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1-1-1995

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### Recommended Citation

Walker, Cheryl. "The Female Body as Icon: Edna Millay Wears a Plaid Dress." *Millay at 100: A Critical Reappraisal*. Ed. Diane P. Freedman. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1995. 85-99.

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## 6 *The Female Body as Icon*

### *Edna Millay Wears a Plaid Dress*

*Cheryl Walker*

The female body has never been so prominently displayed or so critically examined as it is today under the dominance of late capitalism. The results of this display, we can now see, have been mostly negative: women regard themselves at best self-consciously, at worst with disgust. Such astute cultural critics as John Berger and Susan Bordo have explored the way capitalism constitutes the language of body image so that women continually attempt to revise their bodily texts in the hope of increasing their exchange value, thus miming the tactics of prostitution. In *Ways of Seeing*, for instance, Berger maintains: “Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women but also the relation of women to themselves” (47). Given this emphasis on self-scrutiny, it comes as no surprise that middle-aged women experience a reduction of self-confidence regarding their physical presences and a concomitant increase in self-dissatisfaction. It is also worth noting that a querulous tone often afflicts them as they grow older, suggesting that they are at odds not only with others but with themselves.

These reflections are useful in considering the work of Edna St. Vincent Millay, especially with regard to the relatively new set of emphases that appear in Millay’s 1939 volume *Huntsman, What Quarry?* published when the poet was forty-seven. The tone of these poems vacillates between irate defensiveness and despondency. In

"The Plaid Dress," for instance, the speaker begins by longing for a new self:

Strong sun, that bleach  
 The curtains of my room, can you not render  
 Colourless this dress I wear?—  
 This violent plaid  
 Of purple angers and red shames; the yellow stripe  
 Of thin but valid treacheries; the flashy green of kind deeds  
 done  
 Through indolence, high judgments given in haste;  
 The recurring checker of the serious breach of taste?

Yet we cannot know in our first encounter with this poem exactly how the body itself is going to figure. Will it present itself as an alternative to this discourse of self-hatred or will it melt into the fabric of self-recrimination?

The very substance of the body is in question here. In recent theory concerning the female body, we have come to see that substance is too often deformed toward a compulsive eroticism engendered by the male gaze.<sup>1</sup> And indeed there is a way of reading Millay as a poet who capitalized upon this very mode of self-presentation.<sup>2</sup> But the fact that the female body is vulnerable to the deprecations of the meat market may not be the worst aspect of its cultural significance. For if it retains its substantiality, the female body can be reclaimed, and thus there is some ground for hope within the political realm.

A more ominous approach to the female body as icon has appeared under the aegis of postmodernism, suggesting that the endless reproduction of female bodies in public spaces may signify nothing so much as the impossibility of identifying such a substance by connecting the signifier to a signified. In "the society of the spectacle," Guy Debord's term, one image mirrors another in an endless chain, binding even individual "identities" and gestures of political resistance in what Jean Baudrillard has described as a world of *simulacra*—a culture in which everyone and everything is an imitation—and a solicitation—of something else. In such a culture, governed by consumer capitalism, the erotics of seduction have replaced an older, more teleological eroticism. Perhaps one might

even say that contemporary sexuality—repeating itself in overtures that never eventuate in lasting commitments but are simply rewound to start over—has made replaceability the erotic narrative of our time.

In the sustained foreplay of his own reflections on this topic, Baudrillard adopts an ambiguous stance toward this theme in *Cool Memories*, at one moment identifying himself with a preference for the seductive because it “liberates the imagination,” at another engaging in commentary that seems embittered by post-inchoative disgust. Yet his cultural commentary is sometimes helpfully provocative as in this passage:

The only passion today: the passion for a multiplicity of simultaneous lives, for the metamorphosis and anamorphosis of modes of life, of places, of ways of loving. Every object is unique and should be all that our imaginations require. But there is nothing we can do about it: we have to move on from one to the other. Every landscape is sublime, but there’s nothing we can do about it: we have to swap them one for another continually and the sublime today lies in the intercontinental flight which connects them all together. (63)

Baudrillard repeatedly turns to the media for the controlling metaphors of everyday life: “The TV: every image is an ephemeral vanishing act. But art is the same. In its countless contemporary forms, its only magic is the magic of disappearance, and the pleasures it gives are bloodless ones” (67).

