



**THE VOID THAT CANNOT BE FILLED:
EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY’S SONNET “WHAT LIPS MY LIPS HAVE
KISSED”**

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An interesting figure of the literary world of the early half of the twentieth century, the American poet Edna St. Vincent Millay often found it appropriate to explore her experiences and feelings writing sonnets. Her choice was probably motivated not only by the very flexible nature of the sonnet as a lyrical poem, but also by somewhat sentimental reasons as her mother Cora seems to have often read to her children from her favourite writers, chief among which some of the greatest sonneteers like William Shakespeare and John Milton. (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edna_St._Vincent_Millay)

“What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why” (*Collected Poems*, 1956 in www.poets.org) observes to some extent several conventions of sonnet-writing. Formally, she preserves “the traditional [Petrarchan] octave/ sestet division” (*Block 1*, 2005: 73) – instead of the “four-part structure” (*Block 1*, 2005: 69) to be found in the Shakespearean sonnets – and shows preference for the same iambic pentameter pattern used in most English sonnets:

“What líps my líps have kíssed, and whére, and why...” (l. 1)

In terms of content, like many of her predecessors, she pours in the fixed-form mould of the sonnet a highly autobiographical matter. But this is where, roughly speaking, the list of conventional features of Edna Millay’s sonnet stops. It is a profoundly personal, unique experience that gives the exquisite combination of passionate, sorrowful, lonely tones pervading the sonnet. The poet’s persona laments in an almost elegy-like style the loss of youth and of the numerous lovers whom she passionately devoured without forming any strong emotional bounds to any of them.

The statement in the first three lines of the octave introduces two of the major themes of the sonnet: love and the passage of time. Yet, here, love is not perceived in its completeness as an unbreakable union of bodies and souls; it is strictly limited to physical contact, hence the metonymical use of “lips” and “arms” in lines 1 and 2:

“What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why,
I have forgotten, and what arms have lain
Under my head till morning...” (ll. 1-3)

The lack of gender references may be accounted for by autobiographical details, since Edna St. Vincent Millay is known to have been bisexual and to have indulged in numerous affairs even after her marriage. (See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edna_St._Vincent_Millay and Hart, 2001: 1-2) Her many affairs, one-night stands, were simply meant to satisfy her lust and none of them was based on genuine love feelings. That is why she cannot remember any face. Neither the place, nor the reason why she got involved with so many lovers stayed with her because it was simply not in her intentions to develop serious love relationships.

In further developing the main themes in the statement, Edna St. Vincent Millay relies, like Shakespeare, on nature images. Thus, in lines 3-5, her poetic persona conveys

the inner suffering by means of a metaphorical construction in which the rain stands for tears:

“but the rain
Is full of ghosts tonight, that tap and sigh
Upon the glass and listen for reply...” (ll. 3-5)

Forgetfulness is implicitly conceived as a form of death as her many lovers seem to have lost all individualizing features in her memories. The glass becomes then a symbolical boundary of the chamber of consciousness, a borderline that separates the memories that are still very much ‘alive’ and can be easily revived in all detail, from those which have almost faded away, like those of so many short-lived relationships. The raindrops – tears – that fall along the windowpane and the sigh may be interpreted as an expression either of the sorrow that her too soon abandoned lovers had to live with or of her own regrets and feelings of guilt for having wasted so many opportunities to really love somebody.

The octave ends with an image of the void that she seems to be unable to fill and that threatens to overwhelm her:

“And in my heart there stirs a quiet pain
For unremembered lads that not again
Will turn to me at midnight with a cry.” (ll. 6-8)

These lines make it very explicit that the one who was once a heartbreaker and hurt so many lovers by her lack of emotional involvement – here explicitly identified as male “unremembered lads” – now painfully longs for tenderness and suffers for not being able to remember. The impossibility of reliving, at least in her mind, those deep moments of intimacy “stirs a quiet pain” in her heart and makes her “cry”.

