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A POET'S MEMORY

By CARL J. WEBER

ON Monday, June 9, 1958, the Commencement Address at Colby College was delivered by Dr. Mary Ellen Chase, author of that best-selling record of Maine life, *The Edge of Darkness*. Miss Chase's presence at a Colby commencement carried my thoughts back twenty-one years to another Colby commencement, to that of 1937, when she came to Waterville to receive the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters. That was the first time I had seen Mary Ellen Chase, and I was interested to see her and to talk with her because I had just been reading (and reading with enthusiasm) some of her recently published books: *A Goodly Heritage* (1932), *Mary Peters* (1934), *Silas Crockett* (1935), and *This England* (1936).

My memory of that earlier occasion included another figure, one who sat beside Miss Chase on the commencement platform. For on June 21, 1937, Colby College conferred the honorary degree of Doctor of Letters upon Edna St. Vincent Millay, and in the academic procession that morning I had had the honor of being assigned as Miss Millay's escort.

In those days Colby College still functioned on "the old campus," and one of the reasons why the college was planning to leave that campus and move to a new site on Mayflower Hill was the lack of an auditorium. In spite of the fact that the institution was then nearly 125 years old, it possessed no hall or building in which a college commencement could be held. The result of this lack was that

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Mary Ellen Chase and Edna St. Vincent Millay received their degrees in a shoddy public auditorium grandiloquently known (locally) as "The Opera House."

This worthy edifice had of course never been planned for college commencements, and there was, naturally enough, no provision in its structure for the arrival of an academic procession through the audience to the stage. As a result, two make-shift stairs had been constructed on either side of the orchestra pit—narrow, wooden contraptions—by which the college men and women with their caps and gowns were expected to mount from the floor of the auditorium to the stage-level. As we approached the footlights, I remember noticing how long Miss Millay's black gown was, and I recall hoping that she would not step on it as she mounted those narrow stairs. What if she should trip and fall! In the fear that such a disaster might occur, I remember whispering to her that it would be wise to lift the front of her gown; and just as she was about to mount the stairs, I remember putting a supporting hand under her arm. I still recall how surprised I was to discover that she was trembling like an aspen leaf. I had not realized that a poet, coming before a large audience to receive an honorary degree, could find the occasion so nerve-tensing and so exciting. I felt greatly relieved when Miss Millay, safely seated in her chair on the platform, turned to me and in a grateful whisper said: "Thank you so much for lending me that helping hand! I certainly needed it!"

I skip the rest of the morning's exercises, for with them I had nothing to do and therefore have no memory of them, not even of the identity of the commencement orator. Finally, the hour for the recessional arrived, when it again became my duty to act as escort to the famous poet. I remember that the procession back to the campus went smoothly and easily, Miss Millay chatting quite freely and naturally about Wordsworth and other poets whom she

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had studied at Vassar, until the parade reached the campus. There the men and women in the procession broke ranks, the new Doctor of Letters was free to doff her robe and hood and—gratefully!—light a cigarette.

While we were waiting for the hour for the commencement luncheon to arrive, we stood in a group, chatting—Mr. Eugen Boissevain (Miss Millay's husband), Mary Ellen Chase, my wife, and others having joined us—and while thus occupied, Miss Millay was approached by some member of the Commencement Luncheon Committee with a request that she "say a few words" to the luncheon guests at the conclusion of the meal. Thereupon Edna St. Vincent Millay, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, and now Doctor of Letters *honoris causa*, at once took fright. I remembered how her arm had trembled at the Opera House stairs. No, she couldn't, she simply *couldn't*, make a speech. Well, then, persisted the committeeman, would she be willing to read one of her poems to the crowd? Just one poem, *any* poem? Miss Millay hesitated. She obviously wanted to be "agreeable." She was in good spirits. The morning had gone well. But what if she should break down in the middle of an attempt to read a poem? Suppose her memory went blank!

It so happened that Mr. Boissevain was carrying a set of galley-proofs for Miss Millay's next book of poems—the book the world now knows as *Conversation at Midnight*, published later that year (1937). I am not sure—I cannot now recall—whether Mr. Boissevain offered any of those galley-proofs or not; but if he did, they were promptly rejected. It was clear that Edna St. Vincent Millay recognized instantly that her as-yet-unpublished *Conversation* was not suitable for reading to a commencement-luncheon audience.

But what else could she turn to? "I might read my poem about the coast of Maine," she tentatively and hesitantly suggested, "if only I could be sure that I remember it.

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But it was published fifteen, sixteen years ago, and I think I haven't looked at it since!"

"Could you write it out?" asked some one (was it her husband?). Well, she didn't know, but she could at least *try*! Mr. Boissevain thereupon extracted one of the long galley-sheets from the set of proofs in his hand—it was Galley 55, containing the text for pages 115, 116, and 117 of the book-to-be—and the present reporter supplied a stubby lead-pencil, hardly three inches long. Then, seated in my automobile (O honored Chevrolet!), Edna St. Vincent Millay wrote out in pencil the thirty-six lines of her poem "Exiled," writing rapidly, hardly pausing to consider or recall. When the writing had been accomplished, the stubby pencil was returned to its owner, and he thereupon had the effrontery to ask whether he might also have the penciled manuscript, after it had served its purpose at the luncheon table. Yes, he might, Miss Millay replied; and at this point the poet and her husband, along with Mary Ellen Chase and other recipients of honorary degrees, were ushered off to the head table.

