

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 6
Issue 5 *March*

Article 5

March 1963

Millay, Dell, and "Recuerdo"

G. Thomas Tanselle

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 6, no.5, March 1963, p.202-205

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

202 Colby Library Quarterly
MILLAY, DELL, AND "RECUERDO"

By G. THOMAS TANSELLE

IT is sometimes true that a large part of a writer's career can be summed up by following the biographical or extraliterary associations of even a minor product of that career. In the case of Edna St. Vincent Millay, two episodes involving her poem "Recuerdo" (as well as her friendship with Floyd Dell) are indicative of two broad phases of her literary life — her famous Greenwich Village freedom and her later use of poetry for political and patriotic purposes.

I

There has been some confusion about the origin of "Recuerdo," one of the best-known of the verses in *A Few Figs from Thistles* (1920).¹ Each of the three stanzas opens with these lines:

We were very tired, we were very merry,
We had gone back and forth all night on the ferry.

Floyd Dell, in his autobiography, *Homecoming* (New York, 1933), tells of taking his girl for a ride on the Staten Island ferry when his funds were low, and he describes one particular night (p. 328), a month before the real Armistice in 1918, when he and Edna St. Vincent Millay and John Reed rode "back and forth half the night" on the ferry to celebrate the end of the war (Reed had received secret news of the negotiations). Critics have sometimes interpreted "Recuerdo" in the light of this biographical information. Thus Elizabeth Atkins, in *Edna St. Vincent Millay and Her Times* (Chicago, 1936), calls it "the gayest of all the victory poems" and considers its origin to be Millay's premature Armistice celebration with Dell (p. 64); and Louise Tanner, in *Here Today . . .* (New York, 1959), makes the same association (p. 54).

Dell, however, asserts in a letter (19 May 1959) to the present writer that he intended for the passage in *Homecoming* to

¹ The poem had earlier appeared in *Poetry*, XIV (May 1919), 68. See the letter to Harriet Monroe in *Letters of Edna St. Vincent Millay*, ed. Allan Ross Macdougall (New York, 1952), 88.

Colby Library Quarterly 203

guard against the suggestion that the Armistice ferry ride was the origin of "Recuerdo." He declares that the poem was written before Edna Millay had ever met John Reed, and he believes that the "Recuerdo" ride occurred with Salomón de la Selva, a Nicaraguan poet whose volume *Tropical Town* was published in 1918.² Norma Millay also writes (30 December 1959) that she had always understood Salomón de la Selva to be her sister's companion on the "Recuerdo" night; she adds that the title, being in Spanish and meaning "remembrance" or "recollection," supports this point of view. But, as Dell says, "Salomón de la Selva is unknown, Jack Reed is a figure of some importance, and the way the ferry ride will go down to posterity is — probably — with Jack Reed as Edna's companion."

In Allen Churchill's recent book, *The Improper Bohemians* (New York, 1959), Salomón de la Selva is in fact given as the companion on the "Recuerdo" night, but the Dell-Millay-Reed night is placed in 1919 rather than in 1918 at the time of the Armistice (p. 228). If Dell's account is accurate, however, his ferry ride with Reed and Millay must be set in October of 1918, while the "Recuerdo" ride with Salomón de la Selva must have occurred at sometime previous to that.

Since Floyd Dell was one of the men who fell in love with Edna Millay in Greenwich Village, it is reasonable to believe that their experiences together formed the basis for some of their poems (such as Dell's sonnet "The sunny magic of a tree in flower," inspired by an evening he spent in her back garden in 1918 during the time he was on trial with the other *Masses* editors under the Espionage Act). Nevertheless, "Recuerdo" must be excluded from the poems arising from their relationship. Indeed, the poem says nothing of the Armistice or of victory, and to consider it a "victory poem" is to make its interpretation wholly dependent on biographical facts, in this case mistaken ones.

II

The story of the relation of Millay, Dell, and "Recuerdo" has one further episode, occurring over twenty years later, in

² *Tropical Town and Other Poems* (New York, 1918). See references to him in Millay's *Letters*, especially pp. 57-59, 89; and in Jessie B. Rittenhouse, *My House of Life: An Autobiography* (Boston, 1934), 252-253.

204 Colby Library Quarterly

1940. Millay, disillusioned with the Democratic administration because of its indifferent attitude toward the destruction of loyalist Spain, wrote a poem which she called "The President with a Candidate's Face." It was read over the radio on Republican time during the presidential campaign and was issued in mimeographed form on 2 November 1940 by the Republican National Committee;³ it also appeared in the New York *Herald Tribune* on Sunday, 3 November 1940 (sec. 2, p. 1). This poem of 82 lines was never reprinted in any of Millay's volumes because she considered it only a piece of propaganda and because she later changed her attitude toward Roosevelt. In the poem she criticizes him for using public money to pay for his trip to the University of Pennsylvania to receive an honorary degree (she later found out that the trip was not financed by the taxpayers), a trip she thought of only as part of a campaign for a third term; but she soon became an admirer of Roosevelt and offered her services as a writer to him.⁴

At any rate, this episode indicates that her more characteristic Democratic position was eclipsed for a short time. Dell, surprised at finding Edna Millay in the "Tory camp," as he called it, wrote a retort using the stanza form of "Recuerdo" and echoing some of its lines. It was used on the radio by the Democrats and is here published for the first time:

Edna, Edna, when you were young and merry,
You rode back and forth all night on the ferry —
You only had a nickel, but you kept your dreams,
And you didn't fall for any cute Wall Street schemes.
The sun it was that rose, then, a bucketful of gold,
And your poet's heart never could be bought or sold.

Edna, Edna, can it be you
Tooting a horn with the Willkie crew?
Or has some changeling taken your name,
Whose soul is ashes where yours was flame.
Whose heart is cold, and her pen unsteady,
And who rides in a limousine, like a lady.

³ See "Miss Millay Writes Poem Opposing a Third Term," *New York Times*, 3 November 1940, p. 51.

⁴ The information about Millay's change of opinion is included in two letters from Norma Millay Ellis to me, 12 January and 15 February 1962. Mrs. Ellis feels that the poem should not be reprinted since it is not indicative of Millay's final position.

Colby Library Quarterly 205

Edna, Edna, what's happened to you?
This is never the girl we knew!
Break the spell of the Goblin Queen,
Climb down out of your limousine!
Come with us, if your heart is weary,
Where youth and hope still rides the ferry!⁵

Thus "Recuerdo," a poem which at the beginning of the twenties was indicative of the spirit of Greenwich Village bohemia, had by 1940 come to be used as a vehicle for political opinion.



LONGFELLOW AND ARCHIBALD ALISON

By MARSTON LAFRANCE

IN 1790, Archibald Alison published his *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste*, an aesthetic theory based upon David Hartley's psychology of the association of ideas. Alison, whose theory had considerable effect upon Wordsworth and Bryant, was the most important aesthete of that group of scholars in Scotland — Thomas Reid, Dugald Stewart, Lord Kames, Thomas Brown, Hugh Blair — whose thought collectively formed the so-called Scotch common-sense philosophy. The heart of Alison's theory, as described by Samuel H. Monk, is easily understood.

There are two manners of regarding objects: one may be aware of only the object itself, or the perception of the object may be followed by a train of closely associated ideas that are somehow analogous to the objects themselves. In the second instance, the imagination has been engaged, and "trains of pleasing and solemn thought arise spontaneously within our minds." In the one case, we perceive only the qualities that

⁵ "Break the Spell of the Goblin Queen," Poetry Notebook III, Floyd Dell Papers, Newberry Library. Quoted by Permission of Floyd Dell and the Newberry Library.