



The Feminist-Futurist Fragmented Narrator in Mina Loy’s “Parturition”¹

Mina Loy’un “Doğum” Şiirinde Feminist-Fütürist Bölünmüş Anlatıcı

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Abstract

The British avant-garde poet, artist and feminist Mina Loy is an innovative female figure of the early twentieth century. Loy’s poetry is noted for unusual typography, multiple and shifting narrative voices and themes such as motherhood, gender, investigations of female mind and body and sexuality. Her artworks maintain an eclectic attitude synthesizing the ideas of the canonical art movements of the era—Futurism, Surrealism and Cubism. Loy’s “Parturition” (1914) gets the critical attention of the avant-garde community with its idiosyncratic subject, style and graphic description. The poem problematizes the complex relationships between Futurism and Feminism, and argues the act of parturition occurs in three embodiments of labour: physical childbirth, artistic creation and poetic production. So far, the literal interpretations of “Parturition” have generally focused on its physical aspect, treating labour as a parturient woman’s giving birth; however, this semiotic and intertextual investigation brings out the complexity of the text’s conceptions. This article, in terms of various concepts of “feminine writing” and evolution theories and with intertextual references to Loy’s “Aphorisms on Futurism,” aims to explore the poem’s “fragmented narrative” structure and to argue that its Feminist persona multiplies into three different identities—a feminist-futurist mother who resists the social domestication and classification of women, an avant-garde artist who subverts the retrospective aesthetic forms and re-forms the new ones, and a creative poet who overthrows conventional language forms and reconstructs a new form—Futurist language. These identities undergo various bodily and mental transformations eventually merging to construct new forms and achieve physical and psychological self-realization. Loy’s iconography, *Ansikten* [ca. 1910s], which, through the visual, semiotic and intertextual analogy I have created, seems to represent the mental and physical space of the maternal-artistic-textual narrator.

Keywords: Mina Loy, feminism, futurism, Parturition, fragmented narrator, female mind and body, identity reformation.

Öz

Avangard şair, sanatçı ve feminist kimliği ile Mina Loy, yirminci yüzyılın başında yenilikçi bir kadın figürü olarak karşımıza çıkar. Loy’un şiirleri alışılmadık yazım biçimi, çoklu ve değişken anlatıcıları ve annelik, toplumsal cinsiyet, zihinsel ve bedensel kadın temsilleri ve cinsellik gibi temalarıyla dikkat çeker. Görsel yapıtları ise, Fütürizm, Sürrealizm ve Kübizm gibi dönemin başlıca sanat akımlarını eklektik bir yaklaşımla sentezler. 1914 yılında yazdığı “Doğum” şiiri, kendine özgü konusu, biçemi ve çizgesel anlatımı ile, avangard çevrelerde büyük ilgi çeker. Şiir, Fütürizm ve Feminizm arasındaki karmaşık ilişkileri sorunsallaştırır ve doğum eylemini fiziksel doğum, şiirsel yapıt ve sanatsal yaratı olarak üç şekilde tartışır. “Doğum” şiiri ile ilgili şimdiye kadar yapılan edebî yorumlar, genellikle hamile bir kadının fiziksel bağlamda doğum yapmasına odaklanmıştır ancak göstergebilimsel ve metinlerarası yaklaşımlarla yapılmış bu analiz, şiirin karmaşık izleklerini ortaya çıkarmıştır. Bu makale, “kadın yazımı,” ve evrim kuramlarını dolaylı bir çerçevede ele alarak ve Loy’un

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“Fütürizm üzerine Aforizmalar” şiirine metinlerarası göndermeler yaparak, şiirdeki “bölünmüş anlatıcı” yapısını, feminist anlatıcının üçe bölünmüş farklı kimliklerini tartışarak incelemeyi amaçlar. Bu kimlikler, sosyal olarak kadını eve hapseden düşünce ve kadının sınıflandırılmasına karşı gelen feminist-fütürist bir anne, geçmişe ait sanat formlarını altüst eden ve yeni türleri oluşturan bir sanatçı ve alışlagelmiş dilsel formları yıkan ve Fütürist dil olarak yeni bir form geliştiren yaratıcı bir şair olarak karşımıza çıkar. Bu kimlikler çeşitli bedensel ve zihinsel değişimlere uğrar ve yeni türler oluşturmak için sonunda bir araya gelerek zihinsel ve bedensel farkındalığa ulaşırlar. Loy’un *Ansikten* [ca. 1910s] adlı sanat eseri, görsel, göstergebilimsel ve metinlerarası bağlamlarda ortaya çıkardığım paralellik neticesinde, anne-sanatçı-şair kimliklerine bölünmüş anlatıcının zihinsel ve bedensel mekanını temsil yoluyla betimlemektedir.

Anahtar sözcükler: Mina Loy, feminizm, fütürizm, Doğum, bölünmüş anlatıcı, kadın zihni ve bedeni, yeni kimlik inşası.