As we reflect on the status of the female body in Millay’s poetry, Baudrillard’s notion of the de-massification of contemporary imagery will be useful, but there is yet one more strain of cultural commentary that we need to put into play here. Novelist and poet Margaret Atwood provides a political dimension to the discussion that helps us to focus on the way power relations determine the reproduction of simulacra. In her fable “The Female Body,” Atwood offers a wonderful gloss on current cultural imagery:

The Female Body has many uses. It’s been used as a door-knocker, a bottle opener, as a clock with a ticking belly, as something to hold up lampshades, as a nutcracker, just squeeze the brass legs together and out comes your nut. It bears torches, lifts victorious wreaths, grows copper wings and raises aloft a ring of neon stars; whole buildings rest on its marble heads.

It sells cars, beer, shaving lotion, cigarettes, hard liquor; it sells diet plans and diamonds, and desire in tiny crystal bottles. Is this the face that launched a thousand products? You bet it is, but don't get any funny big ideas, honey, that smile is a dime a dozen.

It does not merely sell, it is sold. Money flows into this country or that country, flies in, practically crawls in, suitful after suitful, lured by all those hairless pre-teen legs. Listen, you want to reduce the national debt, don't you? Aren't you patriotic? That's the spirit. That's my girl.

She's a natural resource, a renewable one luckily, because those things wear out so quickly. They don't make 'em like they used to. Shoddy goods.

(2-3)

In this mini-essay, Atwood condenses a number of the ideas I've already mentioned: that the female body is the object of capitalist exploitation, that women are themselves solicited to adopt an entrepreneurial attitude toward their bodies through desire packaged in "tiny crystal bottles," that the culture feeds on replaceability and prostitution, and that its images constantly replicate and solicit one another.

But there are other important issues raised here as well. Atwood suggests that women are inevitably drawn into the process of exchange, that they become counters in a socioeconomic board game in which even resistance loses its force. "Aren't you patriotic? That's the spirit. That's my girl." Furthermore, Atwood's extract ends on a hostile note as the image-hawker transforms what in a more compassionate mode might have been guilt into an attack on the female body being so exploited. Nostalgia hides complicity in the process of obsolescence: "Those things wear out so quickly. They don't make 'em like they used to. Shoddy goods."

In *Masks Outrageous and Austere*, I have argued that Edna Millay can be read as a poet who both thematizes many of these concerns and is herself caught in the meshes of the veil she toys with. In this respect, her work comes to seem not dated or puerile, as so many have asserted, but contemporary and tragic. Millay was precisely the poet who made the replaceability of the love object part of her modernist credo. Just as Baudrillard says, "Every landscape is sublime, but there's nothing we can do about it: we have to swap them one for another continually," Millay wrote, "What lips my lips have kissed, and where, and why, / I have forgotten," calling

her past lovers “unremembered lads.” She so shocked and delighted her readers that she became the figurehead of free love culture, a position she exploited for her own use.

Like any good marketing analyst, Millay was canny about packaging. Her poetry readings were like dances of the seven veils, and though she grumbled about feeling like a prostitute (“If I ever felt like a prostitute it was last night” she wrote in one letter about a reading [*Letters*, 1952, 181]), she was eager to exploit the power of advertising and visual solicitation for projects she approved of, such as her own book sales, the premiere of *The King’s Henchman*, or the American Cancer Society.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Edna St. Vincent Millay is the first American woman poet to become a media personality. Her media career was launched in 1920 by *Vanity Fair*, which did a full-page spread on her, including a calculatingly yearning photograph. *Vanity Fair* turned all levels of culture into photo opportunities. In its pages the young T. S. Eliot looked like Rudolph Valentino; Albert Einstein, Jean Cocteau, Jascha Heifetz, and Bertrand Russell came to seem as glamorous as their *Vanity Fair* picture partners, the Ziegfelds and Greta Garbo. Though Elinor Wylie briefly served as an editor, Edna Millay was the magazine’s real literary heroine; unlike Wylie, she created a special genre, the Nancy Boyd “distressing dialogues,” to suit its demand for controversy, brevity, and sophistication.

In all these ways, we can see Edna St. Vincent Millay as a poet of our time, both spectacular herself and a manipulator of spectacle. Her kitchen was featured in the *Ladies’ Home Journal*. Yet Millay was not entirely at home in the slick world of image commodification that magazines like *Vanity Fair* and the *Journal* successfully mined. In one poem of recapitulation, she claims:

I have learned to fail. And I have had my say.  
 Yet shall I sing until my voice crack (this being my leisure,  
 this my holiday)  
 That man was a special thing and no commodity, a thing im-  
 proper to be sold.

