

Abjection and Transgression: A Psychoanalytical Reading of Mina Loy's Avant-Garde Poetics

抑斥現象與僭越界線：曼娜·洛伊前衛詩學之精神分析學式閱讀

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(Excerpt)

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1. Abstract

This thesis examines how Mina Loy's poems, including "Parturition" (1914), "Love Songs" (1917), and some of her late poems (1942-1949), deal with physical extremes—states of the infantile, corporeal, and unconscious—in which energetic resources of the human psyche can be restored and used to transgress the predetermined social order and identity. Based on Julia Kristeva's discussion of the abject and the semiotic chora in representational practices, this thesis characterizes Loy's avant-garde poetics as a dynamic one that is rooted in the body, the borderline between debased corporeality and further sublimation. Her usages of uncoded and destabilizing images and sign language deconstruct the established rules of social and literary convention, and resituate the position of self as subject to both external environmental powers and internal unconscious forces.

The introduction briefly begins with Mina Loy's personal history and her neglected status as once highly-praised modernist poet. The necessity of rediscovering her works is urged by poets of different generations, but her nonentity in the contemporary literary history proves her conscious refusal to be categorized and the difficulty to posit her poems in any single way. Following the explanation of my argument, methodology and the basic thesis structure, chapter one focuses on the depiction of the abject maternal body in "Parturition" that suggests an in-between state of the speaking voice as neither complete subject nor object, connecting to violent bodily movement and drive energies at birth. Chapter two particularly emphasizes on Loy's most controversial poetic implication of the thirty-four-poem sequence "Love Songs." Consulting with Lacan's elaboration of human psyche and Kristeva's theories of the semiotic chora and poetic language, the second chapter engages on the signs of bodily waste and sexual difference, the abject against which various social and individual taboos are erected. Loy's "language of want, lack" exposes the inadequacy of conditioned expectations set up by social and literary conventions in intersubjective relationships. Chapter three specifically presents and

discusses four of Loy's late poems "An Aged Woman," "Photo after Pogrom," "Moreover, the Moon ———," and "Chiffon Velours" that even Loy's scholar Carolyn Burke has been dismissive of. This last chapter attempts to explore these poems of witness and vision as a stepping beyond the stripped, rotten body and beyond the corpse, into a mystical existence. Loy in her avant-garde writing achieves not only transfiguration of the abject and sublimation of the unclean elements, but also reaches a poetic transcendence that accommodates both self and other, sacred and profane, presence and absence.

2. Chapter 3

Compensations of Poverty: Corporeality and Transcendence in Loy's Late Poems

Such are compensations of poverty,
to see ———

Transient in the dust,
the brilliancy
of a trolley
loaded with luminous busts;

lovely in anonymity
they vanish
with the mirage
of their passage.

--"On Third Avenue," Mina Loy [1](#)

I. Periodizing Mina Loy's Poetic Development from 1910s to 1950s

Prior to 1923, many of Mina Loy's poems tend to react against the repressive conditions of social interactions and the institutions behind them. In a syntactically experimental poem like "Feminist Manifesto" (1914), she sharply criticizes the "inadequate" feminist movements that focus on opening up "professional & commercial careers" instead of seeking within one's self to find the fundamental psychic knowledge (LLB 153-4). And her critique of Futurism's extreme pursuit of masculine, dehumanizing force is apocalyptically portrayed in several early poems, including "Human Cylinder" (1915):

The Human cylinders
Revolving in the enervating dust

That wraps each closer in the mystery
Of singularity
Among the litter of a sunless afternoon
Having eaten without tasting
Talked without communion
And at least two of us
Loved a very little
Without seeking
To know if our two miseries
In the lucid rush-together of automatons
Could form one opulent well-being (LLB 40)