Introduction²

As a poet who produced and published at the focal points of the avant-gardes in the early twentieth century, Mina Loy (1882-1966) stands as one of the most influential and revolutionist female voices of the modernist period. She was affiliated with the canonical modernist writers, like Gertude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Tristan Tzara and James Joyce, and began publishing poetry in the leading modernist magazines, such as *The Little Review*, *Poetry*, *Camera Work*, *The Trend*, *Others* and *Rogue* in the early twentieth century. Her poetic works epitomize the modernist trends with their idiosyncratic form, content and style. Her literary and aesthetic outputs exhibit an eclectic approach as they are engaged with the literary and artistic movements of her time, such as Futurism, Dadaism and Surrealism. Loy’s early texts engage with Futurism. At the beginning of her career, she was inspired by the innovative style and dynamism of the Futurist movement, the first avant-garde movement that was launched in Italy with the publication in a French newspaper, *Le Figaro*, of Marinetti’s 1909 “The Manifesto of Futurism.” Futurism fascinated poets, sculptors, musicians, and painters in the early twentieth century. Loy performed Futurist strategies by experimenting with free verse, unusual typography, lack of punctuation and subverted the grammatical and poetic conventions of the era in her early poems such as “Aphorisms on Futurism” (1914), “Sketch of a Man on a Platform” (1915), “Three Moments in Paris” (1915) and “Lions’ Jaws” (1919) and her plays such as *The Sacred Prostitute* (1914-16), *Collision* and *Cittàbapini* (1915). Her idiosyncratic prose-poem “Feminist Manifesto” is a provocative rhetoric penned in 1914 as a response to Marinetti’s Futurist project. Later, she shifted to Dadaism and contributed to *The Blind Man*, a Dadaist New York journal initiated by Marcel Duchamp in 1917 with two pieces of prose works. Inspired by Surrealism, a movement launched by André Breton with his *Manifestoes of Surrealism* in 1924, Loy also exhibited surrealist techniques and ideas, such as fragmented and reassembled bodies and psyches to reflect the subliminal feelings of her narrators in her textual and visual works such as a novel, *Insel* (1930), and her 1930 painting, *Surreal Secene*.

Loy’s “Parturition”³ is an early experimental poem; it was initially published in the inaugural issue of *Trend*⁴. Because of its unique subject, and with its peculiar style and geometrical form, it caught the critical attention of the avant-garde community at that time. Roger Conover, Loy’s biographer, describing it in his *Editor’s Notes* in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker: The Poems of Mina Loy*,⁵ comments that “as the putative first poem ever written about the physical experience of childbirth from the parturient woman’s point of view, and the first poem in English to use collage as a texturing device, ‘Parturition’ is a significant event in the history of modern poetry as well as in the literature of modern sexuality” (1996, p. 177).

Interpretations of “Parturition” have tended to center on the most literal aspects of the poem, treating it as a description of childbirth. However, the poem is far more complex, as it overlaps and

² This article is the revised and expanded version of the paper presented with the title of “The Feminist Split Persona: Mina Loy’s ‘Parturition’” at the *Thirteenth International IDEA Conference: Studies in English*, 24-26 April 2019, held at Gaziantep University, Gaziantep, Turkey.

³ The word “Parturition” comes from the Latin *parturire*, “to be ready to bear young,” and is related to *partus*, the past participle of *parere*, “to produce.” (*Dictionary University*, dictionary.university/ parturition.)

⁴ An American Journal edited by Carl Van Vechten (1914: 93-94).

⁵ Hereafter cited as *LLB*. Roger L. Conover (1996).

intersects with Loy's theories on poetry, futurism and feminism. Conover also remarks, "This poem, rather than the act of a childbirth itself, was probably the subject of a comment [Loy] made to [Carl Van Vechten] in a letter dated October 29, 1914," (1996, p. 176) and he quotes Loy's words: "I am glad to introduce my sex to the inner meaning of childbirth. The last illusion about my poor mis-created sex is gone. I am sad" (*LLB* 176-177). The characterizations of this comment on "inner meaning" which critical readers of the poem have missed in their emphasis on its literal aspects are the focus of this analysis.

The title, "Parturition," refers to the act of giving birth, so it suggests the bodily experience of a woman. Apart from its biological concept of female procreativity, the act of "parturition" can therefore be understood in different contexts based on its extended connotations of creation and production; it is a reproduction which is not only physical, but also artistic and textual. These additional significations are suggested by Loy's use of the word "Parturition," rather than "birth" or "motherhood." The title suggests a neutral, biological and scientific description, not a purely subjective experience; and an intertextual analysis of the text in these different dimensions questions the complex engagements between Futurism and Feminism.

The poem consists of 133 lines arranged in fourteen sections, and it has an unusual typography and style, which proceeds with unpredictable pauses and caesuras, devoid of punctuation. There are spaces left deliberately before some certain words to emphasize them; and the textual gaps and hiatuses give the impression that the lines go everywhere, as if circling around the poem. These stylistic devices can also be associated with the descriptions of acts of contraction and expansion (signifying the act of birth) occurring throughout the poem; and these in turn suggest the dynamic of poetic and artistic creation.

