" with whom the poet was anxious to meet, she recounts how Death found her first. "The Success--was His."⁷³ Each poet attributes human physical traits to death. Millay, in a poem concerning the Sacco-Vanzetti trial of 1927, writes that the two men, awaiting their execution, sat in "the belly of death."⁷⁴ Dickinson attributes to Death "large--Democratic fingers"⁷⁵ which rub away earthly distinctions among mankind.

Each poet has a personification indicating a rather defiant attitude toward the menacing creature. In Poem No. 608, Dickinson pictures death as one by whom she is not intimidated:

⁷³Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 718, p. 353.

⁷⁴Millay, Collected Poems, "Hangman's Oak," pp. 232-233.

⁷⁵Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 970, pp. 453-454.

Afraid! Of whom am I afraid?
 Not Death--for who is He?
 The Porter of my Father's Lodge
 As much abasheth me!⁷⁶

Millay's "Moriturus" lists some of the different names by which death has been known--Reaper, Angel, King, Monster, Devil, even Thief, but she holds that he is "less than these."⁷⁷ Yet she gives him the dignity of personification, as does Dickinson. Distasteful as the idea of death is to Millay, intriguing as it is to Dickinson, inevitable as it is to both, each knows that it must be met and therefore can be met. All conditions of life may be altered except that final condition--that all living must die. Dickinson expresses this idea in a matter-of-fact but beautiful way:

All but Death, can be Adjusted--
 Dynasties repaired--
 Systems--settled in their Sockets--
 Citadels--dissolved--

Waste of Lives--resown with Colors
 By Succeeding Springs--
 Death--unto itself--Exception--
 Is exempt from Change.⁷⁸

But although death is final, immutable, and life can be channeled, both poets know that all men must cope with the changes of life until it is time for them to die. And both concede that life contains suffering which can be worse than death.

⁷⁶Ibid., No. 608, p. 299.

⁷⁷Millay, Collected Poems, "Moriturus," pp. 199-207.

⁷⁸Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 749, p. 367.

CHAPTER III

LOVE

That death is imminent and life is fleeting remains uppermost in Dickinson's mind, even when she speaks of the preoccupations of the living. But she declares that life is too brief for the completion of enmity. Hate is too large a task to finish in a little lifetime. Therefore she believes "The Little Toil of Love" is enough for her.¹ This love that she understates as a little toil is no minor theme in Dickinson's poetry. She acknowledges its power in our lives:

That Love is all there is,
Is all we know of Love;²

Love, then, is all that we have in life for consolation for the fact that we must die. Love is supreme in life not only because we need it, but also because it is all-pervading; it cannot be escaped. We really understand little of this force that holds us, but its omnipotence and omnipresence proclaim its significance. Dickinson terms it a "little Bane," but acknowledges it to be the "Boon of all alive." It is "As common as it is unknown," she says: despite its universality,

¹The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, edited by Thomas H. Johnson (Boston, 1960), Poem No. 478, pp. 230-231. Hereinafter referred to as Dickinson, Complete Poems.

²Ibid., No. 1765, p. 714.

it is almost impossible to understand by logic. The human being must have love--"To lack of it is Woe," yet when he does, he is hurt by it--"To own of it is Wound." And nowhere but in Paradise--if even there--can love's "Tantamount be found."³

Millay too is aware of the omnipotence of love. As Dickinson does, she acknowledges that it is stronger than hate. She describes hate as a poisonous plant, with "rough stalks, . . . odours rank, unbreathable," thrown from "dark corollas." The seeds of such a plant, the poet says, she planted in her garden, and "fiercely tended" them, but the sun and sweet rain of life prevented the growth of the seeds.⁴ The sweetness of life will not allow any serious spread of hate in the poet's life or in her works.

Love can be victorious, in its own way, over the severity of the grave. Millay cautions "the fortunate breathers of the air" not to say, when true lovers are dead, "that love is false and soon grows cold," but to pass in silence the grave of those lovers, "who lived and died believing love was true."⁵ That love can thin the ranks of death is indicative of its power. Dickinson declares, "Unable are the Loved to die," in Poem No. 809. Love, she says, "is immortality," in that

³Ibid., No. 1438, p. 612.

⁴Edna St. Vincent Millay, Collected Poems, edited by Norma Millay (New York, 1956), "Blight," pp. 47-48. Hereinafter referred to as Millay, Collected Poems.

⁵Ibid., Sonnet C, p. 660.

the memory of loved ones lived on after their physical deaths.⁶ Her statement that "The Text of Love--is Death" in Poem No. 573⁷ might well be applicable to her belief, and to Millay's as well, that love can surmount the final victory of death.

Yet both poets realize that only spiritually can love outrank death. Dickinson says "Love can do all but raise the Dead," and she doubts that even that feat would be too great for "such a giant" as love were it not for the weakness of the flesh which bears the love. But human love "is tired and must sleep, / And hungry and must graze"; therefore death is able to make off with his prey.⁸ Millay, in spite of her protest against death and her strong stand for love, realizes that even the deepest human grief must give way to weariness. At the end of "Interim," a poem concerning the death of a loved one, the mourner declares, after a long expression of his sorrow, "Ah, I am worn out--I am wearied out-- / . . . I am but flesh and blood and I must sleep."⁹

And in life, the human expression of love often falls short of what it should be. It is not that human beings do not love each other, but human faults may cause neglect, or

⁶Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 809, p. 394.

⁷Ibid., No. 573, p. 269.

⁸Ibid., No. 1731, p. 702.

⁹Millay, Collected Poems, "Interim," p. 24.

hinder the ability to show the true feelings of the heart. Dickinson describes her regret at this failure. We bury the dead and are unable to follow them, then we "blame the scanty love / We were Content to show." We feel guilty because we did not show more affection for the loved one while he lived. Death augments our love "a Hundred fold," but the object of that feeling will not or cannot now accept and return it.¹⁰ In "To One Who Might Have Borne a Message," Millay speaks from the point of view of one who now thinks continually of a dead loved one, although he did not show his love while she lived.

I used to say to her, "I love you
Because your face is such a pretty
colour,
No other reason."
But it was not true.

Now, the dead one cannot know how "her shadow intervenes" between the one who loved her and his life as it is now. He says that he would have sent her a message by a friend had he known the friend was going into the world of the dead.¹¹ Millay's implication is that we cannot send messages to the dead, and to our regret we can now never show them how we felt all the time.

The theme of human failings in love, although frequent in the work of both poets, is dealt with in different ways by

¹⁰ Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 482, p. 232.

¹¹ Millay, Collected Poems, "To One Who Might Have Borne a Message," pp. 189-190.

Dickinson and Millay. Dickinson indicates that the failure of man to express his love fully comes from no intentional hardness of heart, but from inadequacy of communication and from the inability to fully comprehend love. She knows that "The Love a Life can show Below / Is but a filament" of the divine love which we can only guess at in this life.¹² According to her Poem No. 1680, there are degrees of love, and few reach the highest:

Sometimes with the Heart
Seldom with the Soul
Scarcer once with the Might
Few--love at all.¹³

The number of people who love with all their being is small. But regardless of human failure in expressing and even in experiencing love, the fact remains that love is of utmost importance. In another poem Dickinson expresses this concept:

Love--is anterior to Life--
Posterior--to Death--
Initial of Creation, and
The Exponent of Earth.¹⁴

Love exists before we are born and continues after we die. It began with the creation of man, and is the explanation of and reason for the earth's existence. The same idea is contained in these lines from her Poem No. 923:

¹²Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 673, p. 334.

¹³Ibid., No. 1680, p. 626.

¹⁴Ibid., No. 923, p. 436.

Love--is that later Thing than Death--
 More previous--than Life--¹⁵

It is evident that her attitude toward love is in accord with the universality of her poetry. Her approach to love, like her approach to all her themes, contains an objectivity which contributes to the broad scope and application of her work.

Millay, however, deals with love with the same intensity, the same personal tone, that pervades all of her poetry. Love is the major theme of her works, and she approaches it, as she does all her themes, with less control than Dickinson shows. She does recognize man's weakness in comprehending and expressing love, but attributes it more to the elusive quality of love than to its enormity. In a poem which describes love metaphorically as a fruit, she declares that he who would partake of it must do so where he finds it; he cannot pluck it from the branches and store it in barrels, or preserve it for later enjoyment.

The winter of love is a cellar of
 empty bins,
 In an orchard soft with rot.¹⁶

Love is spontaneous; it must be taken at the moment it is ripe. Like a fruit, it is unpalatable before it ripens and decays if not seized when ready for harvest. Another thought con-

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, No. 923, p. 434.

¹⁶ Millay, *Collected Poems*, "Never May the Fruit Be Plucked," p. 185.

tained here is that once the fruit is consumed, it is gone and can be enjoyed no longer.