Living in the dynamic, energetic, and violent modern world, especially the industrialized city, human beings turn into self revolving “cylinders.” Men and women may have moments of encounter and even union, but it is only temporary, not lasting or assuring. Even in the early poetic pursuits, Loy reveals her life-long fascination with the gaps between the obvious presence/reality and the non-obvious absence/mystery, between one's corporeality and spirituality. “Human Cylinders” as well discloses her shackles of love and sex in real life (her affairs with the leading Futurists), verbalized in the explicit love sequence “Love Songs” (1917). [2](#) The later poem “Letters of the Unliving” (1949) is also a haunted memoir of her second husband Arthur Craven, the Dadaist poet and boxer. [3](#)

After the 20s, Loy turns away from the satires on discourses and love, first to a more abstract consideration of aesthetics, resulting in a small group of Ekphrastic poems dedicated to her contemporary literary figures and visual artists. “Brancusi's Golden Bird” is probably the most successful among them, using poetry to complement and capture the dynamic materials and spiritual force in the visual arts. In 1923, she began composing a long semi-autobiographical work, “Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose.” The long poem touches her later efforts to represent words as both an in-between gap and a gangway to some psychical mystery:

The child

whose wordless
thoughts
grow like visionary plants
finds
nothing objective new

and only words
mysterious

Lacking dictionaries
of inner consciousness
unmentionable stigmata
is stamped (LLB82 139-148)

Using the child's awakening consciousness as a metaphor for the artist's vision of the world, Loy sets one itinerary for her late verse—to explore the mystic presence in the materialization or disappearance of words and corporeality. Shreiber in her perceptive article “Divine Women, Fallen Angels: The Late Devotional Poetry of Mina Loy” interprets Loy's late poetic endeavor, disdained as “poetry of witness,” as one that discovers the divine presence in the earth's poor. She also compares it to the religious testimony of the Resurrection of Christ, in which “what was presumed to be absent or presumed to be empty, Jesus' tomb, was in actuality the proof of presence” (472). However, the metaphysical inversion in Loy's late poetry is not necessarily indebted to Christianity, but more to her incognito life experience near the society's rejects in the Bowery, lower Manhattan 's skid row and Aspen , Colorado , after 1936. On the other hand, the association with religious metaphysics in Loy's poetry about bums, pests and the decayed, leads us back to Kristeva's theories of abjection and sublimation.

II . Sublimation and Transcendence in the Abject: “An Aged Woman”

Gross again in the essay “The Body of Significance” offers her insights regarding abjection and sublimation:

As unnamable, pre-oppositional, permeable barrier, the abject requires some mode of control or exclusion to keep it at a safe distance from the symbolic and its orderly proceedings. This is the social function of a number of rituals and religious practices which require a distinction between the sacred and the profane. Kristeva claims that religion wrests the subject away from the abyss of abjection, displacing the abject. By contrast, oedipalization and the acquisition of a symbolic position repress abjection. Literature, poetry and the arts are more or less successful attempts to sublimate the abject. (93)

For every socially functioning subject, the abject means an insistence on the subject's relation to animality, to materiality, and to death, hovering at the border of the subject's identity and threatening apparent unity and stability with disruption and possible dissolution. Therefore, it must be kept at a distance or mastered in socially validated activities, such as the production of art and knowledge. However, as Gross continues to explain, there are distinctions between the poetic texts and sacred discourses. While the religious attempts to stabilize the situation of

decay or breakdown, the poetic challenges and transgresses the present boundaries with its open-ended deferral of meanings and its refusal to conform to a symbolic identity. In other words, “the religious recodes what is becoming uncoded and destabilized in the poetic” (99).