Intertextuality between "Parturition" and "Aphorisms on Futurism"

"Parturition" begins with a woman's general description of her giving birth:

- [1]⁶ I am the centre
- [2] Of a circle of pain
- [3] Exceeding its boundaries in every direction

The narrator situates herself as the centre of a circle, representing a sensation, which radiates outwards in every direction. Physically, this describes the expansion of her cervix at the prenatal stage, in which case the act of labour can be seen as a process developing between contraction and expansion. From the maternal perspective, the labour experience and female metamorphic process of the maternal persona in "Parturition" evoke Bracha Ettinger's "Matrixial Theory," which considers the significance of the womb from a psychoanalytic perspective. Ettinger, in her *The Matrixial Borderspace*, where she focuses on the social and ethical implications of the matrixial space and criticizes the perception of society towards the feminine matrix, argues that "the womb can appear in culture only as psychosis" (2006, p. 179). Ettinger also introduces matrixial "metramorphosis" as "a process of inter-psyche communication and transformation that transgresses the borders of the individual subject, and takes place between several entities" (2004, p. 77); it is in this sense that Loy's narrator speaks of "exceeding its boundaries" in the opening of "Parturition." Here, in the light of Ettinger's discussions about the perception of motherhood and the womb in the society, it is suggested that the "centre" in the opening line metaphorically represents the "womb," from where the narrative voice wants to transgress its borders. Therefore, the womb of the parturient woman ("the center of a circle of pain") is described not only as her uterus at the prenatal stage, but also as the centre of psychosis for the persona. The "circle" metaphorically may be seen as a symbol of return, which makes the act of birth a cyclic event and a continuous flux—birth, life and death—as renewal or reproduction through the process of birth. So, the act of parturition takes the maternal persona to a transgressive transformation "in every direction."

⁶ All the transcriptions and the areas of emphasis, which approximate Loy's own writing, and the line numbers in Loy's "Parturition," are provided from *LLB* (Conover, 1996, pp. 4-8).

The broader implications of this characterization are also suggested in Loy's "Aphorisms on Futurism":

[AF 5]⁷ THE straight line and the circle are the parents of design, form
the basis of art; there is no limit to their coherent variability.

The "circle" evokes one of the two basic forms of art, and describes the geometrical figure an artist uses to produce an artwork; while the pain the narrator feels in the circle metaphorically represents the possibility for form to be broken by the artist. The inspiration of the Futurist artists and the limitlessness of the future for the whole of humanity are also suggested in the following aphorism:

[AF 16] BUT in the Future, by inspiring the people to expand to their
fullest capacity, the great man proportionately must be tremendous—a God.

The implication is that the representation of "birth" refers to the act of creating art, and this also includes poetic creation. Loy's Futurist poet is characterized as eternal, limitless—

[AF 22] THE Futurist can live a thousand years in one poem.

—and revolutionary, experimenting with new and creative forms:

[AF 23] HE can compress every aesthetic principle in one line.

With regard to poetic context, the pain of the textual narrator signifies the struggle of the Futurist poet in pursuit of creating his or her text in the pre-writing stage; the evocations of "pain" recall the expansion of the limits of writing while exceeding its [linguistic] boundaries. The "centre" refers to the circular space where the poet is struggling to break her boundaries, and represents the linguistic restraints to be subverted.

A common feature of the circumference which merges maternal, artistic and poetic aspects is the self-awareness each narrator experiences, as they are all aware of their positions as the centre and the need to break their limits, spreading towards every direction of the "circle." This breakage of limits may result in a physical, textual and artistic metamorphosis in the narrators' self-identities, which leads them to an elevated consciousness. The act of parturiency can therefore be interpreted as a process of reconstructing new identities through producing a baby, an artwork and a creative poem.

The poem continues with the persona's comparing the external world with the present moment she experiences:

[4] The business of the bland sun
[5] Has no affair with me
[6] In my congested cosmos of agony
[7] From which there is no escape
[8] On infinitely prolonged nerve-vibrations
[9] Or in contraction
[10] To the pinpoint nucleus of being

The speaker makes use of scientific, medical and astronomical terminology and style in this section to identify the physical experience of labour. The "Sun" represents the external space—the "cosmos"—as a source of energy and the adjectival word "bland" connotes tediousness; "the business of the bland sun" suggests everyday things happening in the outside world and lacking in any distinctive features. The outside world becomes insignificant for the speaker because she suffers an

⁷ Loy's "Aphorisms on Futurism" (1914) is hereafter cited as [AF] in in-text quotations to refer to the number of aphorisms, and as "Aphorisms" to refer to the poem throughout the article. The numbers of the poem are provided from *LLB*. (Conover, 1996, pp. 149-152).

extreme pain in her body, a “congested cosmos of agony” from which “there is no escape”; she struggles with the “prolonged nerve-vibrations or the “contraction” and expansion proceeding in the center of her body—“the pinpoint nucleus of being.” In this way, she characterizes her personal entity as a “congested cosmos,” which signifies the body of the narrative voice, the body of the text. In this sense, the “cosmos of agony” metaphorically implies the artist’s own capacity struggling to exceed conventional linguistic boundaries. And the “prolonged nerve-vibrations / Or [the] contraction” occurring in “[her] pinpoint nucleus of being” refer to the artist’s efforts to attain aesthetic consciousness in pursuit of creating new art forms:

[AF 31] LET the Universe flow into your consciousness, there is no limit
to its capacity, nothing that it shall not re-create.

