MILK OF DANDELION

THE HARP-WEAVER AND OTHER POEMS. *By Edna St Vincent Millay. 12mo. 94 pages. Harper and Brothers. $2.*

THE poetry of Edna St Vincent Millay is distinguished from most modern verse in that it is content to carry forward, under the colour of her particular idiosyncratic emphasis, the ancient lyric tradition. She is in search of no new thing, but so spontaneous and natural are her reactions that she is able to evoke with unfaltering sureness that high beauty which has existed and will always exist beneath the bleak manifestations of the most commonplace day.

At a time when so much verse is merely the product of the intellect—a matter of unexpected verbal manipulation, of startling cacophony—it is indeed refreshing to come upon poetry which at its best is dependent upon something else than brain. In a dozen delicate lilts this young girl has managed to achieve with a graceful inevitability just what her rivals are for ever straining after. Words with her seem to lose their dragging stubbornness, and become swift handmaidens whose happy task it is to carry to the reader, fresh as beaded dew on a white mushroom, this or that suppliance of delicate song.

And yet for all her simplicity, the cast of Edna St Vincent Millay's mind is curiously disillusioned. It has been sprinkled, one suspects, with no lustral water, but rather with the bitter milk of the common dandelion:

> "Not only under ground are the brains of men
> Eaten by maggots.
> Life in itself
> Is nothing,
> An empty cup, a flight of uncarpeted stairs."

It is apparent that she is quite unable to rid her mind of its preoccupation with death; and it is, perhaps, one's consciousness

of this fact that lends such a note of sweet lingering melancholy to her poetical response to our ephemeral planet-existence. Indeed, in spite of her childish gallantry, her childish gaiety, her childish mischief, one is ever aware of the soughing of rain-wet winds against the white window panes of the world. Her rarest poems have in them a note of dim nostalgia such as one might imagine troubling the wild unsettled mind of a goose-girl who recollects in dreary exile certain fond experiences of her barefoot life on the grass-tufted, gorse-grown village common of her birth.

It is of course this conviction of hers as to the inherent vanity of our days—each one of them nicked for the market of oblivion like so many plumaged birds—which has made her so provocative a leader for the youth of our time; for that youth which since the war has turned so consistently, so wilfully, towards the insidious ancient wisdom which teaches, in a world where all is uncertain, to snatch at pleasure when and where it may be had. And there is, it must be acknowledged, something very engaging, very satisfactory, in the girlish effrontery with which she challenges the accepted standards of the *bourgeoisie*. For all Mr Padraic Colum's reasonable objection to the idea of a candle burning at both ends, her well-known quatrain has its own symbolic value. And how welcome is the candour of that proud and beautiful sonnet which begins

> "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and when
> I have forgotten, and what arms have lain
> Under my head till morning!"

The Harp-Weaver and Other Poems contains much besides this sonnet which is characteristic of Miss Millay's work. Once more she shows herself exquisitely sensitive to the sights and sounds and smells of the country; to the colour of prim asters or heavy-headed globular cottage dahlias; to the sound of the wind in ash trees, reminiscent of the reiterated breaking of seaside waves on a certain distant beach; to the scent of drenched hedgerow weeds in the twilight of a rainy day.

> "Nor linger in the rain to mark
> The smell of tansy through the dark."

She can most wonderfully, most innocently, bring before us the very spirit of each receding season. Which of us does not know the peculiar desolation falling upon the landscape of the eastern states of America during the long months of midwinter? Could this forlornness be better conveyed than by the suggestion of the look of snow lodged upon the hairy dead leaves of nettles? In the same way, four unassuming lines from her pen suffice to put us in the mood to appreciate the long drawn out days of the Indian summer during which the indolent, colonial fruit harvest so slowly progresses.

"Now the autumn shudders
In the rose's root.
Far and wide the ladders
Lean among the fruit."

The fact is these snatches of song have about them the suggestive grace of a hundred world-old human associations. They themselves are like wisps of faintly green midsummer hay, like drifting feathery down from the plant which village people call "old man's beard," like handfuls of driven snow at the time of the feast of St Stephen!

Though her sonnets are undoubtedly distinguished, it may well be that her personality finds its happiest expression in these slighter fragments. Any one who attempts to write sonnets must be prepared to enter the lists where only the mightiest have won fame. Yet even so, the fine rapier of this young girl is not to be despised though 'tis raised aloft in a field where only veterans in armour hold their swords to the sky! How certain lines from these sonnets linger in the mind long after they have been read!

"That Love at length should find me out and bring
This fierce and trivial brow unto the dust."

"Wherefore I say: O Love, as summer goes,
I must be gone, steal forth with silent drums,
That you may hail anew the bird and rose
When I come back to you, as summer comes."

"That April should be shattered by a gust,
That August should be levelled by a rain,
I can endure, and that the lifted dust
Of man should settle to the earth again;
But that a dream can die, will be a thrust
Between my ribs forever of hot pain."

I see in Edna St Vincent Millay's poetry one serious weakness; and this is a certain tendency to allow her childish Narcissism to lapse into the particular note of self-conscious sentimental artifice such as is especially dear to the magazine-reading public. Unfortunately there are traces of this in each of her precious volumes. It is as though upon occasions she was not unwilling to risk her birthright of immortality for the gratification of immediate applause. For many readers her charming Prayer to Persephone in Second April is completely marred by its trifling and saccharine ending:

"Say to her, my dear, my dear,
It is not so dreadful here."

In the present volume a flagrant example of what I am trying to indicate is to be found in the poem entitled A Visit to the Asylum, in which the effect of a highly suggestive conception is again spoilt by the last verse. It is amazing how anybody who could write of Bedlam with the following artful restraint

"And out of all the windows
No matter where we went
The merriest eyes would follow me
And make me compliment."

should be content to conclude the same poem with lines as "cute" and "sympathy-rousing" as,

" 'Come again, little girl!' they called and I
Called back, 'You come see me!' "

But let us forget the Edna St Vincent Millay of Vassar College,

of Greenwich Village, of Vanity Fair, and return once more to the true poet whose rash, reticent, and haughty spirit, is, one feels, ultimately incapable of being cheapened at the hands of the world. In the most beautiful of all her poems, she commits her work to the care of posterity. If there yet remains anybody in America who is in doubt as to its high merit, let him turn to the Poet and His Book.

"Boys and girls that lie
Whispering in the hedges
Do not let me die,
Mix me with your pledges
Boys and girls that slowly walk
In the woods, and weep, and quarrel,
Staring past the pink wild laurel
Mix me with your talk. . . .

Boys and girls that steal
From the shocking laughter
Of the old, to kneel
By a dripping rafter
Under the discoloured eaves. . . .

Bear me to the light,
Flat upon your bellies
By the webby window lie,
Where the little flies are crawling,
Read me, margin me with scrawling,—
Do not let me die!"

LLEWELYN POWYS