Dickinson uses the metaphor of harvest to express a similar idea. She tells how she winnowed the lasting portion of life from "what would fade" and stored it in a barn. But when she returned later, her "priceless Hay" was nowhere to be found. She concludes with a question to "Hearts"--

Art thou within the little Barn
Love provided Thee?¹⁷

It is difficult to preserve the best experiences and emotions-- the most valuable things are also the most perishable.

Millay is fully aware that the "winter of love" is a painful thing. She uses a similar metaphor for dying love in "Alms," in which she compares her heart to a house of which "The sashes are beset with snow." Inside, the heart is "what it was before," but all around it are the signs of love growing cold. "I know a winter when it comes," the poet says, and she believes the frost of a dead love to be as severe as is the frost at the waning of autumn.¹⁸

Dickinson, with her more controlled, objective tone, believes more in the endurance although perhaps not in the rewards, of love, than does Millay. As seen in the poems discussed above, Dickinson views love as an infinite force

¹⁷Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 178, pp. 84-85.

¹⁸Millay, Collected Poems, "Alms," pp. 88-89.

preceding birth and enduring after death. "Love is like Life," she says, "merely longer." And it is "the Fellow of the Resurrection," enduring the length of the grave.¹⁹ The same idea is shown in Poem No. 610, where she says that one never forgets those who die, never finds another love to replace the dead, even though others may somewhat fill their places. And after this world gives way to the next one, the "former love" will be more distinct than those loves which could never quite replace it.²⁰

Millay's love poetry is more bitter than that of Dickinson. She recognizes the fleetingness of the emotion:

After all, my erstwhile dear,
My no longer cherished,
Need we say it was not love
Just because it perished?²¹

In spite of the flippancy of the preceding verse, the death of love is a serious thing to Millay, so serious that the bulk of her love poetry is devoted to it. She realizes that while love is omnipresent, it is often not reciprocal. Though love may be long-enduring on the part of one person, the one he loves may not return his love. Often Millay is bitter and sad about the petty causes of the death of love:

Not dead of wounds, not borne
Home to the village on a litter of
branches, torn

¹⁹ Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 491, p. 236.

²⁰ Ibid., No. 610, pp. 300-301.

²¹ Millay, Collected Poems, "Fonscer Mortus Est," p. 75.

By splendid claws and the talk all
 night of the villagers
 But stung to death by gnats
 Lies love.²²

In "The Spring and the Fall," Millay relates that in the spring of the year love blossomed rich and full. Here again the seasons of the year may be interpreted as symbolic for the seasons of the heart. In the last stages of love, as beauty wanes in the last season of the year, the feeling began to die and grow cold. She implies regret that the fullness of love, like the beauty of spring, must dwindle and fade. In the conclusion of the poem she again recognizes the petty ways in which love dies:

'Tis not love's going hurts my days,
 But that it went in little ways.²³

She is almost resigned to the brevity of love, but she remains bitter about the way in which it goes. She knows well that most love does not last a lifetime, as she says "Pretty Love, I Must Outlive You." Even her little dog lying by the fireside will outlive her love, "If no trap or shot-gun gets him."

Ferrets, tortoises and redwoods
 Live a longer life than men do,
 Men a longer life than dogs do,
 Dogs a longer life than love does.

She seems almost matter-of-fact about the brevity of love, but her awareness of it does not prevent its pain. She concludes the poem with a rebuke to herself:

²²Millay, "Not So Far as the Forest, Part I," p. 338.

²³Millay, "The Spring and the Fall," p. 163.

What a fool I was to take you,
 Pretty love, into my household,
 Shape my days and nights to charm you,
 Center all my hopes about you,
 Knowing well I must outlive you,
 If no trap or shot-gun gets me.²⁴

Dickinson speaks more frequently of the longevity of love than Millay does, as in her Poem No. 549:

That I shall love alway--
 I argue thee
 That love is life--
 And life hath Immortality.²⁵

Here her frequent theme of eternal life is again shown, this time with human love compared to divine love, for she cites as proof of immortal love Calvary, where Christ became a symbol of God's love for man. Perhaps one of Dickinson's most famous poems on the longevity of love is No. 729, "Alter! When the Hills do--" in which she says that she will change in her feelings toward the person addressed when the hills alter; she will have had enough of him when the daffodil has had its fill of dew.²⁶

Millay also recognizes that love can be enduring, though often on the part of one person only, as previously stated. Her "Modern Declaration," which she models after a legal or political document, begins with a lengthy sentence proclaiming, "I, being loved ever since I was a child a few things, never

²⁴ *Ibid.*, "Pretty Love, I Must Outlive You," p. 322.

²⁵ Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 549, p. 267.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, No. 729, p. 358.

having wavered / In these affections," and lists many trials which the poet has endured in her loves, proof of her steadfastness in devotion. The sentence ends with the declaration, "I shall love you always." The conclusion of the poem indicates that she will endure despite the tendency of the loved one to stray:

No matter what party is in power;
 No matter what temporarily expedient
 combination of allied interests
 wins the war;
 Shall love you always.²⁷

Politically minded, in accordance with her times, Millay is able to express the age-old theme of enduring love in modern terms. Her poem, simple and direct in the thought it expresses, is less burdened by sentiment than Dickinson's "Alter! When the Hills do," which tends to overplay the steadfastness of love and consequently makes the emotion seem less sincere than that expressed by Millay.

The fact is that Dickinson, whose poetry has been cited in this study as the more universal, often falls short of her own poetic scope in her love poetry. Her reclusive life precludes the possibility of her having many active romantic experiences. Clark Griffith in his study of Dickinson's tragic poetry mentions that the poet's biographers have credited her with various involvements, none of which Griffith

²⁷ Millay, Collected Poems, "Modern Declaration," p. 352.

believes to be factual.²⁸ Richard Chase, however, states that Dickinson "undoubtedly fell in love with Charles Wadsworth,"²⁹ a minister who took an interest in her life and her work. Millicent Todd Bingham admits that the search for the object of Dickinson's love poems is a "provocative adventure," but she says that any implication that the poet's relationship with Wadsworth was a love affair is a false one.³⁰ Most biographers of Dickinson, however, are in agreement that Wadsworth had an influence on her poetry as well as her life, though her relationship with him, whatever her true feelings were, was not one of reciprocal romantic love, but a spiritual and mental relationship. She admired his sermons and was impressed by his Calvinistic philosophy, both of which made an impact on her thinking.³¹

Griffith has suggested that Dickinson's love poetry is perhaps a result of her efforts to be a poet according to the conventions of her time. She had read some of the literature popular in her day, and recognized the love theme often present therein. Possibly she was trying her hand at

²⁸Clark Griffith, The Long Shadow: Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry (Princeton, 1964), pp. 149-150.

²⁹Richard Chase, Emily Dickinson (New York, 1965), p. 74.

³⁰Millicent Todd Bingham, Emily Dickinson's Home (New York, 1955), pp. 371-372.

³¹Chase, p. 75.

the traditional treatment of love. Another explanation the same critic offers is that her more successful love poems are an attempt to express her constant theme of the "individual plagued by change and time" on a human level.³² Whatever fact lies behind these conjectures, and whatever were the poet's true emotions, there is a quantity of love poetry in her works which deserves some consideration. The fact remains that much of it is inferior to her poems which involve other themes, and that much of it is not as good as Millay's love poetry.

The theme of love is of primary concern to Millay chiefly because it is an emotion none can escape and because it is often a painful experience. There is more evidence of actual romantic experience in Millay's life than there is in Dickinson's. Her letters reveal love attachments to both Arthur Davison Ficke and Witter Byrner, both of whom took an early interest in her work.³³ Both romantic involvements later developed into steadfast friendships, but the poet had other romances, finally marrying, at thirty, a man with whom her letters and biographies indicate that she was very much in love, Eugen Boissivain. It is evident, then, that Millay's love poetry had foundation in actual experience; perhaps that partially explains why it exceeds Dickinson's poetry about love in both

³²Griffith, pp. 153-156.

³³Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay; edited by Allan Ross Fiedougel (New York, 1965), pp. 102-105.

quantity and quality. Millay's greatest interest was love, whereas Dickinson's deeper concern with other themes helps to account for her relatively scant and sometimes superficial handling of the love theme.

Despite the basic differences in their writings on the subject, the theme of love in the two women's poetry can be compared as well as contrasted. Each poet acknowledges the unexplainable, binding quality of the emotion which makes it impossible for any human being to be immune to it. In Poem No. 480, Dickinson begins with the question, "Why do I love You, Sir?" and answers simply, "Because." She reasons that the wind does not ask the grass why she moves when he passes, for he knows, and lightning does not question why the eye shuts as he goes by.³⁴ Such questions do not require replies; they contain their own answers: it must be. Thus the poet expresses the idea that love is an inevitable course.