Therefore, for the avant-garde transgressors, exploration of the abject through the arts achieves not only control and purification. More importantly, this borderline phenomenon brings creative energy and aesthetic experience that helps them immerse in both the “somatic symptom” and “sublimation,” as Kristeva again elaborates:

If the abject is already a wellspring of signs for a non-object, on the edges of primal repression, one can understand its skirting the somatic symptom on the one hand and sublimation on the other. The *symptom* : a language that gives up, a structure within the body, a non-assimilable alien, a monster, a tumor, a cancer that the listening devices of the unconscious do not hear... *Sublimation* , on the contrary, is nothing else than the possibility of naming the pronominal, the pre-objectal, which are in fact only a trans-nominal, a trans-objectal...As soon as I perceive it, as soon as I name it, the sublime triggers—it has always already triggered—a spree of perceptions and words that expands memory boundlessly. I then forget the point of departure and find myself removed to a secondary universe, set off from the one where “I” am—delight and loss. (*Powers* 11-12)

The *symptom* exposes the fading, immersion or disappearance of the subject and its imaginary hold over the object of the improper, the unclean—the probability of breakdown and instability when facing one's “alien” corporeality—which becomes a tension in artistic creation. And *sublimation* , nevertheless, is the recognition of the temporary but necessary configuration of the impure, defiling elements of the subject's uncontrollable materiality, “ *something added* that expands us, overstrains us, and causes us to be both *here* , as dejects, and *there* , as others and sparkling” (12).

“An Aged Woman,” a poem written when Loy confronts the alien self, the loss of “[h]er former self, the slender nude of Stephen's photographic studies, the agile image of Man Ray's portrait” (Burke 413), corresponds to the idea of sublimation in abjection. It begins with the crisis of physical breakdown in a conflict between the past and present:

The past has come apart
events are vagueing
the future is inexplotable

the present pain.

Not even pain has that precision

with which it struck in youth-time

More like moth
eroding internal organs
hanging or falling down
in a spoiled closet (LLB 145)

The persona's aging body brings about a fallen state of erosion, and thereby exposes the fading of her former self and shatters her imaginary hold over a stable subjectivity. The aged woman now is confronted by the probability of breakdown when facing her monstrous corporeality, a dual, ruptured vision of herself.

Does your mirror Bedevil you
or is the impossible
possible to senility
enabling the erstwhile agile
narrow silhouette of self
to hold in huge reserve
this excessive incognito
of a Bulbous stranger
only to be exorcised by death

Dilation has entirely eliminated
Your long reality. (LLB 145)

The intertwining mirror image reflects how the current older self, the “Bulbous stranger,” disrupts the narcissistic “erstwhile agile narrow silhouette of self,” and consequently forms a reminder, a language of lack and want. The fantasy image of the younger self paradoxically is recognized as “Ideal-I,” [4](#) “a long reality” for the speaker while the present older self is positioned as an other, a hidden stranger. Therefore, the speaker's feelings towards the “bedeviling” image of her former, younger self are mixed, caught between hatred (it is so much better than the present self) and love (the wish to be like that image). This haunting desire to maintain the bounded, perfect form of the self is always in tension with the corporeal reality of the fragmented body and the chaotic perceptions, and feelings accompanying it. By naming and verbalizing the speaker's inner fear and anxiety, the subject's uncontrollable materiality is sublimated. However, Loy continues to challenge a further transcendence in the very end of the poem:

Mina Loy

July 12th

1984 (LLB 145)

The final signature reverses the previous assumption of binary opposition between past and present. The whole poem turns out to be positioned from the future instead of the present. She leaps into the unknown space and time, long after her literal death (on September 25, 1966, of pneumonia), envisions not only the past or present, but her future self. Loy's transcendence in "An Aged Woman" lies in her magical touch of the speaking voice from the unknown future, refusing to breakdown and be terminated by death, the ultimate abject.

III . Corpses and Catharsis : "Photo After Pogrom" and "Moreover, the Moon——"

The corpse which is almost universally surrounded by taboos and rituals to prevent contamination of the living, is the most horrifying example of the abject. According to Kristeva, it is:

the most sickening of wastes,...a border that has encroached upon everything. It is no longer "I" who expels, "I" is expelled. The border has become object...The corpse seen without God, and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself from an object. (*Powers* 3-4)

