

Literary Criticism

The 2019 Reading List

Resonance as *Recuerdo*: "The Matrix of the Heart":
"All that hatred down there, all that hatred and misery and love.
It's a wonder it doesn't blow the avenue apart." ¹

And so it was I entered the broken world / To trace the visionary company of love, its voice / An instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled) / But not for long to hold each desperate choice. --- **Hart Crane**

I remember thinking at the time that it was the end of the world and a splendid chance to be a messiah and lift the log off the fire and throw it out where the ants could get off onto the ground. But I did not do anything but throw a tin cup of water on the log, so that I would have the cup empty to put whiskey in before I added water to it. I think the cup of water on the burning log only steamed the ants. --- **Frederic Henry**

In some kinds of people some tenderer feelings have had some little beginning! That we have got to make *grow!* And *cling* to, and hold as our flag! In this dark march toward whatever it is we're approaching *Don't—don't hang back with the brutes!* --- **Blanche DuBois**

I would indeed that love were longer-lived, / And oaths were not so brittle as they are, / But so it is, and nature has contrived / To struggle on without a break thus far,— / Whether or not we find what we are seeking / Is idle, biologically speaking. --- **Millay**

Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* reads as if Lt. Frederic Henry's own self-accounting, "I never think and yet when I begin to talk I say the things I have found out in my mind without thinking," is Hemingway's own approach to chronicling the interaction of three characters, Frederic Henry, Catherine Barkley, and WWI's Italian Front, though we know this to be very far from the case. What we have is a storyline, and we are fairly certain that both Henry and Hemingway were *there*. The novel is a written testimony-of-experience of someone who declares that "all the people who stand to profit by a war and who help to provoke it should be shot on the first day it starts [. . .]." The author's attitude toward war—one backdrop against which men, and *perhaps* it is for Hemingway only men, pursue life—can be recognized in Catherine's death not having been caused by the war. His characters are people caught up in the circumstance of war; they are not exemplars of courage born of soldiering. Remaining human in the midst of the bad choreography of war is enough. Courage is portrayed through Henry's self-removal from the cosmic iniquities of the human construct we call war to begin a search for a paradise with Catherine. And the fatalism that characterizes Henry's leaving Catherine at the hospital and walking back to the hotel in the rain is a playing out of Hemingway's coming to terms with his own mortality after being severely wounded. Hemingway recalls in his 1948 Introduction, "I had a bad time until I figured out that nothing could happen to me that had not happened to all men before me. Whatever I had to do men had always done. If they had done it then I could do it too and the best thing was not to worry about it": nor Nietzsche nor denial of paradise, just a reckoning—and a girding—at nineteen years.

Human experience is the whiskey to which we hope to add some redemptive self-reflection, and in Hemingway's case, as Nadine Gordimer sees it, Hemingway's admixture is "his particular illumination of what our existence has been, his gift to us that belongs to us all."

¹ James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues"

Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* has at its heart an outsider, a fully realized circumstance reinforced by the ambiguity of Blanche's moment of dignity when she turns to the symbolic agent of realism, her immediate gallant, the doctor, and in an admixture of coy modesty and affected candor, confesses that she has "always depended on the kindness of strangers." Underlying "the struggle without a break," as Millay pronounces the several "dark march[e]s" to which we are privy once we alight with Blanche, *Desire* having brought us to Elysian Fields, to the house dominated by Kowalski's masculinity, is Williams's observation, "Hell is yourself and the only redemption is when a person puts himself aside to feel deeply for another person." Blanche now gone, Stella, her life circumscribed by the unnamed newborn and Stanley's commonness, redemption is tragically forestalled, and Stella's acquiescing to Stanley is as poignant as was Blanche's having succumbed to him. In that particular house in Elysian Fields, as Steve reminds us, the "game is seven-card stud"—there is no question regarding the ante.

Williams's tragedy is fraught with contextual memories that retrogressively manifest themselves in the ornate, from Belle Reve's columns, from which Stanley has pulled Stella, to Blanche's costume jewelry and overcompensating clothing, to her "I want magic" paper lantern, until Mitch bares the light, and Blanche shares, proleptically, the story of her young husband's death. Her treatment of Allen Grey's continued past anticipates Stanley Kowalski's treatment of Blanche's letters, during which confrontation she declares, "Everyone has something that is too intimate to be touched by other people." The memories, the souvenirs, the disguising: the resonating through the matrix of "dark marches" guides us through a litany of "desperate choice[s]" that confirms Williams's assertion that "it is not the essential dignity but the essential ambiguity of man that [. . .] needs to be stated."

Edna St. Vincent Millay: selected poetry. Edna St. Vincent Millay as a traditionalist in the first half of the twentieth century, whose poetry might, indeed, suffer, in John Crowe Ransom's estimation, "a deficiency in masculinity," offers a remembrance-in-the present, a resonance in full, of being human, written, J. D. McClatchy argues, "from the bedroom, not the library." The personal and topical themes, often couched adroitly, not necessarily softly, in the sonnet's closed form, display the threads of social and political expressional experimentation characterizing the young century's turmoil. Her poetic voice is keenly aware of the world around her, and conversely, the world around was keenly aware of both her actions and her poetry; indeed, public interest in both ensured a popularity that has recently found something of a renewal.

The traditional thematic interests entwined in the valorized sonnet form, love and mortality, find twentieth-century expression in Millay's lyrical authenticity. The performance art that is her poetry dramatizes with wit and often irony what Hart Crane has called the matrix of the heart. The private becomes public with little inhibition, and the background, the world at large, is the immediate: the expression of embodied experience is not relegated to Crowe's intellectual masculinity—to our good. While we will spend a good bit of time on the principles of versification that our poet exploits so well, it will be her feminine introspection that leaves a lasting impression: "Yours is a face of which I can forget / The colour and the features, every one, / The words not ever [. . .]."