Millay records a similar idea in "The Philosopher," a simple poem which reveals the futility of philosophy in the face of love:

And what are you that, wanting you,
I should be kept awake
As many nights as there are days
with weeping for your sake?

She reasons that there are braver and kinder men than the one she loves, but concludes:

³⁴Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 480, pp. 231-232.

Yet women's ways are witless ways,
 As any sage will tell,--
 And what an I, that I should love
 So wisely and so well?³⁵

The process of logic, she affirms, has no bearing on the phenomenon of love. While it may be argued that the person one loves is unworthy of such devotion, the lover can know only that the choice of his heart seems right to him. His feeling alone makes the loved one seem worthy to him.

Feeling, then, not reason, is the mainstay of love. And if, as Dickinson says in the previously discussed Poem No. 1765, "love is all there is," then feeling is the chief guide to human actions. Millay's poetry, so personal with its ever-present theme of love, is indicative that she believes in the great role emotion plays in human lives. Nor is Dickinson's poetry lacking in the expression of emotion, but she portrays it more quietly, more subtly, than does Millay. Occasionally, however, she makes a definite statement on the subject. Poem No. 1765, "That Love Is All There Is," is one example of this. Another example is Poem No. 1354, which begins "The Heart is the Capital of the Mind--/ The Mind is a single State." She continues that each person is a continent; each person is his own nation.³⁶ Here she is not advocating complete isolation

³⁵ Millay, Collected Poems, "The Philosopher," p. 148.

³⁶ Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 1354, p. 585.

from others; she is simply acknowledging the fact that one's world must revolve around himself. But the point to be considered from the standpoint of the love theme is that the heart is the operations center of the mind; the emotional part of the brain controls the individual's feelings and actions. The poem following this one, No. 1355, contains the same idea:

The Mind lives on the Heart
 Like any Parasite--
 If that is full of Meat
 The Mind is fat.

But if the Heart omit
 Emaciate the Wit--
 The Aliment of it
 So absolute.³⁷

The heart nourishes the mind. If one's feelings are rich and full, his reasoning powers will be strong. If he is unable or unwilling to love, the "wit"--the thinking function of the mind--is useless to him.

One of Millay's most splendid sonnets, although it does not express the exact idea of the two preceding Dickinson poems, also describes the power that love wields over the physical and reasoning facilities of man.

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;

³⁷Ibid., No. 1355, p. 595.

Yet many a man is making friends
 with death
 Even as I speak, for lack of love
 alone.³⁸

While the poet admits that love is not a panacea for all physical ills and phenomena, she points out that it does affect man's most serious actions. For most people, the absence of love renders life meaningless. She concludes the sonnet with the statement that she might well trade a night of love for release from hunger or other agony, for peace or fulfillment of desire: "It well may be. I do not think I would."³⁹

This belief in the omnipotence of love shown in Milley's poetry is often accompanied by an awareness that the power of love can be a harmful force. Yet man is unable to escape it. In one sonnet the poet asks that she not be pitied because the day dies and the beauty of nature passes "from field and thicket as the year goes by," nor does she want to be pitied because "a man's desire is hushed so soon" and love dies. She knows well that love lasts no longer than the blossoms of spring or the rising tide on the shore. She asks pity not for love's brevity, but

Pity me that the heart is slow to
 learn
 What the swift mind beholds at every
 turn.⁴⁰

³⁸Milley, Collected Poems, Sonnet XCIX, p. 659.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰Ibid., Sonnet XXIX, p. 588.

Again the heart takes precedence over reasoning powers. The knowledge that love is transient cannot keep the heart from searching for love. There are some losses that the heart, as well as the mind, can accept, although not without sorrow, such as the death of man and the death of natural beauty, as shown in the sestet of another sonnet:

That April should be shattered by
 a gust,
 That August should be levelled by
 a rain,
 I can endure, and that the lifted
 dust
 Of man should settle to the earth
 again;
 But that a dream can die, will be
 a thrust
 Between my ribs forever of hot pain.⁴¹

The loss which Millay cannot accept is the death of dream after dream. Perhaps the heart at length can find consolation for the death of one dream, as it is comforted after the death of a dear one, but the unrelievable pain comes with the necessity to face again and again the loss of dreams.

Although Dickinson has many poems concerning the endurance of love, many of these verses, as already observed in this paper, have an artificial, strained quality. But certain of her poems, which seem to spring more spontaneously from the poet's actual feelings, show that she too possessed fears and regrets about the transience of love. Poem No. 156 expresses

⁴¹Ibid., Sonnet XXXII, p. 592.

uncertainty. She asks a loved person: "You love me--you are sure," fearful that she will awaken some morning to find that love is gone.⁴²

She is in accord with Millay on the point that one who loses love knows well that love goes, but does not comprehend the reason:

Love's stricken "why"
Is all that love can speak--
Built of but just a syllable
The highest hearts that break.⁴³

The impact of lost love is complete; though the reasons be complex and incomprehensible, the fact of heartbreak remains, inescapable and final.

Heartbreak, although it affects the whole life of the one who experiences it, is often an outwardly simple process. Millay says of the broken heart: ". . . what a little sound / It makes in breaking."⁴⁴ Dickinson comments that the heart is not broken with a club or a stone, but with "A whip so small you could not see it."⁴⁵ Although it may be scarcely evident to the ear or the eye of the outside observer, heartbreak is a painful process to him who experiences it.

In the above Dickinson poem, again we see the inability of the heart to comprehend its loss, for the whip which

⁴²Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 156, pp. 73-74.

⁴³ibid., No. 1368, p. 589.

⁴⁴Millay, Collected Poems, Sonnet CXIX, p. 679.

⁴⁵Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 1304, pp. 567-568.

lashed that "Magic Creature," the heart, was considered noble by that which it assailed.⁴⁶ Here a new point is introduced: the heart is not willing to relinquish love, even though it be painful. Dickinson notes that we rehearse to ourselves a "Withdrawn Delight" and thus achieve a "Bliss like Murder." But

We will not drop the Dirk—
Because We love the Wound.⁴⁷

The lover who has lost keeps the memory of not only the love but also of the ache caused by the loss of that love. Millay, though bitter about love's brevity, also recognizes the willingness of the heart to be enslaved. In one sonnet she confesses that it is but just

That Love at length should find me
out and bring
This fierce and trivial brow unto the
dust.

She can even see "a subtle beauty in this thing, / A wry perfection." Although she has made her devotion to the lover apparent, he does not return her love. But though the world may mock at her, she staunchly maintains, ". . . if I suffer, it is my own affair."⁴⁸ Several of her other sonnets reflect the same attitude. One example is her proclamation that she

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid., No. 379, pp. 180-181.

⁴⁸Millay, Collected Poems, Sonnet XXV, p. 585.

is the humblest of those who "wear the red heart crumpled
in the side," not that she does not cry to be released and is
unable to free herself, but that she knows she would not
force her way out, even if she had the strength, from this
prison

Where thrusts my morsel daily
through the bars
This tall, oblivious gaoler eyed
with stars.

The jailer, love, though merciless, is "eyed with stars."⁴⁹
Such enslavement is misery, but she would not leave it even
if she were strong enough. Her own chains made "a golden
clank" upon her ear.

Dickinson expresses a similar feeling in Poem No. 925.
Though the enemy of no one, she was "struck" and "Maimed" and
'Robbed," but declares, "I love the Cause that Slew Me."⁵⁰
She is grateful for love, even though it gives her pain. In
Poem No. 1736 she says she is

Proud of my broken heart, since
thou didst break it,
Proud of the pain I did not feel
till thee.⁵¹

When heartbreak is all she receives from the one she loves,
she must be proud of the heartbreak.

⁴⁹Ibid., Sonnet LXXIV, p. 634.

⁵⁰Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 925, p. 435.

⁵¹Ibid., No. 1736, p. 704.

Although it would seem from the standpoint of logic that enslavement to love is not an inevitable thing, try as the human spirit may, it cannot constantly exercise reason over emotion. Millay says that when youthful and inexperienced, she vowed

. . . In love's despite:
 Never in the world will I to living
 wight
 Give over, air my mind
 To anyone,

but she concludes that "the wind and the sun" of love in due time invaded her mind.⁵² The first verse of another poem, "Indifference," contains a vow from the poet to be on the lookout for love and refuse it admittance upon its coming. But the second verse finds the vow forgotten.