The corpse provokes cultural and individual horror and disgust because it exists at the very border of life. It represents a disquieting corporeal waste that resists consciousness, reason or will. It also testifies to the shaky grasp of the subject on its own identity, a threat that the subject may fall back into the impure chaos out of which it was formed. Therefore, the corpse can be seen as a declaration of the death drive, a process of undoing identity. The very existence of it not only destabilizes the ego's self-control, but questions the orthodox religion:

But it is the corpse that takes on the abjection of waste in the biblical text. A decaying body, lifeless, completely turned into dejection, blurred between the inanimate and the inorganic, a transitional swarming, inseparable lining of a human nature whose life is undistinguishable from the symbolic—the corpse represents fundamental pollution...it is to be excluded from God's *territory* as it is from his *speech* ...In other words, if the corpse is

waste, transitional matter, mixture, it is above all the opposite of the spiritual, of the symbolic, and of divine law. (109)

And it seems that for Kristeva, “writing” or the avant-garde text “allows one to recover” from such downfall because it “becomes a substitute for the role formerly played by the sacred, at the limits of social and subjective identity”(26). She privileges writers such as James Joyce, emphasizing the “work in progress” quality in his writing:

The abject lies, beyond the themes, and for Joyce generally, in the way one speaks; it is verbal communication, it is the Word that discloses the abject. But at the same time, the Word alone purifies from the abject, and that is what Joyce seems to say when he gives back to the masterly rhetoric that his *Work in progress* constitutes full powers against abjection. A single catharsis the rhetoric of the pure signifier of music in letters—
Finnegans Wake . (23)

Literature, the art of words, the figuration of abstract, metaphysical constructs in the shape and sound of material letters, simultaneously contains corporeality and spirituality without opposition. The ambiguous signifying process between signifier and signified are revealing but at the same time self-contained with secrets. That may explain why literature is a place of lively characters and emotions but also a haunted house of unfinished, untellable ghostly existence. It is this oxymoronic state of writing that grants it the status of not only sublimation but transcendence. The abject may be expelled from the symbolic, from our consciousness and reason, but it will and has to be confronted and transcended in literature, in the arts, especially through avant-garde texts.

Loy in her late poetry of witness and vision, also attempts to purify the horror and filthiness that rotten, decayed corpses bring to the living. More than that, she insists on a visionary gaze, penetrating the fundamentally stripped-bare essence of life—death, and therefore offers a poetics of absence that evokes a mystical presence. In the poem “Photo After Pogrom,” the speaker observes the corpses in pictures of human carnage with physical details and spiritual illumination:

Arrangement by rage
of human rubble

the false-eternal status of the slain
until they putrefy.

Tossed on a pile of dead,
one woman,
her body hacked to utter beauty
oddly by murder,

attains the absolute smile
of dispossession:

the marble pause before the extinct haven
Death's drear
erasure of fear,

the unassumed
composure

the purposeless peace
sealing the faces
of corpses—

Corpses are virgin. (LLB 122)

Impartial to either life or death, the speaker acknowledges both the corporeal and spiritual truth at the sight of “human rubble.” The corpses inevitably “putrefy,” rot and disappear while their images are preserved in photos, the “the false-eternal status of the slain.” There is no illusion of the fact that death will tear the body apart, and will terminate the identity. However, in a specific body of a female corpse, the speaker finds the coexistence of horror (“hacked” murder) and “utter beauty” the “absolute smile of dispossession” that is simultaneously deprived of life (“the marble pause”) and not totally devoured by death (“the extinct haven / “Death's drear / erasure of fear”). Through the speaker's poetic vision, the corpse is transformed to a frozen zone (“the purposeless peace/ sealing the faces”), a border tainted with death but also marked with traces of life, not fully possessed by either state with

“the unassumed composure.” The last line, accumulating the poem's energies and enigmas (“her body hacked to utter beauty/ oddly by murder”; “the unassumed/ composure”), elevates corpses to the state of unimpacted purity, a requisite state of holiness in terms of death before annihilation. “Photo After Pogrom” firstly captures the absence in presence, the corpses in the picture, and then reveals a mystical presence in absence of identity, consciousness or will. It is a sublimation of the abject corpse and a transcendence of an absent presence.