These characterizations also include poetic creation; if the “bland sun” refers to conventional and limited literary forms, the “congested cosmos of agony” metaphorically represents the poet’s own capability. Here, both the “nerve-vibrations” and the “contraction” can be regarded as the Futurist poet’s act of creating literary work:

[AF 26] THE Futurist must leap from affirmative to affirmative, ignoring
intermittent negations . . .—

The Futurist poet is aware of his capabilities and and is ready to create textual outputs without any interruptions by exceeding his own limits.

The third section clarifies the speaker’s labour experience, which takes place both inside and outside of her body and mind:

[11]	Locate an irritation	without
[12]	It is	within
[13]		Within
[14]	It is without	
[15]	The sensitized area	
[16]	Is identical	with the extensity
[17]	Of intension	

The opening lines’ “exceeding” boundaries radiating “in every direction” are elaborated as the act of labour proceeds. The “irritation” occurs in her “sensitized area;” the discomfort the speaker feels takes place not only on a physical level, but also on mental, social and emotional levels. What occurs inside and outside of the female body is used to define the bodily rhythm between contraction—“within”—and expansion—“without.”

Interpreting the dilemma between contraction and expansion as an act of decentralization enables multiple interpretations in the analysis of the text, rather than locating the meaning in a fixed concept. The paradox here is that while the narrator separates external and internal worlds by means of the irregular spaces left between “within” and “without,” she also relates them to each other as two interchangeable spaces, and likens the pain she senses to the spasms occurring inside and outside of her body. These textual gaps create a restless rhythm, and also suggest interludes the parturient woman senses between contractions and expansions. The space left deliberately before these words creates a territorial and confined space which is uncomfortable both for the narrative voice and the reader, as is argued in the second section of the poem: it is the “congested cosmos of agony” from which “there is no escape.”

In terms of artistic creation, the play between “within” and “without” represents the aesthetic narrator’s struggle to break the limits of traditional art forms and re-produce new ones. As is implied in the aphorisms, “without” signifies the external world, and “within” the internal and these two worlds clash:

[AF 11] FORGET that you live in houses, that you may live in your-
self—

“The sensitized area” signifies the speaker’s and the Futurist artist’s self-realization of the discomfort, the “irritation” occurring in the inner and outside world; it leads to a reconstruction in her self-identity as she performs in between them. This change takes place both in the inside space—the “sensitized area,” the “congested cosmos”—and in the outside world appearing as an extreme form for her—“the extensity of intension.”

All these representations also refer to the form of the poem. The persona subverts the boundaries of language and destroys the conventional integrity and the logic of the structure by using “within” and “without” in four lines with irregular gaps and caesuras; and the grammatical ambiguities in the text’s use of these two words adds to the uncertainties as well as the multiplicity of meaning. The caesuras left deliberately before “without” and “within” also represent an aporia—the insoluble paradox for the persona described earlier: “there is no escape.” The poet likens her own painful struggles with the outside forces (“extensity”) and is conscious of the discomfort she feels while producing a creative and independent text.

Visual Representation of the Fragmented Narrator

What merges these interpretations is that the parturient, artistic and poetic personas are self-aware of the transformation occurring in their corporeal and mental spaces, through accompanying extreme difficulty and discomfort, the “pain” and “irritation.” The textual spaces and hiatuses between “within” (“contraction”) and without” (“expansion”) create a cyclical effect, which both centers and decenters the narrator at the same time, and leads to a reconstruction in her identities—by both fragmenting and fusing.⁸

In fact, what the persona is multiplying here is herself. A visual analogy of this identity fragmentation of the narrator can be seen in Loy’s iconography, *Ansikten*⁹ (*Faces*), in Figure 1:

