EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY

1892–1950

In the American nineteenth century, sexual activity outside of marriage was expected, if not condoned, for men, but prohibited for women. Since the freer men had to have partners, there were held to be two classes of women, the "virtuous" and the "fallen." A "fallen woman" could not hope for marriage and would probably be disowned by her parents; with few decent jobs available to women, this was a dismal prospect. Around the turn of the century, this so-called double-standard began, slowly, to change; by the 1920s some women were demanding the same freedom of behavior, and freedom from moral judgment, as men. Edna St. Vincent Millay was among the first women to write openly and with no expression of guilt or remorse about physical love and a succession of lovers. Her life was also free, but what she did was less important than what she said, and this in turn was less important than the unapologetic tone in which she said it. In the 1920s she was a national symbol of the sexually liberated woman.

She was raised in a small town on the coast of Maine. Her mother, who had been divorced, supported her three daughters by working as a practical nurse, providing them with books and music lessons and encouraging them to be ambitious and independent. Millay began to write poetry in high school; her education at Vassar College from 1913 to 1917 was paid for by a patron who had been impressed by her writing. At Vassar, Millay studied languages, wrote songs and verse plays, and became interested in acting. After graduating she worked as an actress in New York City and became associated with the Provincetown Playhouse and the Theater Guild. Her first book, *Renascence and Other Poems* (1917), was well received. Associated with the free "Bohemian" life of Greenwich Village, she had many love affairs and continued to work as writer and actress at an exhausting pace until 1921.

After two years of rest in Europe, she returned to the States in 1923 with her new businessman husband Eugene Boissevain and settled on a farm in upstate New York. Living quietly, away from the New York literary scene, she published many more volumes of poetry, went on reading tours, and participated in public affairs. She was arrested and jailed in Boston for her support of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927; during the 1930s she wrote antitotalitarian newspaper verse, radio plays, and speeches. The public preferred her amorous poetry to her political work, and her reputation declined.

Some of her subject matter was controversial but her poetic techniques were always traditional, using such verse forms as the sonnet and such older conventions as archaisms and inversions. Besides poems of love and freedom, she wrote like other New England women regionalists about the landscape and the familiar. Among her books of verse are *A Few Figs from Thistles* (1920), *Second April* (1921), *The Harp Weaver and other Poems*—which won a Pulitzer Prize in 1923—*The Buck in the Snow* (1928), and several sonnet sequences including *Fatal Interview* (1931). She also wrote a verse play, *Aria da Capo* (1920), and a libretto for an opera, *The King's Henchman*, with music by Deems Taylor, which the Metropolitan Opera successfully produced in 1927.

The text of the poems included here is that of *Collected Poems: Edna St. Vincent Millay* (1956).

Euclid Alone Has Looked on Beauty Bare

Euclid[1] alone has looked on Beauty bare.
Let all who prate of Beauty hold their peace,
And lay them prone upon the earth and cease
To ponder on themselves, the while they stare
At nothing, intricately drawn nowhere
In shapes of shifting lineage; let geese
Gabble and hiss, but heroes seek release
From dusty bondage into luminous air.
O blinding hour, O holy, terrible day,
When first the shaft into his vision shone
Of light anatomized! Euclid alone
Has looked on Beauty bare. Fortunate they
Who, though once only and then but far away,
Have heard her massive sandal set on stone.

1920, 1923

Edna St. Vincent Millay

H. D.

1886–1961

In January 1913, Harriet Monroe's influential "little" magazine, *Poetry*, printed three vivid poems by an unknown "H. D., Imagiste." These spare, elegant lyrics were among the first important products of the "imagist movement": poems devoid of explanation and declamation, unrhymed and lacking regular beat, depending on the power of an image to arrest attention and convey emotion. The poet's pen name, the movement's name, and the submission to the magazine were all the work of Ezra Pound, poet and tireless publicist for anything new in the world of poetry. The poems themselves had been written by his friend Hilda Doolittle. In later years, H. D. would look back at these events as epitomizing her dilemma: how to be a woman poet speaking in a world where women were spoken for and about by men. It is, perhaps, a symbol of her sense of difficulty that, though she strove for a voice that could be recognized as clearly feminine, she continued to publish under the name that Pound had devised for her.

She had been born in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, one girl in a family of five brothers. Her mother—who was her father's second wife—was a musician and music teacher, active in the Moravian church to which many in Bethlehem belonged. The symbols and rituals of this group, along with its tradition of secrecy created in response to centuries of oppression, had much to do with H. D.'s interest in images and her attraction in later life to occult and other symbol systems: the cabala, numerology, the tarot, and psychoanalysis.