Loy offers another example of absence/presence and her penetrating vision by evoking the moon that can be both full of presence (the full moon) and full in its absence (the new moon). The undated late poem “Moreover, the Moon— — —” explores the realm where death and life coalesce, where corporeality and mystical existence rise:

Face of the skies
preside
over our wonder.

Fluorescent
truant of heaven
draw us under.

Silver, circular corpse
your decease
infects us with unendurable ease

touching nerve-terminals
to thermal icicles

Coercive as coma, frail as bloom
innuendoes of your inverse dawn
suffuse the self;
our every corpuscle become an elf. (LLB 146)

Loy's moon is symbolic of the feminine, fluid, rhythmic semiotic chora, charged with

disruptive negativity [5](#) and dynamic energy. It also symbolizes to the speaker the fatal but alluring object ("Face of the skies/ preside over our wonder."), a body in revolt, a body disavowed by consciousness, an abyss that may trigger the subject's generation and its potential obliteration. In its various processes of destabilization and breakdown, the moon is abject: ambiguously inside ("touching nerve-terminals") and outside ("Face of the skies") the body, transcending ("draw us under") and engulfing ("Coercive as coma"), dead ("Silver, circular corpse") and alive ("our every corpuscle become an elf"). The transcendence here, however, is achieved by the "terminals," the centers of transit systems that convey the driving energies from the deceased but living moon to the cold, speaker in an oxymoronic way ("infects us with unendurable ease"). Kristeva notes in *Powers of Horror* that "at the level of downfall in subject and object, the abject is the equivalent of death. And writing, which allows one to recover, is equal to a resurrection" (26). Loy's vision and her poetics reanimate and alter the bodily presence—corpuscles, nerves, disease and death—to something unconscious, blooming and elfish, something internal, mystical and transcendental.

IV . Compensation of Poverty: "Chiffon Velours"

For Loy, writing might not necessarily be a "resurrection" as Kristeva claims. Instead, it is an essential "compensation" for the fragmented, impermanent, and imperfect life based on an arbitrarily constructed subjectivity in the transient world. Raphael Schulte in his account of Loy's late Ekphrastic poetics elaborates how the inevitable state of "poverty" becomes an inspiration for Loy to "see":

Roger Conover has noted that among Loy's manuscripts at Yale University is a file labeled "Compensations of Poverty." Conover suggests that Loy in the 1940s and 50s may have hoped to publish a collection of poetry with that title. The title itself comes from the poem called "On Third Avenue." Dunn asserts that for Loy poverty offered two compensations: beauty and movement. I would like to add the third: vision...Modernists, such as Eliot and Pound, view fragmentation as being a symptom of the illness and fallen state of the modern world; fragmentation points to their desire for wholeness. For Loy, however, this fragmentation is an essential element in her visionary poetics: lives are marked by imperfections and fragments that cannot ever become whole. Nevertheless, Loy insists that a nontraditional but nonetheless very real holiness result from the vision and acceptance of our lack of wholeness. (20)

The model of Eliot and Pound, their prophetic oscillation between degraded images from modern life and brighter images of past belief, implies a binary opposition between the

present — the secular as broken — and the past, the sacred as whole. In *Many Gods and Many Voices*, Louis L. Martz compares Williams' poetics with that of Eliot and Pound, and points out this difference of views: “Eliot and Pound would reply that they too are trying to speak in the present tense, to re-create their myths, their religions, their heroes, within the modern scene—but Williams finds them stricken with too much nostalgia; however much they speak of and in the present, their longing moves for him too strongly towards the past” (66). Loy's poems, similar to Williams' ideas, propose alternatively that holiness is indispensably in things and moments themselves, though often broken and fragmentary. Holiness can be found in the corporeal bodies and in the most dismal circumstances. For a poet like Loy who is open to dissolve her identities and shatter the representative aspect of language, beauty, movement and seeing in the presence of want and lack, are the necessary transcendence over the narcissistic and socially transcribed subjectivity, and the abject lingering around the border.