I lay,--for Love was laggard, oh, he came not
 until dawn,--
 I lay and listened for his step and could not
 get to sleep,
 And he found me at my window with my big cloak on,
 All sorry with the tears some folks might weep.⁵³

One of Dickinson's poems may also be applied to the same theme:

We shun it ere it comes,
 Afraid of Joy,
 Then sue it to delay
 And lest it fly,
 Beguile it more and more--⁵⁴

⁵² Millay, Collected Poems, "Being Young and Green," p. 222.

⁵³ Ibid., "Indifference," p. 45.

⁵⁴ Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 1580, p. 655.

Although she does not expressly name the awaited thing which brings joy, it might well be, like Millay's leggard visitor, the experience of love. We are afraid to experience it before it comes, but when it does we are glad and would implore it to stay.

Love's inevitability, then, as well as its brevity, contributes to its power to enslave the human heart. Both poets attempt at times to reconcile themselves to the rapid passing of the emotion. Millay becomes nonchalant, almost flippant, in "Passer Hortus Est," where she acknowledges that "Death devours all lovely things." Here she appears to take the attitude of the one who has ended the love, in saying that she no longer cherishes her "erstwhile dear."⁵⁵ She takes the same approach in "Thursday." She speaks not from the viewpoint of the heartbroken, but from that of the heartbreaker:

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 rarer than I can see.
I loved you wednesday,--yes--but what
Is that to me?⁵⁶

Dickinson speaks in a matter-of-fact way about the passing of love in one poem:

⁵⁵Millay, Collected Poems, "Passer Hortus Est," p. 75.

⁵⁶Ibid., "Thursday," p. 129.

We outgrow love, like other things,
 And put it in the Drawer--
 Till it an Antique fashion shows--
 Like Costumes Grandsires wore.⁵⁷

This poem does not contain a direct expression of pain at the capacity of love to become dated, although the poet does not take an explicit stand, as Milley does in the above poems, from the point of view of the lover whose feeling died first. In one of her sonnets, Millay implies that love is but a brief experience for both of those involved. She begins:

I shall forget you presently, my dear,
 So make the most of this, your little
 day,

appearing again to take the attitude of the heartbreaker. But a few lines later she shows the mutuality of the feeling:

If you entreat me with your loveliest
 lie
 I will protest you with my favourite
 vow.

She is aware that her lover's plea is a lie, as insincere as her own vow. But in the concluding lines of the poem she lapses into an attitude more characteristic of her poetry. "I would indeed that love were longer-lived," she says, but rallies by confessing.

But so it is, and nature has
 contrived
 To struggle on without a break
 thus far.--⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 887, pp. 420-421.

⁵⁸ Millay, Collected Poems, Sonnet XI, p. 571.

Though love is brief, the world goes on, its natural elements functioning as usual. The pain of love is relative to the position of the lover. Dickinson again shows both sides in Poem No. 1314.

When a Lover is a Beggar
 Abject is his Knee--
 When a Lover is an Owner
 Different is he--⁵⁹

This verse seems to imply that love is but the desire for the unobtainable. Millay's sonnet beginning "Oh, think not I am faithful to a vow!" states the same idea. She tells the lover that his changeability keeps her constant:

So wanton, light, and false, my
 love, are you,
 I am most faithless when I most
 am true.⁶⁰

She is true to him not because she really loves him, but because she cannot be sure of his love; she will not leave him because she is not certain he is true to her.

Though both poets can look at love from the attitude of the rejector as well as the rejected, they most often take the latter viewpoint. Millay is usually sad or bitter about love's brevity and its power to enslave. Dickinson is seldom overtly bitter, sometimes sad, but always cognizant of the importance and magnitude of love. A brief poem of hers might sum up the attitudes of both poets toward the transience and inevitability of love as well as its power to enslave:

⁵⁹Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 1314, p. 570.

⁶⁰Millay, Collected Poems, Sonnet 4, p. 570.

How fleet--how indiscreet an one--
How always wrong is Love--
The joyful little Deity
We are not scourged to serve--⁶¹

⁶¹Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 1771, p. 715.

CHAPTER IV

ANGUISH

Anguish can endure as long as love, either mutual or unrequited. It is related to the brevity of love by the fact that the early loss of love often produces anguish. Whereas Millay often writes of this specific anguish caused by lost love, Dickinson does not usually state the exact cause of the anguish she describes. A great deal of Dickinson's inner agony can probably be attributed to the sensitiveness which caused her to be reclusive most of her adult life. She saw and understood the agonies of life, and was hurt by her own perceptiveness. Whatever the cause of her anguish, she allows her poetic treatment to have broad application.

Poem No. 264, "A Weight with Needles on the Pounds," is one of her most poignant expressions of anguish. In it she describes how the sensitive soul reacts to inner agony. The soul has many openings that the "needles" of anguish can enter, with the weight of heartache pressing in the sharpness of the pain. The two properties of pressure and penetration work together,

That not a pore be overlooked
Of all this Compound Frame--

As manifold for Anguish--
As Species--be--for name--¹

The sensitive soul has more openings for anguish to enter than the ordinary soul. On the other hand, the person who can reach the depth of anguish is usually the one who can experience the highest joy. Thus anguish is related in an illogical sort of way to joy. Dickinson indicates that pain is a payment for joy which falls due without fail:

For each ecstatic instant
We must an anguish pay
In keen and quivering ratio
To the ecstasy.

But the ratio of pain to joy seems out of proportion, she explains, because "for each beloved hour" we pay "Sharp pittance of years."²

Millay also indicates, in "The Anguish," that the penalty for the happy experience is pain. She remembers the time of innocence when she knew no heartache:

I would to God I were quenched and fed
As in my youth
From the flask of song, and the good bread
Of beauty richer than truth.

But the years have replaced that innocence with pain, for she continues:

¹The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson, edited by Thomas H. Johnson (Boston, 1969). Poem No. 264, p. 121. Hereinafter referred to as Dickinson, Complete Poems.

²Ibid., no. 125, p. 58.

The anguish of the world is on my
 tongue
 My bowl is filled to the brim with
 it; there is more than I can eat.³

Anguish comes with living, and although Millay usually finds that it comes with love, the application of the preceding verse may be as broad as that of Dickinson's poem. Here Millay seems to include all the pain of life--"the anguish of the world"--of which it may be assumed that love is only one part.

Perhaps consolation for pain lies in the fact that in experiencing the deepest pain as well as the highest joy, the soul can perceive the full range of life. Such a realization makes one appreciate suffering. If man would see life whole, he cannot exist in a constant state of satisfaction; he must experience longing; he must be compelled to search. Millay's "Feast" illustrates the compulsion which makes the sensitive soul a seeker:

I drank at every vine.
 The last was like the first.
 I came upon no wine
 So wonderful as thirst.

I gnawed at every root.
 I ate of every plant.
 I came upon no fruit
 So wonderful as want.

Feed the grape and bean
 To the vintner and monger;

³Edna St. Vincent Millay, Collected Poems, edited by Norma Millay (New York, 1956), "The Anguish," p. 229. Hereinafter referred to as Millay, Collected Poems.

I will lie down lean
 With my thirst and my hunger.⁴

The sensation of expectancy is often sweeter than the actual experience of discovery. The searcher finds worth in life where the satisfied never suspects it. In "My Heart, Being Hungry," Millay describes her heart as being able to feed on foods "The fat of heart despise." She finds beauty where others pass it by, because she has "a growing heart to feed."⁵ She implies that the simple things the seeking heart loves are, after all, the best things.

Dickinson also compares the desires of the searching heart to physical hunger. In Poem No. 579, she begins, "I had been hungry, all the Years," but at last her "Moon had Come--to dine." She describes the feeling of looking through windows at tables laden with bounty the hungry dares not hope to attain. Then she confesses that the plenty of at last attaining food, as the searcher might attain the sought-for truth, was hurtful. Her conclusion is:

Nor was I hungry--so I found
 That hunger--was a way
 Of Persons outside windows--
 The Entering--takes away--⁶

⁴ Ibid., "Feast," p. 158.

⁵ Ibid., "My Heart, Being Hungry," p. 151.

⁶ Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 579, p. 233.

She does not state explicitly, as does Millay, that hunger is often a better experience than fulfillment, but she implies that satisfaction is a rather bland feeling when compared to the sharpness of anticipation. Often the desired goal promises to be better than it actually is when attained.

Another of Dickinson's poems which expresses this idea is the well-known "Success Is Counted Sweetest," in which she says the defeated man can define triumph much more clearly than can the victor himself.⁷ He understands the value of victory by experiencing its opposite. In another poem, again using the food metaphor, she notes:

Undue Significance a starving man
 attaches
 To Food--
 Far off--He sighs--and therefore--
 Hopeless
 And therefore--Good--

Partaken--it relieves--indeed--
 But proves us
 That Spices fly
 In the Receipt--It was the Distance--
 Was Savory--⁸

In Poem No. 355 she again says that lack of something enamors us of it. "Deformed Men--ponder Grace," and "The Blind--esteem it be / Enough Estate--to see."⁹ Further, in Poem No. 490, she advances the theory that to lead a thirsty man to

⁷Ibid., No. 67, p. 35.

