

father of the astronomer, made a humanist cause of liberating music (as singers naturally do anyway) from “the tyranny of inviolable number.” Descartes, by contrast, maintained that equal temperament’s altered proportions were a violation of nature.

The spirit of *Temperament* owes more than a little to Dava Sobel’s marvelous little volume *Longitude* (1995). *Temperament*, unlike *Longitude*, has no breakthrough moment and no single hero (the Baroque composer Jean-Philippe Rameau comes close). Though the book is light sailing, the pleasure here is that it gives readers a glimpse of the oceanic depths of musical metaphors and mysteries still unsolved by cognitive science and evolutionary psychology. Please, God, may we never know just where music comes from, or why it moves us so!

—CHRISTOPHER LYDON

**WHAT LIPS MY LIPS
HAVE KISSED:**

*The Loves and Love Poems of
Edna St. Vincent Millay.*

By Daniel Mark Epstein. Henry Holt.
300 pp. \$26

A poem’s “I” can hypnotize us into believing we have seen through the portals of a poet’s secret anguish. That’s commonly an illusion, but not in the case of Edna St. Vincent Millay. Epstein, a poet who has written biographies of Aimee Semple McPherson and Nat “King” Cole, persuasively links themes in Millay’s life to themes in her verse, including guilt, longing, rituals, religious defiance, and, of course, eroticism.

Millay (1892–1950) grew up in Maine with two younger sisters and a divorced, hardened mother, Cora. To support the impoverished family, Cora often took nursing jobs out of town, which left frail Vincent, as she was known, as de facto parent. The upbringing sparked an uprising of sorts, hushed but heartfelt. “I guess I’m going to explode,” teenage Vincent confided to her diary.

(Epstein enjoyed nearly unprecedented access to the poet’s papers at the Library of Congress.) In another entry, she laments her household responsibilities and longs for carefree “jump-rope and hop-scotch days.” At 19, she wrote that “I have been ecstatic; but I have not been happy”—a passage the biographer deems key to understanding Millay’s personality.

While still living at home, Millay gained a measure of local renown through her poetry. Her fame spread vastly with the poem “Renaissance,” published in a collection of new work by some 60 poets in 1912. One reader maintained that the book’s description of Millay had to be a hoax: “No sweet young thing of 20 ever ended a poem precisely where this one ends; it takes a brawny male of 45 to do that.” Millay went on in 1923 to win the Pulitzer Prize in poetry, the first woman to do so. By her early thirties, she had established herself as America’s best-known poet.

In 1923 she wed the Dutch-born Eugen Boissevain; the marriage proved long and lenient. “She must not be dulled by routine acts; she must ever remain open to fresh contact with life’s intensities,”



Edna St. Vincent Millay (undated photograph)

declared her adoring husband, who graciously disregarded her periodic love affairs. The affairs, like much else in her life, found their way into her witty, carefully crafted diary entries, and then into her poetry. Through the diaries, Epstein traces obvious and pure links between the poet's feelings and her verse.

Millay yearned for the respect of the critics as well the devotion of the public, but she lost both with *Make Bright the Arrows* (1940), a heavy-handed tribute to the Allies. "There are a few good poems, but it is mostly plain propaganda," she acknowledged to one correspondent. She hoped reviewers would at least single out the good poems, but they didn't. Her reputation never recovered, and morphine, alcohol, and agoraphobia overshadowed her final decade.

Shifting fashions in poetry further dulled her reputation. Millay's great strength was fiery passion, not the calculated perplexity of Eliot and Pound. Today, in an age dominated by narrative poems in the third person, her first-person confessional verse can seem sentimental. But don't be surprised if Epstein's vigilant investigation sparks a Millay renaissance—a new wave of admiration for the many costumes of her erotic sovereignty.

—ALLISON EIR JENKS

JAY'S JOURNAL OF ANOMALIES.

By Ricky Jay. Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
202 pp. \$40

The historian of stage magic faces a daunting assignment: recreating spectacles as vividly as possible while observing the taboo against revealing their methods. Thus, writing histories of conjuring (and such related forms of deception as confidence games and sports hustling) is itself an exercise in sleight-of-hand. Readers have to be entertained but not fully enlightened, convinced of the skill of the performance but left arguing among themselves about the secrets—especially because sometimes even the experts can only guess.

Jay, a magician's magician, widely considered the outstanding sleight-of-hand specialist of our time, is up to this challenge. He is a stage and television performer/writer, an actor and consultant to the film industry in

its portrayals of conjurers and confidence artists, a scholar and collector of magic history, and the author of *Learned Pigs and Fireproof Women* (1986) and the cult classic *Cards as Weapons* (1977).

Jay's Journal of Anomalies presents material from the author's bibliophile quarterly of the same title, with rare and superbly reproduced illustrations from the author's collection. Each issue is an excursion to the farther shores of theater and the extremes of the human condition. We learn about levitation, a favorite of spectators at least since the days of Euripides, and about such early conjurers as Isaac Fawkes, whose skill at extracting eggs from a seemingly empty black bag stunned his 18th-century contemporaries.

Beyond stage magic, *Jay's Journal* celebrates the full and sometimes frightening gamut of a centuries-old European and American demimonde. Where academics would probe the otherness of the past and see these performances as keys to vanished mentalities, Jay seems to revel in dissolving conventional boundaries between past and present. An affable if sardonic cicerone, he has special affection for the acts of the 18th and early 19th centuries, but he also notes that the last flea circus in New York City lasted until 1965 and holds out hope for the revival of the art.

The flea circus is on the divide between two classes of oddities that fascinate Jay. One is the animal prodigy, such as the mathematical poodle Munito and another of the breed called Inimitable Dick, who mimicked the sensational fin-de-siècle illuminated dances of Loïe Fuller: timeless feats that reveal the skills of animals and trainers alike.

Jay takes special delight in questionable creatures purported to be freaks of nature. Among the fabulous beasts exhibited to the gullible were the Mighty Bovalapus (actually an ordinary Philippines water buffalo) and the Cynocephalus or dog-headed man (probably a yellow baboon). Today's taboo against exploiting disabilities would doom the careers of brilliant dwarf performers such as Hervio Nano, the Gnome Fly. Our billionaires, whatever their other failings, do not wager on the weight of extremely fat people, as 18th-century English aristocrats did. And how do we account for the strange