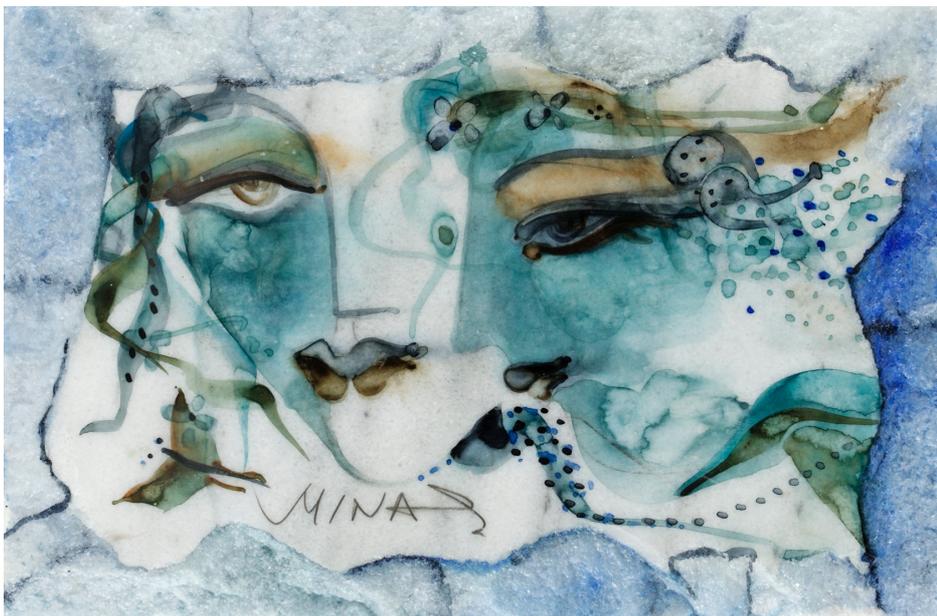


Figure 1. Mina Loy, *Ansikten* [ca. 1910s]. Courtesy of the Bukowskis Auction House, Stockholm, Sweden¹⁰

⁸ The identity fragmentation of the narrator in “Parturition” can also be seen in Loy’s “Lions’ Jaws” (1914) as the narrative voice is multiplied through different anagrams or aliases: “Nima Lyo, alias Anim Yol, alias Imna Loy” (*LLB* 1996, p. 49). This can be considered a reaction to the Futurists, who generalize all women to “carnivorous courtesan[s]” (*LLB* 47).

⁹ The Swedish word “Ansikten” means “Faces.” (en.bab.la/dictionary/swedish-english/ansikten).

¹⁰ The image *Ansikten* [ca. 1910s] is reproduced here by courtesy of Bukowskis Auction House, Stockholm, Sweden. Photo credit “Photo Bukowskis Auctions.” Photo byline “Photo Bukowskis Auctions.” I am very grateful to Lena Rydén and Per Kesselmar, Specialists of Modern Art, Bukowskis Auction House, Stockholm,

The image, suggested by the word “Ansikten” in Swedish, is painted on marble and is the only artwork on which Loy signed her first name. It is unfortunately unknown when exactly she made this painting; however, it seems to have been produced in the early period of her career, when she was under the influence of Futurism as well as Surrealism and Cubism, probably close to the year this poem was composed.

This painting can be interpreted as a visual representation of the poem, where the multiplied female faces signify the narrators whose identities are fragmented, and fused as the text evolves. The facial features are not clear and there are no sharp tonal differences in blue and green colours; the artwork has a focal face image at the center from the front sight depicting one of the eyes of the woman looking directly to the viewer as well as her lips. The background of the image is out of focus and heavily painted in blurred blue. Some of the tiny images scattered in the image resemble animals such as a moth and a bird, which I will refer to later. And the image of a little baby, which may signify a newborn child in this context, is seen at the top right corner. These associations reinforce the intertextual relationship between this painting and the poem.

On a more general level, the image bears the characteristics of various well-known art forms of the early modernist period. The impression of motion and dynamism of the fragmented images as if they are circling around one another suggests the styles of Futurism, and the futurist features of this painting can also be associated with Loy's arguments in “Aphorisms” as it is in line with the Futurist artists' destruction of the “the straight line and the circle” and their use of dynamic figures moving and circling each other:

[AF 5] THE straight line and the circle are the parents of design, form
the basis of art; there is no limit to their coherent variability.

However, it also reflects other artistic forms of the period, such as Surrealism and Cubism. The irregular lines surrounding the intertangled face images and the tiny hallucinatory elements scattered in the painting—a bird's head at the bottom right, a moth at the bottom left corner, a little baby at the top right corner and some scattered, barely perceptible animal silhouettes—evoke Surrealism, as they reflect the narrators' subliminal and unconscious feelings. At the same time, features such as the multi-dimensional fragmented appearance of the faces from different angles, and the straight-lined geometrical shapes—such as the sharp nose of the frontally-positioned face—echo Cubist aesthetics. In this way, Loy's fragmented narrator synthesizes a variety of aesthetic forms, a synthesis argued for in the “Aphorisms,” referring to the Futurist poet who is capable of abridging different aesthetic principles:

[AF 23] HE can compress every aesthetic principle in one line.

In the next section, the persona reemploys the first person singular “I”; however, in contrast to the self-centered viewing of herself in the opening line of the poem, here, she feels discomfort about her existing position:

- [18] I am the false quantity
- [19] In the harmony of physiological potentiality
- [20] To which
- [21] Gaining self-control
- [22] I should be consonant
- [23] In time

The use of the first-person singular suggests the radical potential of female subjectivity in the process, as the speaker characterizes herself as a distracting subject matter—“the false quantity”—causing disorder and distraction in this activity of labour, which might otherwise have the potential to have a “harmonious” outcome. As her pain increases, she feels more exhausted and under pressure,

Sweden, for sending me the high-resolution image of *Ansikten*, and giving me permission to use it for this project.

anxious to provide the necessary control. She now wants to exceed the boundaries of time, but because the process takes place both inside and outside of her body and mind, this pressure fills her with bodily and mental distress, so that she cannot exceed these temporal boundaries.