⁸Ibid., No. 439, pp. 210-211.

⁹Ibid., No. 355, pp. 168-169.

a well and let him hear it drip would remind him acutely of what water is.¹⁰

She again expresses the profound feeling of unfulfilled desire when she says that forbidden fruit has a flavor which mocks that of "lawful Orchards." "The Pea that Duty locks" away lies "luscious . . . within the Pod."¹¹ Millay also uses fruit as a metaphor for a similar idea. In "The Plum Gatherer" she describes the value of the sharp emotions experienced in childhood as opposed to the dullness of the adult life which has lost some perception of beauty along with its loss of sensitivity to pain. When a child, the poet says, she was unable to determine which was her friend of the "angry nettle and the mild" when gathering the sweet plums, as one gathers the joys of life in childhood. But now, much later, the plum trees are barren, and there is no more fruit--it is lost as the sweet discoveries of childhood are lost to the adult. And along with the plums have vanished the needles of the angry nettle, as has the pain which accompanied those childish joys.¹² The poet prefers to experience pain in the quest for joy than to feel nothing at all.

Though Millay states more explicitly than Dickinson does that searching is, paradoxically, better than satisfaction, the

¹⁰Ibid., No. 490, pp. 235-236.

¹¹Ibid., No. 1377, p. 592.

¹²Millay, Collected Poems, "The Plum Gatherer," p. 248.

tone of the latter's poetry allows the implication to make itself felt. Dickinson remains subtle in conveying her feelings and thoughts. For Dickinson, death's grasp is loosened by the possibility of immortality, and unrequited love has no bitterness when it is a real feeling. Likewise, anguish can provide, for her, a refuge from itself by its own severity.

A doubt if it be Us
Assists the staggering Mind
In an extremer Anguish
Until it footing find.

An Unreality is lent,
A merciful Mirage
That makes the living possible
While it suspends the lives.¹³

Pain, whether physical or mental, brings a merciful numbness which makes the sufferer able to bear it. The person who receives an agonizing blow moves through the first days of shock with an unreal feeling that enables him to resist giving way completely to grief. Dickinson again describes this feeling when she speaks of "a pain--so utter-- / It swallows substance up." The pain "covers the Abyss" it has made in the mind with "trance" so that the person affected may cross the gaping hole "as one within a Swoon."¹⁴ In the first of a series called "Three Songs of Shattering," Millay is able to note, after a long time of grief has passed and the wound has begun to heal, that the first rose "Budded, bloomed, and shattered,"

¹³ Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 859, pp. 411-412.

¹⁴ Ibid., No. 599, p. 294.

unnoticed, "During sad days when to me / Nothing mattered."¹⁵ Grief somehow adopts a shield which makes it oblivious to all about it and so assists the sufferer until he is able to go on as he did before.

Dickinson finds another protection for the sufferer. "Mirth is the Mail of Anguish," she says. People laugh when they suffer, "Lest anybody spy the blood / And 'you're hurt' exclaim!"¹⁶ But this mirth is not genuine; it is but the armor in which one faces the world to hide his suffering. Millay is also aware of the protection a happy front affords. In "The Merry Maid" she affirms, "Oh, I am grown so free from care / Since my heart broke,"¹⁷ but the ironic tone of the poem implies that this freedom from care is one the maid would gladly surrender to regain the love for which her heart has been broken.

But if gaiety cannot do the job properly, Millay hopes that time will be an antidote for pain. In one sonnet she dreads not age, "the first white in my hair, / . . . The cane, the wrinkled hands, the special chair," for "Time, doing this to me, may alter too / My anguish, into something I can bear."¹⁸

¹⁵Millay, Collected Poems, "Three Songs of Shattering," Part I, p. 40.

¹⁶Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 165, pp. 77-78.

¹⁷Millay, Collected Poems, "The Merry Maid," p. 145.

¹⁸Ibid., "Sonnet," Part VI from a series of poems commemorating Cora Millay, p. 291.

Dickinson too acknowledges the healing quality of time. She tells how an anguish she suffered went away, by degrees, so slowly that she did not notice its going. She cannot determine what consoled her grief, but knows only that where there was once a wilderness inside her, now "It's better--almost Peace."¹⁹

But both poets know that there are some wounds it seems time will not heal. Millay admits that some emotions are seemingly endless, such as longing for a love that is dead.

Time does not bring relief, you all
 have lied
 who told me time would ease me of
 my pain!
 I miss him in the weeping of the rain;
 I want him at the shrinking of the
 tide.²⁰

Dickinson holds that a real grief, as a real love, strengthens with age, for "Time never did assuage."

Time is a Test of Trouble--
 But not a Remedy--
 If such it prove, it prove too
 There was no Malady--²¹

She is perhaps more correct in the poem which describes the gradual disappearance of anguish over a long period of time, but the poem immediately preceding serves to show that an inner agony can remain acute long enough to seem endless.

Regardless of whether time does ease all hurts, it is not always to be trusted. Time is pleased, Millay says, "to

¹⁹ Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 584, p. 285.

²⁰ Millay, Collected Poems, Sonnet II, p. 562.

²¹ Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 586, p. 286.

lengthen out the day / For grieving lovers perted or denied," yet will wickedly "hurry the sweet hours away / From such as lie enchanted side by side."²² She speaks of time in human terms, referring to it as "he," yet ascribes to "him" supernatural powers. Dickinson, with a similar supernatural personification, shares Millay's realization of time's duplicity:

Time's wily Chargers will not wait
At any gate but Woe's--
But there--so gloat to hesitate
They will not stir for blows.²³

Time seems to stand still for the suffering man, but for those who are happy, the poet pictures time as a coachman whose horses cannot be stayed. Again in Poem No. 177⁴ she presents the idea.

Too happy Time dissolves itself
And leaves no remnant by--
'Tis Anguish not a Feather hath
Or too much weight to fly--²⁴

Light, carefree times seem to end sooner than unhappy times.

Both poets are concerned with the endurance of anguish, Dickinson perhaps the more so. Millay, with her more varied life, was more subject to change in attitude. But both know that, if love is inevitable, at times the coming of anguish seems even more certain. And if love is incomprehensible, pain is even more so. In one sonnet Millay says that were the pains of life "as are the pains of hell," seemingly impossible,

²² Millay, Collected Poems, Sonnet CI, p. 661.

²³ Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 1458, p. 618.

²⁴ Ibid., No. 177⁴, p. 716.

yet imperative, to bear, still she must cry: "So be it: it is well."²⁵ Here she retains her judgment of the value of pain to a true vision of life, but she confesses an inability to explain exactly why man must suffer. In this sonnet she uses a metaphor similar to that of the nettles in "The Plum Gatherer." The blossoms of the world--the beautiful things of life--grow behind spiked boughs, but

Needs must I gather, guessing by
the stain
I bleed, but know not wherefore, know
not where.²⁶

As she cannot locate the exact source of her inner pain, neither can she determine why her spirit must bleed. But she is willing to suffer to attain the truth and, finally, the joy of life.

Dickinson knew inner agony too deep to be explained in human terms. She admits the possibility that "Christ will explain each separate anguish" in an after-life, but seems little consoled by this hope, for though she will "know why--when Time is over," by then she will have "ceased to wonder." And though she realizes she will forget her anguish then, the last line of the poem indicates that the depth of pain needs some relief now, not in heaven. In describing her "drop of Anguish," she repeats the poignant phrase--"That scalds me now--that scalds me now."²⁷

²⁵ Millay, Collected Poems, Sonnet LXIII, p. 623.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 103, p. 67.

She is, in fact, not so optimistic as Millay is about the unexplained "why" of suffering. She knows that pain is inevitable, even though the human spirit protests.

The heart asks Pleasure--first--
And then--excuse from Pain--
And then--those little Anodynes
That deaden suffering--

Here she does not admit the redeeming value of pain Millay sees. The poem becomes more pessimistic in its second and final stanza:

And then--to go to sleep--
And then--if it should be
The will of its Inquisitor
The privilege to die--²⁸

Indeed, sometimes death seems to Dickinson the only escape from anguish. She comments that "Many Things--are fruitless," but that dying is the "Reward of Anguish."²⁹ While death seems a poor reward for suffering, it does remove man from his pain and so helps to ease it.

Occasionally Millay expresses a similar longing for death to soothe the agony of life. In one sonnet she tells how her "similar years / Repeat each other, shod in rusty black," a color symbolic of life's griefs. She sees that her life must continue in this way until she dies, and concludes in a weary tone:

²⁸Ibid., No. 536, p. 262.