(“Lines Written in Recapitulation”)

It is significant that this poem was first published in *Huntsman, What Quarry?* in 1939, when her career was already beginning to

decline and was about to take a precipitous fall. The voice in this poem presents itself, in failure, as continually speaking against the commodification of the person. Yet, in fact, Millay had herself successfully participated in this process for twenty years. My point here is simply that a conscious intention to defy commodification does not necessarily add up to effective resistance. Millay had both exploited her physical presence as part of her media attraction and insisted that her body was somehow independent of the frames in which others sought to bind its significance. In this she could be compared to Madonna in our own time.<sup>4</sup>

As an example of the way the female body becomes a counter in a sociopolitical board game, one might instance Millay's involvement with the propaganda machine during World War II.<sup>5</sup> Her radio broadcasts and public appearances contributed to her complete breakdown in 1944, which occurred just after the Writers War Board had insisted that she write a poem for their continuous D-Day broadcast. ("Aren't you patriotic? That's the spirit. That's my girl.")

In the 1940s, even those who had once found her charms seductive, such as Edmund Wilson, noted how her "shoddy goods" had worn thin. "She was a travesty of the girl I had once known," wrote Jean Starr Untermeyer after attending an appearance Millay made in support of Czech war relief in 1942:

Her hair, which she wore in a long pageboy cut, was now shades lighter than the red-gold locks of her girlhood. It seems to me now . . . that she was attired in a long, straight gown of dark red velvet, but the face under the thatch of yellow hair had changed, almost unbelievably: it had aged but not ripened. With its flushed cheeks it reminded me of a wizened apple. (qtd. in Dash 215)

This description captures the narrative of the media heroine whose very success enslaves her and whose body eventually becomes the rejected toy of her own audience. As Millay's career illustrates, constant rewinding ultimately erodes the glamorous celluloid image.

In light of these reflections, *Huntsman, What Quarry?* has come to seem to me the most moving and the most telling of Millay's books, the one in which she explores the semiotics of the female

body at the very point of its decline. The body had in some way always been Millay's primary theme, even when she had been most insistent on her independence from it (in Suzanne Clark's words, "Millay's poetry celebrates the failure of independence even in its defiance" [*Sentimental Modernism* 71]). In many of her poems in *Huntsman*, Millay is especially defiant, harsh in her excoriation of fascist politics, war, and commercialism, insistent upon fidelity to principle and the claims of her flagrant flesh. "Modern Declaration" asserts:

I, having loved ever since I was a child a few things, never  
having wavered  
In these affections; . . . . .  
Never when worked upon by cynics like chiropractors having  
grunted or clicked a vertebrae to the discredit of these  
loves.

It is as if the body were somehow a reservoir of resistance, a site under siege but impervious to exterior forces of corruption.

Yet it quickly becomes clear at another level that the persona who dominates this text is by no means invulnerable, either to cultural or to biological incursions. This is the volume in which appear both "Menses," begun in 1928 but best read as a poem about menopause, and "Rendezvous," in which the speaker memorably concludes:

Your laughter pelts my skin with small delicious blows.  
But I am perverse: I wish you had not scrubbed—with  
pumice, I suppose—  
The tobacco stains from your beautiful fingers. And I wish I  
did not feel like your mother.

The persona in this volume is aging and feels herself distanced from the world of youth: "The young are so old, they are born with their fingers crossed; / I shall get no help from them" ("Fontaine, Je ne Boirai pas de ton Eau!").

If there are ominous suggestions in this volume that the female body in middle life cannot expect to figure with the same force it has previously, Millay also implies here her sense that even the domain of the biological is at the mercy of semiotics. Of the two



interpretations of the female body with which I began, the one subject to erotic misuse, the other merely a simulacrum among simulacra, the former is the less virulent one. Where the poems suggest that there is a real body, even if it becomes the plaything of an uncaring lover or the target of a destructive world, there is hope. Thus, in the sonnet beginning "I too beneath your moon, almighty Sex, / Go forth at nightfall crying like a cat, / Leaving the lofty tower . . . , Millay's persona pictures her iconic tower as befouled by birds, derided by youthful laughter, and gossiped about by neighbors, but in the sestet, the speaker still believes that it represents a core reality she can claim:

Such as I am, however, I have brought  
 To what it is, this tower; it is my own;  
 Though it was reared To Beauty, it was wrought  
 From what I had to build with: honest bone  
 Is there, and anguish; pride; and burning thought;  
 And lust is there, and nights not spent alone.