The implication is that the “physiological” harmony also refers to the act of producing art—an artist’s struggle to attain independence by allowing uncertainties to produce her own artwork. This evokes one of the strongest arguments of the “Aphorisms,” on the need for expansion and liberation of the individual mind:

[AF 14] WHAT can you know of expansion, who limit yourselves to
compromise?

As the Futurist artist has the capacity to tolerate the unclarity, she can break the traditional forms to reproduce them. In this way, the artistic persona can be saved from boundaries, and be ahead of her time. Once the mind is liberated, it can be saved from its boundaries, which expands the limits of the individual, and this expansion would bring about mental liberation and self-development to the artistic narrator. In terms of the poetic creation, the use of the “I” suggests the central position of the poet, but the textual narrator now feels discomfort about her current “potentiality;” she wants to be self-aware—“I should be consonant / In time”—and “gain [her] self-control by getting rid of the pressure of uncertainties—“without” and “within.” These arguments with regard to maternal, artistic and poetic creation make it clear that all the fragmented narrators—a mother, an artist and a poet—are aware of the uncertainties while breaking their limits, and embrace them to reform the new forms. Here, the paradoxical multiplicities and uncertainties¹¹ point to the idea of reproducing creative, and independent aesthetic and poetic works as well as mentally developed children.

Intertextually, these arguments related to women’s maternal reproductivity can also be seen in Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto” (1914);¹² the narrator argues for women’s rights in regard to maternity and race-responsibility to educate the next generation, as women’s psychic development, which will eventually affect their children’s development: “Woman must become more responsible for the child than man” (*LLB*, as cited in Conover, 1996, p. 155). As declared in the manifesto, “Each child of a superior woman should be the result of a definite period of psychic development in her life” (*LLB*, p. 155). A child should be a product of a woman’s mental development instead of a common product of the parents, which is only possible through woman’s self-realization. Women seem to be “superior” as the physical and psychological owners of the child, and free of stress, because children should no longer be obstacles for the continuation or termination of marriage.

The narrator of “Parturition” now emphasizes the drastic pain she suffers:

[24] Pain is no stronger than the resisting force
[25] Pain calls up in me
[26] The struggle is equal

Describing the “pain” she senses, she compares it with her struggle while she is delivering her baby, which shifts between “prolonged nerve-vibrations” of “contraction” and “expansion. The pain which shakes her up is the same as that of her battling—“the resisting force”—and the “expansion” and “contraction.”

¹¹ The ambiguities of the narrator’s maneuvering between “within” and “without” recall John Keats’s idea of “negative capability” since the narrator is also “capable of being in uncertainty.” Keats encourages uncertainties to perceive and produce a creative, artistic or poetic work, and describes negative capability in *The Complete Poetical Works and Letters of John Keats* as “an emotional state characterized by indecision, restlessness, uncertainty and tension resulting from incompatible inner needs or drives of comparable intensity.” (Keats, 1899, p. 277).

¹² For a detailed analysis, see Karabulut, T. (2020). “Futurism and Feminist Performativity: Mina Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto,” *Househunting* and *Christ on a Clothesline*.” *Women Studies: an interdisciplinary Journal*, 49(1), 1-30.

This painful process also takes place for the artist while producing art: it is the artist's struggle against breaking the traditional artistic forms—"resisting force"—which reflects how challenging it is for an artist to break the stereotypical forms in order to replace them with more creative and independent ones. From the perspective of the "Aphorisms," the "resisting force" can be considered a metonymy representing the "crisis in consciousness" and as the new form suggested by the narrator:

[AF 28] TODAY is the crisis in consciousness.

[AF 29] CONSCIOUSNESS cannot spontaneously accept or reject
new forms, as offered by creative genius; it is the new form.

Poetic creation is also implied. The Futurist poet labours in difficulty to exceed linguistic boundaries and unite creatively, and this is depicted in the clash between the distress she feels (the "pain"), and the linguistic limits—"the resisting force." Here again, "the resisting force" is a metonymy substituting for the boundaries restricting individuals on the way to expanding themselves and attaining independence. The "resisting force" is also depicted in the fragments of the "Aphorisms on Futurism," such as egotism [AF 18], the "insidious reactions" [AF 19], the "prejudices" [AF 20], and the "irrelevant minds" [AF 34]. Therefore, viewed in terms of the activities of the three personas, the transformational and reproductive process involved in "exceeding [the] boundaries" is painful for a mother, an artist, and a poet.

Incorporation of the Feminine Experience of the Male Gaze

In this section, the voices of Loy's speakers appear as female, and are contrasted with satirical portrayals of the male; the text can be seen as developing a feminist perspective with female narrators—an expectant mother, a female artist, and a female poet. First, a male and another female figure are incorporated in the poem:

[27] The open window is full of a voice
[28] A fashionable portrait painter
[29] Running upstairs to a woman's apartment
[30] Sings
[31] "All the girls are tid'ly did'ly
[32] All the girls are nice
[33] Whether they wear their hair in curls
[34] Or —"
[35] At the back of the thoughts to which I permit
 crystallization
[36] The conception Brute
[37] Why?
[38] The irresponsibility of the male
[39] Leaves woman her superior Inferiority.
[40] He is running up-stairs

The parturient persona's voice suddenly shifts to a different focus. She first describes the attitudes of the male character by ironizing his act of viewing women as objects, and then changes her voice, adopting an indifferent and aggressive attitude. The voice of the male figure she hears comes from a "fashionable" male artist, who is perhaps the father of the baby. Here, I would suggest this "fashionable portrait painter" symbolizes the external world the narrator perceives during the act of labour.