²⁹Ibid., No. 614, p. 302.

I would at times the funeral
 were done
 And I abandoned on the ultimate
 hill.³⁰

In "Journey" she also expresses a weariness at the burdens of life; it seems that all her days she has had to pass by pleasant resting places to meet the demands of living, and she longs to lie down. But she ends the poem with a hopeful tone: ". . . far as passionate eye can reach," and "long as rapturous eye can cling," the world is hers.³¹ It is the task of her feet to follow its beauty, but the joy of her heart to hold that beauty.

Millay does not diminish the reality of anguish with her optimism, for many of her poems, such as the sonnet cited in the preceding paragraph, prove that her optimistic attitude cannot always overcome her despair. She even rebukes her ever-hopeful heart for its persistence in the face of ever-present defeat, as in "Mortal Flesh, Is Not Your Place in the Ground?" She asks why the mortal being should stare "with stern face of ecstasy at the autumn leaves," saying that mortals should instead

Learn to love blackness while there is yet
 time, blackness
 Unpatterned, blackness without horizons.³²

³⁰Millay, Collected Poems, Sonnet XXVI, p. 596.

³¹Ibid., "Journey," pp. 66-67.

³²Ibid., "Mortal Flesh, Is Not Your Place in the Ground?" p. 382.

Those mortals who dare to hope, as she does, will face extinction the same as all others.

In another of her poems concerning anguish, Dickinson also speaks of the brevity of mortal life:

I reason, Earth is short--
And Anguish--absolute--
And many hurt,
But, what of that?³³

Although man's mortal space is brief, he still has time for absolute anguish, perhaps because he knows he has little time to accomplish his goals. But here Dickinson seems little concerned with impending death, for she notes that "The best vitality" must someday perish, "but, what of that?" And she persuades herself that there will be a new law in heaven, perhaps one to preclude anguish, "But, what of that?"³⁴ Her refrain indicates that she is resigned to suffering and is in this life so burdened by it that the solutions of death and heaven are less than enticing.

Anguish, then, is unavoidable, unmistakable. Both poets acknowledge its reality, Dickinson in Poem No. 241, which she begins:

I like a look of Agony,
Because I know it's true--

³³Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 301, p. 142.

³⁴Ibid.

Anguish, she says, is an emotion "impossible to feign."³⁵ We may fool others by simulating love or happiness, but this most serious of feelings mocks pretense.

Millay, despite her tendency to be more optimistic than Dickinson, also shows in her poetry her cognizance of the seriousness of anguish. Dickinson's more serious tone may be discerned in a comparison of the poets' respective poems about the drowning of a young person. Dickinson relates the drowning of a boy who "stretched his Anguish" to absent eyes and ears. But all that remains to "sum the History" are his "unclaimed Hat and Jacket" beside the lily-covered pond.³⁶ Millay, on the other hand, tells almost casually the story of a farmer's daughter who, jilted by her beau, reached to "pluck a lily" to allay the suspicion of passersby "Ere she drowned herself for love."³⁷

Millay does not have to speak of the reality of pain; instead she illustrates it. In "Nuit Blanche" she describes sleepless nights caused by some unspecified inner agony. Her last lines tell the depth, as well as the endurance, of her feeling:

And childish griefs I have outgrown
Into my eyes are thrust,

³⁵ Ibid., No. 241, p. 110.

³⁶ Ibid., No. 923, p. 134.

³⁷ Millay, Collected Poems, "The Pond," p. 176.

Till my dull tears go dropping down
Like lead into the dust.³⁸

The very words of the last two lines indicate despair: "dull tears," "dropping down," "lead," and "dust," are heavy words when they stand alone, and combined they tell of deep agony.

In fact, anguish to both poets becomes so real and intense that they consider it more painful than death. "'Tis living--hurts us more." There is another kind of dying, she says, a life-in-death type of suffering like that experienced by the birds who do not go south with their fellows, but try to brave out the cold northern winter. As the birds endure the frost until the snow kills them, the human sufferer endures agony until merciful death claims him.³⁹ Again in Poem No. 561, she says of those whose grief she observes:

I wonder if it hurts to live--
And if they have to try--
And whether--could they choose between--
It would not be--to die--⁴⁰

Sometimes anguish can become so acute that living is a real effort; dying is a simpler course. After all, she continues later in the poem, "Death--is but one--and comes but once--"⁴¹ but to suffer and go on living is to die a thousand times.

³⁷Ibid., "Nuit Blanche," p. 155.

³⁸Richardson, Complete Poems, No. 335, pp. 158-159.

³⁹Ibid., No. 561, pp. 272-273.

⁴¹Ibid.

Milley also deals with the idea of life in death in one of her sonnets:

Since of no creature living the
last breath
Is twice required, or twice the
ultimate pain,
Seeing not to quit your arms is
very death,
'Tis likely that I shall not die
again.⁴²

This major agony of lost love, it seems to the poet, should fulfill her duty to death for all time.

Both show in their poetry not only the depth and endurance of anguish, but also its universality. The preceding Dickinson poem begins, "I measure every Grief I meet." She is comparing her agony to that of others: "I wonder if It weighs like Mine-- / Or has an Easier size." She notes that she is not the only person required to bear anguish, but further, she considers the timelessness of pain:

I wonder if when Years have piled
Some Thousands--on the Harm--
That hurt them early--such a lapse
Could give them any bala--

Or would they go on aching still
Through Centuries of Kerve--
Enlightened to a larger Pain--
In Contrast with the Love--⁴³

⁴²Milley, Collected Poems, Sonnet LXXXIII, p. 643.

⁴³Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 561, pp. 272-273.

She seems to be speaking of the timeless quality of the burden of the original sufferers, perhaps conjecturing that the anguish of this life carries over into eternity. Or perhaps she is again describing the slowness with which time seems to pass when one is unhappy.

Millay recognizes the timelessness and universality of pain in its recurrence in the people of generation after generation. One example of this is "If Still Your Orchards Bear," in which the poet imagines the thoughts of her brother who will breathe "the August air / Ten thousand years from now." She knows that bitter memories and unrealized dreams will not be assuaged by time:

I think you will have need of tears;
 I think they will not flow;
 Supposing in ten thousand years
 Men ache, as they do now.⁴⁴

In another of her poems which shows an awareness of the universality of anguish, she describes the feelings of Penelope, crying as she wove and unwove at her loom, awaiting the return of her husband. She compares her own tears to those of the mythical woman: "I thought, as I wiped my eyes on the corner of my apron: / Penelope did this too."⁴⁵

The universality of pain emphasizes its reality, but it also perhaps contains some consolation for the sufferer. The

⁴⁴Millay, Collected Poems, "If Still Your Orchards Bear," pp. 308-309.

⁴⁵Ibid., "An Ancient Gesture," p. 501.

fact that others hurt does not take away the pain, nor does it make it less, but it gives one a feeling that his anguish is but a part of life. That literature and history and even the lives of one's contemporaries are full of suffering can bring about a feeling of brotherhood, a feeling of being part of the world, which is in some way consoling.

There are other comforts for anguish, but Dickinson finds them fewer than the later poet. She feels more alone in her pain than Millay feels. She considers the possibility that pain merely schools us for later peace. But she says " 'Augustan' years" await us "If pain for peace prepares," indicating the depth of her anguish. The tone of the poem is ironic, almost disbelieving, as the third and fourth stanza indicate:

If night stands first--then noon
To gird us for the sun,
What gaze!

When from a thousand skies
On our developed eyes
Noons blaze!⁴⁶

Another ironic statement on consolation in eternity for the pain of this life is found in Poem No. 1064:

To help our Bleaker Parts
Salubrious Hours are given
Which if They do not fit for Earth
Drill silently for Heaven--⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 63, p. 33.

⁴⁷ Ibid., No. 1064, p. 434.

The wholesome time which is to recompense for the time of despair is too often not given on earth, but is apparently conserved for an after-life. The tone of the poem implies that "Heaven" is too far away for us to find comfort in its promise of peace and happiness.

Whereas Dickinson finds little earthly consolation for suffering, Millay, despite her intense knowledge of inner agony, believes it to be a part of life that is not only to be endured, but profited from. Both women have many other poems concerning anguish which show their contrasting attitudes. Millay is the more optimistic of the two; she openly states that seeking is better than satisfaction (see p. 77). Not only does she feel that pain is necessary, she finds some measure of earthly comfort for it, in the happy facets of life as well as in the knowledge that she is not alone, that others suffer too. One of her chief consolations seems to come from her faith in and love of nature. In one sonnet she vows a retreat from the pain of lost love:

I shall go back again to that bleak
 shore
 And build a little shanty on the sand,
 In such a way that the extremest band
 Of brittle seaweed will escape my door
 But by a yard or two; and nevermore
 Shall I return to take you by the hand;
 I shall be gone to what I understand,
 And happier than I ever was before.