This seems at first a brave statement of agency and responsibility. Nevertheless, one should not ignore the way this tower elides the distance between body and text. At one moment, the speaker seems to be leaving it behind at the insistence of the desirous body, much as in another poem she speaks of her little boat being "rolled in the trough of thick desire" ("Theme and Variations"). At first, then, the tower is not the body itself but a monument, an opus—a suggestion repeated in the sestet where she speaks of rearing the tower to "Beauty." Yet in other places in the poem, the tower seems to be the body itself, built with "honest bone" and displaying all the iconography of physical experience.<sup>6</sup>

It is this elision, in which the body comes to seem a representation, a text, rather than a substance existing outside of textuality, that brings Millay's work into the world of the simulacra, that second sphere of interpretation where there is no substance beneath or behind the image but only a series of mirrors in which images wink at one another. "The Fitting" is an example of this darker logic:

The fitter said, "*Madame, vous avez maigri,*"  
And pinched together a handful of skirt at my hip.  
"*Tant mieux,*" I said, and looked away slowly, and took my  
under-lip  
Softly between my teeth.

Rip—rip!

Out came the seam, and was pinned together in another  
place.  
She knelt before me, a hardworking woman with a familiar  
and unknown face,  
Dressed in linty black, very tight in the arm's-eye and smell-  
ing of sweat.  
She rose, lifting my arm, and set her cold shears against  
me,—snip-snip;  
Her knuckles gouged my breast. My drooped eyes lifted to  
my guarded eyes in the glass, and glanced away as from  
someone they had never met.

"*Ab, que madame a maigri!*" cried the *vendeuse*, coming in  
with dresses over her arm.

"*C'est la chaleur,*" I said, looking out into the sunny tops of  
the horse-chestnuts—and indeed it was very warm.

I stood for a long time so, looking out into the afternoon,  
thinking of the evening and you. . . .

While they murmured busily in the distance, turning me,  
touching my secret body, doing what they were paid to do.  
(Millay's ellipsis)

I have always delighted in this poem because of the density of its physical details. Millay's ability to externalize the language of the body is impressive. But it is also impossible not to recognize that the speaker is performing for us. Here she performs her suffering over a love affair, for instance in the gestures of looking away slowly and taking her under-lip softly between her teeth. We can read the performance precisely because there is no "secret body" but only textualized bodies that regard one another in endless mirrors.

The moment at which drooped eyes meet guarded eyes in the glass is only the most obvious occasion in which we confront the lack of a Real.<sup>7</sup> Both sets of eyes are defined by their capacity for

simulation. If they do not recognize each other, it is only because there is no deeper sense of identity to unite them. We are in a world of unanchored echoes: the fitter who says the speaker has lost weight is echoed by the saleswoman, "rip-rip" is echoed in "snip-snip," the treatment of the speaker's body by these superficially concerned women reverberates with implications about the person identified as "you." And so it goes. "Out came the seam, and was pinned together in another place."

Furthermore, the bodies themselves produce the cultural contexts in which they become legible, rather than asserting their own independent legitimacy.<sup>8</sup> The speaker has lost weight because she is under emotional stress, of which her thinness is the sign. She also invokes the cultural preference for thin women when she responds to the fitter's concern by saying "*Tant mieux*" (so much the better). The working-class woman, dressed in "lainty black," performs her role by the clothes she wears, beneath which she is not separable from her social status but simply another version of it, signified by her sweat.

Interestingly, the speaker herself may be seen to echo the hard-working fitter who has a "familiar and unknown face," familiar as the speaker's own face in the mirror, unknown as the guarded eyes from which the drooped eyes flee. The fact that all three women are brought together here in the circle of an economic relationship, and that somehow this relationship that groups them around an alienated body is meant to tell us something about the love relationship only gestured at but never described, implies Millay's instinctive comprehension of commercial culture's power to saturate every relationship, even that of a woman to her lover or of a woman to her own body.