The late poem “Chiffon Velours” stands as an especially explicit expression of Loy's fragmented but holy poetics:

She is sere.

Her features,
verging on a shriek
reviling age,

flee from death in odd directions
somehow retained by a web of wrinkles. (LLB 119)

Again, it is typical of Loy to explore the abject, especially those broken bodies of aging, those unlikely sites of illumination, in her late poems. The first line on the one hand exposes her withered state of being, but on the other hand suggests a position of a poet-prophet, a “seer,” chosen and gifted with extraordinary vision. The survey on the physical, bodily signs of age is only to reveal the possible rejuvenation juxtaposed with her present closeness to death, a tension between the presence of what can be seen and other realities that cannot be fully seen:

The site of vanished breasts
is marked by a safety-pin.

Rigid
at rest against the corner-stone
of a department store.

Hers alone to model
the last creation,

original design
of destitution.

Clothed in memorial scraps
skimpy even for a skeleton. (LLB 119)

The old woman's decaying body, trimmed with “skimpy” bits and pieces, is paradoxically a perfect “model” for embodying a potentially renewed presence (“a safety-pin” as a childhood, juvenal product and “the corner-stone” as a foundation) based on an absence, a lack (“The site of vanished breasts”; “original design of destitution”). The lines beginning with “the last creation,” as Shreiber interprets in “Divine Woman, Fallen Angels,” bring up the religious association of the mortal body as the last word in God's design, the Tailor's making of the world (481). While the woman is looking into the department store window, daydreaming about herself clothed in the fashionable design in the midst of her fallen state, a moment of transformation also comes to her:

Trimmed with one sudden burst
of flowery cotton
half her black skirt
glows as a soiled mirror;
reflects the gutter—
a yard of chiffon velours. (LLB 119)

The aged woman's reflection mirrored in the store window becomes the site where her physical, tainted existence (“half her black skirt”) coalesces with the possibility of

regeneration (“one sudden burst of flowery cotton”). But this transcendence is

always rooted in the fallen, foul world, the “gutter” and the illumination is only “half” limited to “a yard,” concealing as much as it reveals. This conflation of absence and presence, transcendence and corporeality without privileging either, distinguishes Loy's poetics from most modernists' vision. If the tradition of Eliot, Pound and H.D. is a new religion, the prophetic poetry that seeks to preserve and reactivate the ideals, beliefs and inspirations of the past, Loy's poetics, on the other hand, is more like a guidebook that doesn't demand an ordering power from the past, but only aims to show us what is worth seeing right here right now, beyond the present and into future. Her depiction and sublimation of the “gutter” life is never an escape from the real, material world but an indiscriminative embrace of what she sees, allowing her subjectivity to dissolve and her writing to work in dynamic progress.

The poet-physician William Carlos Williams, also a close friend of Loy, describes in his autobiography a similar view of the transcendental power of poetry as “medicine” and its relationship to the corporeal, the abject bodies:

My “medicine” was the thing which gained me entrance to these secret gardens of the self. It lay there, another world, in the self. I was permitted by my medical badge to follow the poor, defeated body into those gulfs and grottos. And the astonishing thing is that at such times and in such place — foul as they may be with the stinking ischio — rectal abscesses of our comings and goings — just there, the thing, in all its greatest beauty may for a moment be freed to fly...guiltily around the room. (288)

The “otherworldliness” found in the materialization of words/world and the “greatest beauty” exists in the abject, the extreme, stripped bare corporeal features, are exactly what Loy looks for in her visual and verbal arts. While the dominant institutions promise unearthly or ideological salvation, Loy's avant-garde poetics offer us instead a guide book to the less obvious, less whole but equally holy ground both bounded to earth and distant from it—a “Lunar Baedeker.” They point to an unlimited vision that sees self and other, corporeality and spirituality, life and death, in a compatible, luminary way.

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