This scene—the portrait-painter's "running upstairs to a woman's apartment" and sing[ing a song]—may be read as an illustration of the male paying a visit to his mistress while the woman gives birth. Here, the male gaze occurs in the mind of the parturient woman. She hears the lyrics of a song murmured by a man; the lyrics she hears are shallow and meaningless, describing women from a male perspective as little and worthless, which evokes a man who views women as inferior figures as the

word “tid’ly” means drunk and “did’ly” worthless; the male figure generalizes women by depicting them “All the girls. . .”

The “Or” with a long dash at the end of the quatrain gives the impression that there is more than the narrative voice can describe about the stories of the “girls,” yet she has no wish to proceed. In effect, there is a mental synthesis occurring “at the back of [her] thoughts,” which liberates the process of “crystallization” in her mind. And she questions (“Why?”) the irresponsible nature of fathers or male partners. The section ends with an ironic repetition of the male figure’s “running upstairs.”

From an aesthetic perspective, the artistic persona articulates both visual and aural elements in the initial sentence of the section. The “fashionable portrait painter”¹³ stands for a male artist who makes women’s portraits, and the woman for whom he is “running upstairs” in this context might be a female muse or a model. The painter murmurs a song while “running upstairs,” which ironizes the aesthetic creativity and potency of female artists in the field of art; the lyrics of the song he sings seem to suggest that male artists view women in their minds as little and worthless—“tid’ly” “did’ly.” The female artist, however, goes through a mental synthesis by setting her thoughts free, and she “permit[s] crystallization.” She assumes that “the irresponsibility of the male” makes women inferior, finds this situation “brute,” and satirically critiques the misogynist attitudes of male artists, who exclude female artists from the canon of art.

On a broader level, as a reference to poetic creation, the “voice” the persona hears from “the open window” can be associated with new and innovative language forms. The textual narrator is ready to break the limited conventional forms in order to reproduce new ones. The quatrain verse embodied in this part represents the new language form, because it destroys traditional grammatical structure and punctuation. The final line of the verse is silenced by an “Or,” followed by an em-dash and marking a caesura or a break, which also leaves a gap to the reader to fill in. And now, the voice of the poetic narrator suddenly changes: she liberates her thoughts, and speaks with the subconscious mind—“crystallization.” Here, the narrator’s feminist perspective may be ironizing the dominance and indifference of the male writers—presumably the Futurists—in the literary circle. She implies that “irresponsible” male poets leave women inferior, which is depicted as “brute.” The phrase “running upstairs” can be considered a metaphor to ironize male writers’ trivial affairs, either in the literary cycle, or depending on whether the female upstairs is a courtesan, an artist’s model, or a poet.

The maternal, artistic and literary values the poem develops can also be taken to describe, by contrast, the social roles of the male as a father, an artist, and a poet. These interrogations of the inferior status of women in society recall the arguments developed in Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto:” “The women who adapt themselves to a theoretical valuation of their sex as a relative impersonality, are not yet feminine” (*LLB* 1996, p. 154). Such characterizations implying the inferior status of women evoke the misogyny and anti-female biases of the Futurists, based on hierarchies which exclude women and reject feminism. The parturient narrator criticizes the role of the men—“the irresponsibility of the male,”—both as fathers and as partners, and critiques mothers’ inferior position.

The artistic and textual aspects also merge, because “the irresponsibility of the male” can be associated with the viewpoint of a feminist female artist or a poet ironizing male artists’ and writers’ aesthetic and literary potency in the world of art and literature. The masculine language used ironically in the song also foregrounds the female narrator’s gaze against males’ viewing women as objects of entertainment.

Transcendence of Boundaries to Form a New Identity

This section begins with a sort of comparison the narrator makes to connect the two polar modes. While “[h]e is running upstairs,” the narrator is concurrently “climbing a distorted mountain of agony,” which functions as a counterargument. She now recenters herself using the first person singular—“I”—and elaborates her own circumstances, reproaching, in contrast, the roles played by males during the time of creative and pro-creative labour:

¹³ This characterization of the “fashionable portrait painter” recalls Man Ray, an American Dadaist and Surrealist artist and a fashion photographer who took Loy’s several photos, one of which is positioned at the beginning of Loy’s “Lions’ Jaws.” See orgs.utulsa.edu/mjp-exhibit/items/show/21.

- [41] I am climbing a distorted mountain of agony
[42] Incidentally with the exhaustion of control
[43] I reach the summit
[44] And gradually subside into anticipation of
[45] Repose
[46] Which never comes
[47] For another mountain is growing up
[48] Which goaded by the unavoidable
[49] I must traverse
[50] Traversing myself

In the process, she feels “agony” in which she “reach[es] the summit” and hopes for a relaxation period—“Repose”—between the contractions and expansions. Yet it never comes: once she gets to the summit, she anticipates a rest, but then another “mountain of agony” appears there, and the pain she feels circles its own rhythm, which she has to cross through only by controlling herself. As she is aware that this is a painful phase (“another mountain”) which she has to overcome, she tries to keep her control to “reach the summit:” “I must traverse / Traversing myself.”