In an earlier era, it was possible to speak of clothing as making an appearance merely. Characters in Hawthorne, Melville, Carlyle, and the early Henry James *do* so speak.<sup>9</sup> But under the clothes of Edna St. Vincent Millay are simply more clothes, signs covering and covered by other signs.

So Edna Millay wears a plaid dress. This plaid—as she describes it in the poem—represents a form of violence, self-created, perhaps, but color-coded by its inscription in culture, the reading of her

behavior in a social context. Listening to the first stanza once again, we can hear the voice of middle-aged dissatisfaction:

Strong sun, that bleach  
The curtains of my room, can you not render  
Colourless this dress I wear?—  
This violent plaid  
Of purple angers and red shames; the yellow stripe  
Of thin but valid treacheries; the flashy green of kind deeds  
done  
Through indolence, high judgments given in haste;  
The recurring checker of the serious breach of taste?

But why do I say that this plaid dress is color-coded by intertextual reference? In the first place, the colors themselves are conventional: purple for anger, yellow for cowardice and betrayal. Then there is the denotative level of Millay's terms—shame that involves public embarrassment, shortly followed by that wonderful line: "The recurring checker of the serious breach of taste." Both shame and taste insist upon the social constitution of meanings. Nothing is shameful or tasteful without a community to judge it so.

In the pattern of plaid, with its repeating rectangles, we might even see a visual echo of the mirror image. The checker is an echoing frame, as well as an oblique reference to the checkerboard, perhaps. Furthermore, as the poem continues, we once again encounter a problem with our usual expectations regarding clothing, for the poem concludes:

No more uncoloured than unmade,  
I fear, can be this garment that I may not doff;  
Confession does not strip it off,  
To send me homeward eased and bare;  
  
All through the formal, unoffending evening, under the clean  
Bright hair,  
Lining the subtle gown . . . it is not seen,  
But it is there. (Millay's ellipses)

Just as in "The Fitting," in which drooped eyes meet guarded eyes in a glass where both are representations and neither is determinant, here the covering dress and the plaid dress form an unbroken circuit of interconnection and fleeting regard. There is no secret body

beneath the layers of signification. At first, one might conclude that the phrase "it is not seen" means that there is an appearance-reality distinction at work here. If we do not see the plaid dress, perhaps the poet is nonetheless claiming that it represents the truth about the self, a truth that persists even when covered over. But further reflection reveals that the dress itself is the result not of an inner realization but of other moments of self-exposure. This social occasion ("the formal, unoffending evening") is simply one of a series of public appearances, interchangeable with others where "high judgments [were] given in haste" or where the speaker exhibited her penchant for "thin but valid treacheries" and "the serious breach of taste."

There is what we might call a *commutative principle* at work here. One occasion replaces without obliterating the other, just as the word "subtle" modifying "gown" could as easily (and perhaps more reasonably) modify "lining"—since *subtle* not only means fine or delicate but also carries the implication of secrecy, of something going on under the surface.

Yet, as I have said before, there is no secret body here, no hope of "getting down to basics," as one might say. The plaid dress worn on the inside during the formal, unoffending evening seems to be worn on the outside in the first part of the poem and can occupy either position equally well, it seems. The important point is that "Confession does not strip it off, / To send me homeward eased and bare." Why not, one might ask, if what is at stake here are only the venial sins mentioned above? Perhaps there is no hope of absolving oneself of the narrative of one's experience because there is no master trope to counter the force of endless replication. One version of the body calls up another, but none may be genuinely claimed as one's own. I think the conclusion we must draw from the reference to the issue of confession is that in the world of spectacle the Real as a substance has evaporated.

But this is not the same thing as saying that nothing is hidden. As Guy Debord writes, "Secrecy dominates this world [of the spectacle], and first and foremost as the secrecy of domination" (*Comments* 60). What is obscure are the power relations that have eviscerated ideas of self, love, God, or the state. And here is where a

recognition of the vulnerability of the signifier, the Female Body, emerges at the intersection of culture and gender. Here is where twentieth-century politics (in which the buck stops nowhere) and twentieth-century economics (where everything is exchange value) and popular culture (with its emphasis on replaceability) come to greet a woman, who thinks they are admiring her body, but who in the end learns that in their eyes she is little more than a prostitute, briefly alluring but ultimately dispensable.