At the conclusion of the meal, various speeches were given: some brief, some not so brief; some humorous, some not so humorous. But at last the Master of Ceremonies got around to announcing that it was with the greatest pleasure that he was able to inform his listeners that Miss Millay had graciously consented to read one of her poems.

Miss Millay arose. From my position in her audience, I could see that she had spread out on the table before her the long galley on which she had written out the nine stanzas of her poem. There they were, a prop to aid her memory in case she needed such help. But not once did she glance down at the paper. Few in the audience can have been aware of the fact that that precautionary paper was there. Then, in clear, bell-like tones, without a stumble, without a pause, without a slip of the tongue, she recited with fervent sincerity the entire poem. Here it is:

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EXILED

Searching my heart for its true sorrow,
This is the thing I find to be:
That I am weary of words and people,
Sick of the city, wanting the sea;
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.
Always before about my dooryard,
Marking the reach of the winter sea,
Rooted in sand and dragging drift-wood,
Straggled the purple wild sweet-pea;
Always I climbed the wave at morning,
Shook the sand from my shoes at night,
That now am caught beneath great buildings,
Stricken with noise, confused with light.
If I could hear the green piles groaning
Under the windy wooden piers,
See once again the bobbing barrels,
And the black sticks that fence the weirs,
If I could see the weedy mussels
Crusting the wrecked and rotting hulls,
Hear once again the hungry crying
Overhead, of the wheeling gulls,
Feel once again the shanty straining
Under the turning of the tide,
Fear once again the rising freshet,
Dread the bell in the fog outside,—
I should be happy,—that was happy
All day long on the coast of Maine!
I have a need to hold and handle
Shells and anchors and ships again!
I should be happy, that am happy
Never at all since I came here.
I am too long away from water.
I have a need of water near.

No one who heard Edna St. Vincent Millay on that twenty-first day of June is likely ever to forget the quality of her voice as she declaimed:

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I should be happy,—that was happy
All day long on the coast of Maine!

There is no need for me to try to describe the applause as Miss Millay ended her poem and sat down; soon afterwards the 1937 Commencement came to an end.

In the confusion that followed the adjournment, Miss Millay and the man who had loaned her the stubby lead-pencil never again met. The result was, Mr. Boissevain and his poet-wife departed for "the coast of Maine" without depositing in my hands the coveted manuscript of "Exiled." This of course gave me an excuse for writing to Miss Millay shortly afterwards. I reminded her of her promise to leave the autograph with me. After a brief delay, back came Galley 55 by mail, and with this additional inscription now added in ink:

For Carl J. Weber
from
Edna St. Vincent Millay
Colby College
1937

Upon my receipt of this manuscript, I became curious to learn how reliable Miss Millay's memory of the text of her poem was. So I got from the library a copy of her *Second April* (New York, Mitchell Kennerley, 1921), and turned to pages 66, 67, and 68 on which the poem "Exiled" is printed. I compared the text as printed in 1921 with the hastily written autograph of 1937. Sixteen years lay between the two, but the texts proved to be identical. Not a word, not a line, not a semi-colon, not a comma or a dash, had been changed. Miss Millay's memory had achieved complete and perfect recall.

In a famous essay entitled "My First Acquaintance with Poets," William Hazlitt once quoted a remark of Wordsworth's about a sunset and then exclaimed: "With what eyes these poets see nature!" After my careful examination

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of the galley-sheet on which Edna St. Vincent Millay had scribbled her lines, I was ready to exclaim: "With what a memory these poets remember poetry!" Not an *i* left undotted nor a *t* left uncrossed! Every colon and semi-colon in its right place! It should now be clear to the reader why I call this article "A Poet's Memory" instead of entitling it "My Memory of a Poet."

I was reminded of all this, not only by Mary Ellen Chase's re-appearance at a Colby commencement, but also by what I had read, shortly before that commencement, in Toby Shafter's *Edna St. Vincent Millay, America's Best-loved Poet* (New York, Messner, 1957). There are not a few things in this book which sound to me like rhapsodies, if not downright myths, and many glimpses of the poet seem to me more like the romantic dreaming of an inventive, girlish biographer than like faithful portraiture. But of the correctness and reliability of one page in the book I can have no doubt. It is page 175, on which Miss Shafter tells about Miss Millay's painful experience in Florida, the year before she came to Colby to receive the D.Litt. degree.