She did not find true happiness in the love which she soon learned was part of "all that in a moment dies." Love is too often subject to change; it offers no stability;

But I shall find the sullen rocks
 and skies
 Unchanged from what they were when
 I was young.⁴⁸

She knows she can find solace in returning to a place which she has held dear since childhood. For it is the sharp and intense feelings of childhood, both of happiness and of pain, that Millay wishes to retain in the hope of combating anguish. In one poem she maintains that she has not lost these emotions she so values. She speaks of the ecstasy of encountering the wonders of nature:

Such marvels as, one time, I feared
 Might go, and leave me unprepared
 For hardship. But they never did.
 They blaze before me still, as wild
 And clear, as when I was a child.
 They never went away at all.⁴⁹

Even in times of inner trouble she does not fail to notice nature and appreciate its beauty, as she indicates in "The Wood Road."

Yes, though Grief should know me hers
 While the world goes round,
 It could not in truth be said
 This was lost on me:
 A rock-maple showing red,
 Burrs beneath a tree.⁵⁰

Nature has an enduring quality which seems to say that the beauty of life never ceases, even though people suffer.

⁴⁸ Millay, Collected Poems, sonnet XLIII, p. 593.

⁴⁹ Ibid., From an unfinished poem, pp. 433-434.

⁵⁰ Ibid., "The Wood Road," p. 157.

Occasionally Millay reverses her position, as in the bitter "Spring," in which she asks, "To what purpose, April, do you return again? / Beauty is not enough." Nature, she continues, can no longer quiet her with the opening of its new leaves. She admits, "It is apparent that there is no death," but asks, ". . . what does that signify?" Not only do men die, but "Life in itself / Is nothing."⁵¹ The yearly return of April is not enough to provide a reason for living.

In Part I from "Three Songs of Shattering" she notes that the first bloom of the rose-tree budded and shattered without anyone's notice, during days when her grief was so heavy that nothing mattered to her. But in the last lines of the poem her old love of nature returns somewhat; she admits that it seems a pity no one saw the pretty sight.⁵²

In spite of her infrequent lapses into a despair from which even nature offers no refuge, the larger part of Millay's nature poetry contains a basic optimism. She is often pessimistic about mankind, especially in her poetry written about the time of World War II, because the race sometimes seems bent on destroying itself. But she seems to find some hope in the assured endurance of nature. She writes of her belief that life will continue even if man becomes extinct or destroys himself. She asks whether there will not be, "when

⁵¹Ibid., "Spring," p. 53.

⁵²Ibid., "Three Songs of Shattering," Part I, p. 40.

it is over," clover and flowers in the fields, apple orchards "intent on blossoming." She answers her own question simply, "There will; I know there will."⁵³ It is at once a plea and a cry of hope, revealing her confidence in the ultimate power of nature.

Dickinson also recognizes nature's power. She says that "Nature is Heaven-- / . . . Nature is Harmony," and concludes with a tribute to its mysterious force:

Nature is what we know--
Yet have no art to say--
So impotent Our Wisdom is
To her Simplicity.⁵⁴

She also acknowledges its endurance in Poem No. 1257:

How everlasting are the Lips
Known only to the Dew--
These are the Brides of permanence
Supplanting me and you.⁵⁵

But she does not find the same hope, nor even the consolation, that Millay finds in this enduring power. Although she calls nature "the Gentlest Mother" in one poem, describing the tender, patient care nature gives, she reveals an attitude toward nature as a force separate from her "children,"⁵⁶ not as the sum of all her components--insects, creatures of the woods, flowers, sunshine--but as the overseer, or ruler, of them. For Millay nature is no more than the separate living

⁵³Ibid., "When It Is Over," p. 457.

⁵⁴Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 668, p. 332.

⁵⁵Ibid., No. 1257, p. 550. ⁵⁶Ibid., No. 790, pp. 385-386.

things and the elements which make it up. They hold for her an innocent and simple beauty. She rarely speaks of "Nature" as a self-controlled, almost divine force; Dickinson often does.

It is not that Dickinson sees no beauty in the individual components of nature; indeed she sees it clearly and is very adept at translating what she sees into lively and effective images. But the whole of her nature poetry retains the concept of the force as mysterious and omnipotent. She does write of bees and birds and flowers and sunsets in light, joyful verses, but she also writes of storms, lightning, snow, and snakes. But in neither its separate parts nor in nature as a whole force does she find a panacea for anguish.

Indeed, sometimes the beauty of nature seems to add to her anguish, as in Poem No. 348, which concerns the return of spring. She dreads the first robin, the daffodils, the bees--the first wild shout of the new season. But they come, despite her wish not to encounter them.

They're here, though; not a
 creature failed--
 No Blossom stayed away
 In gentle deference to me--
 The Queen of Calvary--⁵⁷

She compares her suffering to that of Christ, indicating its seriousness. Her pain is made more acute, not alleviated

⁵⁷Ibid., No. 348, pp. 165-166.

as is Millay's, in the confrontation of beauty. Millay also speaks of the impact of the returning season, with its lively colors and smells and sounds. But in contrast to Dickinson, she finds that "Spring is wise," prudent enough to advance slowly.

And Spring is kind.
Should she come running headlong in a wind-
whipped acre
Of daffodil shirts down the mountain into this
dark valley we would go blind.⁵⁸

Each takes note of other season changes, retaining for the most part her personal attitude. Different seasons often represent human emotions in Millay's poetry (see p. 54); winter, for example, may symbolize dead love. But Millay finds much beauty in each season, just as she almost always finds value in every emotional experience. Dickinson's attitude toward season changes, and all of nature, contain a certain ambiguity. She recognizes natural beauty with admiration and respect, but sometimes finds it ominous, almost menacing. An example of the beauty combined with dread which the force renders to the poet may be seen in a poem concerning the disappearance of the crickets with the death of summer.

Further in Summer than the Birds
Pathetic from the Grass
A minor Nation celebrates
Its unobtrusive Pass.

⁵⁸Millay, Collected Poems, "New England Spring, 1942," pp. 469-470.

No Ordinance be seen
 So gradual the Grace
 A pensive Custom it becomes
 Enlarging Loneliness.

Antiquiest felt at noon
 When August burning low
 Arise this spectral Canticle
 Repose to typify

Remit as yet no Grace
 No Furrow on the Glow
 Yet a Druidic Difference
 Enhances Nature now⁵⁹

The seasonal change presents beauty to the human senses with its colors, with the song of the crickets. Yet it is a "pensive Custom"; it increases "Loneliness." The song typifies repose, but the placid change which "Enhances Nature" carries with it the realization of death.

Clark Griffith believes the steady flow of time, which brings change and death, is an important factor in Dickinson's reclusiveness and frequent despair.⁶⁰ According to this view, nature would be to Dickinson a symbol of impermanence, opposite of what it is to Millay. In Griffith's opinion, nature is symbolic of a divine antagonism toward mankind. He illustrates this point with a poem which concerns the venture of a child into the ocean, beginning "I started Early--Took my Dog-- / And visited the Sea."⁶¹ The ocean moves as if to swallow the

⁵⁹Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 1068, pp. 485-486.

⁶⁰Clark Griffith, The Long Shadow: Emily Dickinson's Tragic Poetry (Princeton, 1964), p. 62.

⁶¹Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 520, pp. 254-255.

child before it finally recedes, an action which Griffith interprets as Dickinson's symbol of malevolent nature with strong sexual overtones.⁶² Whether or not Griffith's interpretation of this particular poem about the sea is accurate, the clearly different reactions toward the sea evident in the poetry of Dickinson and Millay are significant in the differing nature poetry of the two. Millay considers the sea a source of comfort and happiness, and a source of adventure as well, having grown up near the coast of Maine. "More sea than land am I,"⁶³ she says in one poem, and in another, "Mine is a body that should die at sea."⁶⁴ In "Exiled" she speaks of

Wanting the sticky, salty sweetness
Of the strong wind and shattered spray;
Wanting the loud sound and the soft sound
Of the big surf that breaks all day.⁶⁵

It is to the sea that she longs to return when troubled or sad.

Dickinson, however, speaks of the "awful Sea" with its "swift Partitions."⁶⁶ Those who die there find "Abhorrent" their "Rest / In undulating Rooms."⁶⁷ The sea to her, like the force of nature itself, has a power potentially hostile to man.

⁶²Griffith, pp. 18-26.

⁶³Millay, Collected Poems, "Cap D'Antibes," p. 279.