The sestet starts with the conjunction “thus”, which serves to introduce the consequences of the reckless rushing from one lover to another. Again, Edna St. Vincent Millay’s choice of imagery reminds the reader of Shakespeare’s, as she symbolically associates youth with summer (line 11) and old age with winter (line 9). To suggest the transience of youth and beauty, the text dwells on an allegorical construction: just as the tree loses its leaves in winter and is abandoned by all the birds that used to stop for a while to rest and sing on its branches, so the woman grown old loses her passion and appeal and cannot attract young lovers any more:

“Thus in the winter stands the lonely tree,
Nor knows what birds vanished one by one,
Yet knows its boughs more silent than before.” (ll. 9-11)

Loneliness and the sense of loss become the pervading tones of the sestet, which is eventually reinforced – as also suggested by the use of the colon – by the tercet making up the conclusion:

“I cannot say what loves have come and gone,
I only know that summer sang in me
A little while, that in me sings no more.” (ll. 12-14)

The theme of promiscuous youth is underlined anew, since she cannot say what lovers went through her bed and then were gone, but stress seems to shift more on the obsession with the passage of time and the decay it causes: youth lasts too short a while to be then lost forever.

Like Shakespeare’s persona in the sonnets, Edna St. Vincent Millay’s proves to have grown grievously aware of the inescapable perishability of the human being by meditating on her own experience, hence the inversion which brings “in me” to emphasis in line 14. But here comes the difference: whereas Shakespeare looks for artistic solutions to defeat time and salvage beauty from its “cruel hand” (Shakespeare, 2005: 1014), Edna

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St. Vincent Millay irremediably sinks in her sorrow and rounds off the sonnet in an utterly pessimistic tone.

The rhyming pattern and the sound effects lend the sonnet special musicality that makes it all the more appealing. The rhyme is indeed straightforward, following "the basic Petrarchan model: ABBA ABBA CDE CDE." (*Block 1*, 2005: 74) Yet, the structuring of the lines displays an interesting interplay of run-on lines (enjambement), dominating mainly the octave, and end-stopped lines in the first tercet. The first sentence is interestingly constructed leaving, by a change of the traditional word order, the subject ("I") and the predicate ("have forgotten") for the second line, inducing a sense of sadness and mourning by the alliterative repetition of the consonants *w* and *l* and by the use of the assonance – the repetition of the same vowel *a*.

The use of the caesura (associated with the introduction of the semi-colon) in line 3 combines with the enjambement and makes it difficult to read the octave as possibly made of two quatrains. Coordinating in function, but adversative in meaning, the conjunction "but" contributes to suggesting that forgetting, especially when it comes to pleasant things, is not without tormenting consequences, an idea which continues to develop swiftly in the third sentence connected to the previous one by the conjunction "and." Inversion dominates the sestet from the beginning as well, leaving the subject "the lonely tree" for the end of line 9 so that the two next lines could directly connect to it playing on the same predicate ("knows") but opposing the negative ("nor knows what birds vanished one by one") to the positive ("yet knows its boughs more silent than before"). The concluding tercet restores to the foreground the enjambement and rounds off the sonnet with the same plaintive tone it started, sustained this time by the repetition – assonance – of the vowel *o*.

All in all, the sonnet manages to convey strong emotion. It reminds to the reader that human beings are frail and must suffer the consequences of time passing mercilessly; therefore they should try and make the best decisions for themselves while they are young so that they might not live with the regret of having wasted the best time of their life.

References:

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Rezumat

Lucrarea își propune să reflecte o serie de aspecte caracteristice evoluției artei sonetului în literatura celei de-a doua jumătăți a secolului XX făcând referire, în mod deosebit, la una din cele mai reprezentative creații lirice a poetei americane Edna St. Vincent Millay: "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why" deviază de la normele estetice specifice artei sonetului atât la nivelul formei, prin nerespectare convențiilor sonetului shakespearian, cât și al conținutului, prezentând dintr-o perspectivă interesantă teme tradiționale ale iubirii neîmpărtășite și efemerității ființei umane.

Résumé

Ce papier se propose de mettre en évidence quelques aspects significatifs qui caractérisent l'art du sonnet pendant la seconde moitié du vingtième siècle à travers l'analyse d'une des créations lyriques les plus représentatives de la poétesse américaine Edna St. Vincent Millay. Le sonnet "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why" est illustratif pour l'attitude défiante de l'auteur à l'égard des règles préétablies du genre : sa forme ne respecte plus les conventions du sonnet shakespearien, tandis que son contenu met en valeur les thèmes de l'amour malheureux et de l'existence humaine éphémère d'une façon qui fait le lecteur réfléchir.

Abstract

The paper aims at (re)tracing some significant developments in the art of sonnet writing in the second half of the twentieth century by making special reference to one of the most representative lyrical productions of the American poet Edna St. Vincent Millay: "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why" displays an interesting challenge to pre-established patterns in both form – given its departure from the Shakespearean sonnet conventions, and content – providing a thought-provoking perspective on the themes of unrequited love, loss and transience.