When her father, an astronomer and mathematician, was appointed ector of the observatory at the University of Pennsylvania, the family ved to a suburb of Philadelphia. There, when she was fifteen years old, H. D. met Ezra Pound, a student at the University, already dedicated to poetry and acting the poet's role with dramatic intensity. The two were engaged for a while, but Pound's influence continued long after each had gone on to other partners. H. D. began college at Bryn Mawr but could not work under the pressure of deadlines and grades; after two years she returned home, and lived quietly, studying and reading, until in 1911 she made a bold move to London where Pound had gone some years earlier. She was caught up in his free style of life and the energy of his plans for modern poetry. She married a member of his circle, the English poet Richard Aldington, in 1913. With Aldington she studied Greek and read the classics, but the marriage was not a success and was destroyed by their separation during World War I when Aldington went into the army and served in France.

1919 was a terrible year for H. D.: her brother Gilbert was killed in the fighting in France; her father died soon thereafter; her marriage officially broke up; close friendships with Pound and with D. H. Lawrence came to an end; she had a nearly fatal case of flu; and amidst all this gave birth to a daughter who Aldington said was not his child. She suffered a nervous collapse, and aftereffects of all these traumas haunted her for the rest of her life. But she was rescued from the worst of her emotional and financial troubles by a young Englishwoman named Winifred Ellerman, whose father, a shipping magnate, was one of the wealthiest men in England. Ellerman, a writer who had adopted the pen name Bryher, had initially been attracted by H. D.'s poetry; their relationship developed first as a love affair and then into a lifelong friendship.

In 1923 H. D. settled in Switzerland. With Bryher's financial help she raised her daughter and cared for her ailing mother who had joined her household. During 1933 and 1934 she spent some time in Vienna where she underwent analysis by Sigmund Freud. Freud's theory of the uncons and the disguised ways in which it reaches surface expression accorded perfectly with H. D.'s understanding of how the unexplained images in a poem could be significant; the images were a code, carrying personal meanings in disguise. Freud and H. D. had many arguments, especially over the destiny of women, for H. D. by this time had become a feminist, and Freud believed that woman's nature was determined entirely by biology; still, H. D. felt strong affection for him, and was instrumental (with Bryher's help) in getting him safely to London when the Nazi regime took over in Austria. When World War II broke out H. D. went back to London to share England's fate in crisis.

Like many of the major poets of the era, H. D. came in time to feel the need to write longer works. During the thirties she worked mostly in prose forms and composed several autobiographical pieces (some of which remain unpublished); the outbreak of World War II inspired three long related poems about the war, *The Walls Do Not Fall* (1944), *Tribute to the Angels* (1945), and *The Flowering of the Rod* (1946), which appeared together as *Trilogy*. In them she combined layers of historical and personal experience; wars going back to the Trojan War all came together in one image of humankind forever imposing and enduring violence.

The personal and the historical had always been one to her, and now she became increasingly attracted to the image of Helen, the so-called cause of the Trojan War, as an image of herself. According to Homer's *Iliad*, Helen's beauty led Paris, a Trojan prince, to steal her from her Greek husband Menalaus, and all the Greek warriors made common cause to get her back. After ten years encamped before the walls of Troy, they found a devious way to enter the city and destroy it. H. D. was struck by the fact that the legend was related entirely from the male point of view; Helen never had a chance to speak. The object of man's acts and the subject of their poems, she was herself always silent. If Helen tried to speak, would she even have a voice or a point of view? Out of these broodings, and helped by her study of symbols, H. D. wrote her meditative epic of more than 1400 lines, *Helen in Egypt*. The poem, composed between 1951 and 1955, consists of three books of interspersed verse and prose commentary, which follow Helen's quest. "She herself is the writing" that she seeks to understand, the poet observes.

H. D.'s imagist poetry, for which she was known during her lifetime, represents a perfect expression of the imagist credo with its vivid phrasing, compelling imagery, free verse, short poetic line, and avoidance of abstraction and generalization. She followed Pound's example in producing many translations of poetry from older literature, choosing her favorite Greek poets for the exercise. Her images come chiefly from nature: austere landscapes of sea, wind, and sand are contrasted with exotic figures of flowers, jewelry, and shells. This contrast can be understood in many ways: it is sterility versus fruitfulness, intellect versus passion, control versus abandon, grief versus joy. H. D. lived a liberated life for a woman of her time, but experienced too much grief to be an exponent of self-abandon. The austere landscapes were as attractive to her as the luscious jewels and flowers which decorated her poetry. In some ways she felt that her truest self was the bookish home-loving young woman who was lost when she moved to London and joined the modern world. Her poetry, though centered on her experience as a woman, was also entirely modernist in its representation of the psyche—anybody's psyche—adrift in a violent, fragmented, alien, and insecure reality.

The texts of the poems included here are those of *Collected Poems of H. D.* (1925) and *Trilogy* (1973).

Helen

All Greece hates
the still eyes in the white face,
the lustre as of olives
where she stands,
and the white hands.

All Greece reviles
the wan face when she smiles,
hating it deeper still
when it grows wan and white,
remembering past enchantments
and past ills.

Greece sees, unmoved,
God's daughter, born of love,
the beauty of cool feet
and slenderest knees,
could love indeed the maid,
only if she were laid,
white ash amid funereal cypresses.

1924

H. D.