After spending the winter of 1935-1936 at Delray Beach, the Boissevains moved on May 2, 1936, to Sanibel Island, Florida, arriving at the Palms Hotel there an hour or so before sunset. They had taken with them the partly completed manuscript of *Conversation at Midnight*. Shortly after their arrival, a fire broke out in the hotel and the manuscript of the projected book was a total loss. The poet and her husband returned to "Steepletop," their home at Austerlitz, New York, and there, says Miss Shafter, Edna St. Vincent Millay "began the painful task of reconstructing her burnt manuscript." And now comes the statement, about the truth and correctness of which I have said I have no doubt whatsoever. Miss Millay set to work. "The passages that had been finished . . . she could recall from memory. By saying them over and over aloud,

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she was able to rewrite them exactly as they had stood" (page 175).

Each one of the words in this statement has significance. "*Exactly* as they had *stood*" (my italics). The lines Miss Millay recalled were of course lines of poetry: that is, they were regularly rhythmical; they made music. But they were not merely sounds, directed at the ear; they were to *stand* on a printed page, and Miss Millay *saw* "exactly" how they were intended to appear in print.

I remember a passage in her preface to the *Flowers of Evil*—those poems which she and George Dillon translated "from the French of Charles Baudelaire" (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1936)—in which she makes this point perfectly clear. Although she speaks there of "most poets" and of "many poets," it is clear that she ranks herself among them and that she is describing herself as she writes:

With most poets, the shape of the poem is not an extraneous attribute of it: the poem could not conceivably have been written in any other form. When the image of the poem first rises before the suddenly quieted and intensely agitated person who is to write it, its shadowy bulk is already dimly outlined. . . . To many poets, the physical character of their poem, its rhythm, its rhyme, its music, the way it looks on the page, is quite as important as the thing they wish to say . . ." (Preface, page vii).

"The way it looks on the page." "Exactly." In this attention to exactness, to accuracy, the poet shows her close alliance with the scholarly world. Though poetry was her specialty and music her delight, she had the scholar's and the scientist's true spirit, and there is no need to question the sincerity of her assertion to Professor Herbert C. Lipscomb, to whom (on October 6, 1936) she wrote: "I have often thought how I should like to be a true scholar, truly and deeply learned." Edna St. Vincent Millay *was* learned, far more than those foolish persons think who know only about her candle that burned at both ends.

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This account of the Maine-born poet must not end without brief mention of two later events, one that took place five years after her visit to the Colby campus, and the other that followed a year later.

Readers will remember that Miss Millay's first book, *Renascence and Other Poems*, had appeared in New York, published by Mitchell Kennerley, in 1917. To celebrate the twenty-fifth anniversary of this book, the Colby College Library planned an elaborate Millay Exhibition for the spring of 1942. Copies of all her books were to be on display. Miss Millay herself agreed to lend the original manuscript of "Renascence" for the exhibition—Mr. Boissevain would go to New York to get the manuscript from the safe-deposit box where it was kept (a result, perhaps, of the experience with the Florida fire)—but, as all the world knows, "the best laid plans of mice and men. . ."

The date of Pearl Harbor intervened. Military and naval activities took the place of library exhibitions; and, while the Millay Exhibition at Colby *was* held, it was a greatly curtailed affair, with no loan of the manuscript of "Renascence." First editions of all the Millay books were displayed, but the sole manuscript in the exhibition was the galley script of "Exiled."

And now for the second event. In 1943 Colby College took the first step in its long-planned move to a new campus. Classes were held on Mayflower Hill for the first time during the Summer Session of 1943, but the library building had not yet been completed, and not until the fall of 1947 was there a Rare Book Room into which the Library could move its literary treasures. In the meantime, these treasures had to be stored in various places—in a bank on Main Street, in a room in the Women's Gymnasium, and elsewhere. The manuscript of "Exiled" was put away with utmost care—in fact, with *such* care that when the Treasure Room was finally opened for business in the fall of 1947, the manuscript could not be found! For nearly ten years it remained on the list of those things that, in

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the confusion of moving from the old campus to the new, had become temporarily "lost." I am happy to be able to state that "Exiled" finally turned up, not lost at all but carefully stowed away! It is now safely—and permanently—housed among the Millay treasures in the Rare Book Room of the new Miller Library, and visitors are there invited to inspect it, and to see with their own eyes the evidence of what it is to possess the memory of a poet.



A REVEALING LETTER FROM JAMES G. BLAINE

By HOWARD B. GOTLIEB*

A LETTER recently discovered among the John Alexander Logan correspondence in the Yale University Library reveals several interesting aspects of the character of James G. Blaine—aspects which have not hitherto usually been associated with the "Plumed Knight" from Augusta. From this letter it appears that by 1886 Blaine had resigned himself with a rather astonishing placidity to attacks and misrepresentations on the part of the press and to the fact that he was almost, reluctantly, at last a private citizen. That his prodigious literary output did not in reality come easily to him is in itself somewhat of a discovery in the light of the amount of writing he produced.

The background of the letter is grounded in the political climate of the period and in Blaine's personal relationships with those who had figured in his long and illustrious career. Blaine left Augusta for the Congress in 1863 after having served both as a local newspaperman and a member of the State Legislature. He remained in the

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