This is what is implied by considering Edna St. Vincent Millay as a postmodern instance. The woman we discover is not exactly a heroine, but her story is instructive and it may be summarized in a few words. Millay was a skillful poet and perhaps most skillful in her capacity to capture in memorable language physical experience, *not* sex—as was previously thought—but muscular tension and movement. Like many in our culture, especially women, she had no stable sense of her own identity. When young and attractive and flirtatious and talented, she was encouraged to trade on her charms, which she did with great success for a while. But as she grew older and kept trying to retail the same product, she found it no longer sold as well as it once had. Then people said that she had lost “it” or that she had never really had “it” in the first place. Shoddy goods.

What interests me in Millay’s work is not so much that she understood the commodification of either the female body or its relations in consumer society, although there is evidence that she had ideas about such matters, most notably in *Conversation at Midnight*. What interests me is that Millay’s work bears the unmistakable imprint of the stresses and fault lines of our superficially seductive, scopophilic culture. Millay herself was no postmodernist and even believed in such seemingly “old-fashioned” abstractions as Beauty. But her poetry, which has been criticized for its theatrical effects, is deeply interesting when its “theatricality” is understood as a sign of the society of the spectacle.

As a cultural figure, she had a lot to say to the women of her time about living courageously and not letting others inhibit one’s pleasure. In the early days, she championed the rights of women to enjoy their bodies as they so desired. But her poems say more

than she said about the lack of control one has over the semiotics of the female flesh, the way in which individual courage must in the end confront cultural de-realization. In the context of postmodern critique, her poems come alive again with a range of subtle and disturbing messages we would do well to attend to. She knew a lot, but in the long run, they know more than she knew.

### Notes

1. The classic essay on this subject is Laura Mulvey's "Visual Text and Narrative Cinema" (1975), which has now been questioned and revised by many subsequent considerations.

2. See my chapter on Millay entitled "Women on the Market: Edna St. Vincent Millay's Body Language" in *Masks Outrageous and Austere*, 135-64.

3. In 1950, after her husband's death from cancer, Millay wrote a frustrated letter to a friend who was collecting money for cancer research. In it she reveals her own astute observations about the way advertising can use the media to position its clients in the public's mind. (See *Letters*, 1952, 367.) Alfred Kreymborg mentions the extraordinary amount of publicity that preceded the opening of *The King's Henchman*: "The event was tremendously press-agented in advance" (445). Significantly, one of the main characters in *Conversation at Midnight* (1937) is a young man in the advertising business. Though cynical about his own occupation, he is also very shrewd and by no means the least sympathetic character in the bunch. In light of Baudrillard's comments above, it is interesting that he is the one who says, "Let me enlarge to you upon the comforts of modern transcontinental flight" (14). He knows the insubstantiality of life on the ground and has located the sublime where Baudrillard locates it, in connections made by air.

4. In "Material Girl," Susan Bordo argues that Madonna has become the toy of an objectifying media gaze despite her insistence that her creative work (as she told *Vanity Fair*) is ironic, ambiguous, and meant "to entertain myself" (that is, a product that she believes eludes objectification).

5. For an excellent discussion of Millay's work with the propaganda machine, see Schweik, *A Gulf So Deeply Cut*.

6. One hardly need mention the obvious phallic overtones of this tower, suggesting an unconscious devaluation of the female body even as the speaker is claiming it as her own.

7. Here I am using the term *Real* in the sense in which Jacques Lacan uses it, to signify an absolute (and ungraspable) reality outside of the

symbolic. When I refer to objects of perception, I do not capitalize the word *real*.

8. One could, of course, argue that all language must be understood intertextually, that there is no such thing as a signifier asserting its independent legitimacy. However, it becomes clear in the course of this poem that Millay's form of condensation (as in the remark "*Tant mieux*" discussed below) insists upon a particular intensification of intertextual reference that subsequently comes to deracinate all her terms. It may be that, in order for individuals to become agents, they must proceed *as though* their actions are for the moment outside of all language games.

9. I think particularly of Robin in "Young Goodman Brown" (Hawthorne), of Ishmael in *Moby Dick* and *Redburn* (Melville), of *Sartor Resartus* (Carlyle), and of Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady* (James), who argues: "Nothing that belongs to me is any measure of me; everything's on the contrary a limit, a barrier, and a perfectly arbitrary one. Certainly the clothes which, as you say, I choose to wear, don't express me; and heaven forbid they should!" (216). Isabel may be naive in this regard but she does have an inner self whose power is felt by everyone. She is an example of what I mean above when I say that agency requires the fiction of nonfictive status.