⁶⁴Ibid., "Burial," p. 98. ⁶⁵Ibid., "Exiled," pp. 105-106.

⁶⁶Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 1217, pp. 536-537.

⁶⁷Ibid., No. 1428, p. 609.

Dickinson's treatment of nature as no panacea for pain, but often as a contributor to its intensity, is just one manifestation of her despairing attitude toward anguish. It is a darker outlook than that of Millay, who rarely lets anguish take root in her outlook on life.

Both poets speak of hope, Millay more than Dickinson. Once Dickinson calls hope "a subtle Glutton" which "feeds upon the Fair,"⁶⁸ but in an earlier poem she notes that the "strange invention" of hope, which is patented by the heart, never wears out, even through "unremitting action." She continues that "its unique momentum" embellishes our whole existence.⁶⁹ Here she but acknowledges the spark within man which causes him never to lose the hope that his lot will improve, but in another poem she examines the reasoning behind this expectation which has its roots in the emotional--not in the reasoning--faculties of man.

Could Hope inspect her Basis
Her Craft were done--
Has a fictitious Charter
Or it has none--⁷⁰

She indicates here that there is no logical basis for the hopes man continues to harbor. Could one see beneath them, they would be destroyed for lack of a true basis.

⁶⁸Ibid., No. 1547, p. 645. ⁶⁹Ibid., No. 1392, p. 597.

⁷⁰Ibid., No. 1283, pp. 560-561.

Millay knows that man's hope is often ill-founded, and that man's destiny is in all probability that of extinction. But she believes that life will not be deterred by the failures of man, or even by his destruction.

Read history: so learn you place in Time;
 And go to sleep: all this was done before; . . .
 Our flight is lofty, it is not sublime.
 Yet long ago this Earth by struggling men
 Was scuffed, was scraped by mouths that
 bubbled mud;
 And will be so again, and yet again;
 Until we trace our poison to its bud
 And root, and there uproot it; until then
 Earth will be warmed each winter by man's
 blood.⁷¹

Something within life causes it to perpetuate itself, and perhaps there is still a chance that it will eventually purge itself of tendencies to destroy and hurt. But till then man will spill his brother's blood. Millay will not give up on man, however, any more than she will relinquish her personal hopes. She knows she cannot dissuade the race from self harm; she concedes, "I have learned to fail." But she perseveres: "Yet shall I sing until my voice crack . . . / That man was a special thing and no commodity, a thing improper to be sold."⁷²

Millay identifies herself with the bobolink she has seen "scudding" along under a rainy sky, "chuckling and singing" all the while. Of herself and the bird she says,

⁷¹Millay, Collected Poems, Sonnet CLXX, p. 730.

⁷²Ibid., "Lines Written in Recapitulation," p. 267.

The rain has taught us nothing. . . .
 The hawk that motionless above the hill
 In the pure sky
 Stands like a blackened planet
 Has taught us nothing,--seeing him shut his
 wings and fall
 Has taught us nothing at all.
 In the shadow of the hawk we feather our nests.
 Boblink, you and I, an airy fool and an earthy,
 Chuckling under the rain!

I shall never be sad again.
I shall never be sad again.

Ah, sweet, absurd,
 Beloved, bedraggled bird!⁷³

Rainy days are no deterrent to the small, "absurd" creature, as days of despair are not enough to turn the poet from her song. The hawk teaches the bird no lesson; the poet builds her life under the shadow of seemingly ominous fate. Always there is the hope: "I shall never be sad again."

Dickinson also uses a bird metaphor in a poem concerning hope.

"Hope" is the thing with feathers--
 That perches in the soul--
 And sings the tune without the words--
 And never stops--at all--

And sweetest--in the Gale--is heard--
 And sore must be the storm--
 That could abash the little Bird
 That kept so many warm--

I've heard it in the coldest land--
 And on the strangest Sea--
 Yet, never, in Extremity,
 It asked a crumb--of me.⁷⁴

⁷³Ibid., "The Boblink," pp. 211-212.

⁷⁴Dickinson, Complete Poems, No. 254, p. 116.

Dickinson's feathered hope with its perpetual song is reminiscent of Millay's boblink, but the last two lines of the Dickinson poem are perhaps ambiguous. One interpretation might be that hope sings to her as it does to others, yet asks nothing in return. But considering the poet's characteristic anti-hope sentiments, the most probable explanation of the conclusion is that although she hears the bird of hope singing to others, it never asks her to take it in, never offers its song to her. Dickinson's anguish is deeper and darker than Millay's. She has less hope for its future alleviation.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Millay and Dickinson, born more than sixty years apart, were subject to vastly different influences and environments, although their homes were in the same geographic area. Their poetry reflects the difference of their times and their own temperament, but both wrote from a great depth and understanding of feeling and experience about subjects common to all mankind-- death, love, anguish, the significance of nature. Their approaches to these realities sometimes differ because of their separate outlook. Dickinson perceived the reality of life in a darker and more agonized way than Millay, who always found some hope in the face of the bleakest truth. Charles R. Anderson remarks that Dickinson had a "solid sense of reality," saying that she could discriminate between vision and fact.¹ The truth she saw was rarely pleasant; although she did have happy moments, she invariably returned to the realization that life was painful and held little reward for the perceptive soul. Millay, also sensitive, found the rewards of life not

¹Charles R. Anderson, Emily Dickinson's Poetry: Stairway of Surprise (New York, 1960), p. 191.

only in the human ability to experience joy, but also in a similar capacity to experience pain.

Even after the death of her husband, when Millay found it difficult at times to appreciate the full range of life, she was able to recover in some measure by continuing to write poetry, by reading, by enjoying the simple, basic tasks of life such as tending her garden.² She knew, as Dickinson did, that life was precarious, uncertain, and often difficult, but she considered living--both with joy and anguish--a supreme privilege. She expressed her own suffering and happiness in the universal form of poetry with an extremely personal voice. Edmund Wilson has said of her that "in giving supreme expression to profoundly felt personal experience, she was able to identify herself with more general experience and stand forth as a spokesman for the human spirit."³ It might be added that she spoke to the human spirit as well as for it.

Dickinson was also such a spokesman, perhaps a more effective one for her quieter, less ostensibly personal approach and for her more profound insight into human experience. The voice with which she spoke for humanity is significant not only for what it said, but for the way it spoke. Archibald

²Loby Shafter, Edna St. Vincent Millay: America's Best-Loved Poet (New York, 1961), pp. 183-184.

³Edmund Wilson, The Shores of Light: A Literary Chronicle of the Twenties and Thirties (New York, 1952), p. 752.

MacLeish notes that though she spoke "with the laconic restraint appropriate to . . . New England," her tone was "wholly spontaneous," assuming no "literary . . . posture or pose in advance." Her poetry is living speech, and, importantly, it "not only speaks but speaks to you." Its voice is not overheard but heard, directly and personally. MacLeish concludes that "her poems . . . were never written to herself."⁴ She was able to speak to and for mankind, even with the limited range of outward events in her life, because of the depth of her perception and the ability to express in concrete terms the deep abstract truths she perceived.

Both poets speak to the human mind, touching the reasoning powers, but they consider emotion to be of paramount significance. They speak to the human "heart" because they know that logic without feeling is incomplete. They are poets of and for the total human spirit.

Recommendations

A further conjunctive study of Emily Dickinson and Edna St. Vincent Millay might be made of their poems written from a child's point of view. Millay has a series of poems entitled "A Very Little Sphinx," written in the language of a small girl. They are not merely poems for children, however;

⁴Archibald MacLeish, Poetry and Experience (Cambridge, 1960), pp. 10⁴-106. (Italics are MacLeish's.)

one contains the child's thoughts of suicide: "I know a hundred ways to die. / I've often thought I'd try one."⁵ The tone of the poem is flippant, but it reveals the deep roots of anguish. Dickinson's poems about childhood and those written from a child's point of view also often contain an ironic message pertinent to the adult world.

Other comparisons and contrasts besides those made in this thesis of the nature poetry of the two would offer further insight into their major themes. Both were deeply influenced by the natural world and often included nature symbols and images in their poems.

Both suggest comparison with other writers; Shakespeare and Housman are outstanding examples. Millay's sonnet form, as well as her imagery, is reminiscent of Shakespeare, and Dickinson echoes his vocabulary and tone. Housman resembles Dickinson in conciseness and brevity, in his frequent despair, and in his treatment of death. He stresses Millay's favorite subject, transitory love, and his lyric form is, in part, a foretaste of hers. And, more generally, he resembles both Millay and Dickinson in his enthusiasm for nature.

⁵Edna St. Vincent Millay, Collected Poems, edited by Norma Millay (New York, 1956), "A Very Little Sphinx," Part IV, p. 264.

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