The act of “climbing,” or moving to a higher position suggests that the “distorted mountain” might represent the “deformed” and “hideous” forms of Futurist art (which Futurist artists such as Boccioni, Carrà and Nevinson represent in their works)¹⁴ to “rehabilitate” the “dilapidated” so as to find the “sublime core:”

- [AF 3] IN pressing the material to derive its essence, matter becomes deformed.
[AF 6] LOVE the hideous in order to find the sublime core of it.

On the other hand, the “distorted mountain” may be a metaphor for the limited canonical and traditional forms which are to be broken by means of the artist’s transcendence: “I must traverse” / Traversing myself.” The transformational process is painful for the artist. She only manages to get there through “control.” The avant-garde Futurist artist has a mission to overthrow the conventional art forms by “exceeding the boundaries in every direction” in order to construct new ones. This procedure leads her to an “unavoidable” transformation as well as the construction of a new identity.

These evocations can also be associated semiotically with poetic creation. The Futurist poet experiments with the new language forms at an elevated level of “consciousness” by overcoming, “traversing” her limits. The “summit” she “reach[es]” shows the arrival of the new language form and it is the revolution of the new Futurist language:

- [AF 2] THE velocity of velocities arrives in starting.
[AF 49] THUS shall evolve the language of the Future.

“Traversing [herself]” signifies the “unavoidable” change that will subvert canonical and traditional language forms and pave the way for producing innovative ones. The occurrence of the verb “traverse” in the active and passive forms makes the narrative voice both a subject and an object: in this way, the expansion of the writer’s limits—“traversing”—will not only overthrow the conventional poetic forms, but also revolutionize the form and the style of the poet, so that the Futurist poet is reborn by giving birth to another self, which reshapes her identity.

The common feature uniting birth, artistic creation and poetic creation is that the narrators posit themselves as both a subject and an object—who traverses and is being traversed. This occurs inside the “centre of a circle” and between the “mountains,” “contraction” and “expansion.” As they exert themselves to transcend, these exhausting attempts result in a process of evolution which breaks and reshapes their identities.

¹⁴ See the examples of the Futurist art. <https://www.theartstory.org/movement/futurism/artworks/>

Mental and Corporeal Identity Psychosis

The narrative voice now goes beyond the pain, and arrives at a heightened level of sensitivity. In contrast to the abstract perceptions she felt in the earlier stages, now she senses more concrete images in the form of hallucinations, and seems to undergo a corporeal and mental disarticulation and hallucinations, as well as displacement:

- [51] Something in the delirium of night hours
- [52] Confuses while intensifying sensibility
- [53] Blurring spatial contours
- [54] So aiding elusion of the circumscribed
- [55] That the gurgling of a crucified wild beast
- [56] Comes from so far away
- [57] And the foam on the stretched muscles of a mouth
- [58] Is no part of myself
- [59] There is a climax in sensibility
- [60] When pain surpassing itself
- [61] Becomes exotic
- [62] And the ego succeeds in unifying the positive and negative
poles of sensation
- [63] Uniting the opposing and resisting forces
- [64] In lascivious revelation

Here, the expectant mother transcends the pain, which leads her to a temporary “delirium” as well as a mental and spatial displacement: she does not feel the pain any longer because her consciousness separates from her body. Because of her intense sensitivity to the “pain,” she begins to confuse the spatial details (“contours”) around her and loses the concept of time and space. She dreams of escaping from this “circumscribed” situation, which she defined in the opening of the poem as well as in the second section, as a “congested cosmos.” Hallucinating a demonic and grotesque figure in her perplexed mind—“a crucified wild beast”—she hears its voice from a distance. This may be a representation of one of the identities of the narrator, as she sees herself as tormented and fragmented by the pain; or a metaphor indicating the acute pain she perceives in the form of a “beast.” In this crucial moment of childbirth, it may also ironically suggest the baby approaching.

Following the hallucinations, she starts to feel the physical fluid reaction of her body: “the foam on the stretched muscles of [her vaginal] mouth,” which signifies the initiation of the baby’s coming. From this viewpoint, the “crucified wild beast” might be also taken as a metonymy referring to the approaching “foam.” The “foam” can be related to Julia Kristeva’s “Theory of Abjection” if it is considered a human reaction emerged at the time of mother’s separation from the baby—the labour. As Kristeva suggests in her *Powers of Horror*,

The abject refers to the human reaction (horror, vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other . . . On the level of our individual psychosexual development, the abject marks the moment when we separated ourselves from the mother, when we began to recognize a boundary between ‘me’ and other, between ‘me’ and (m)other. (as cited in Felluga, 2011, para. 2)

As the speaker feels neither the baby nor the “foam” as belonging to her—“no part of myself”—she depicts the “foam” appearing “on the stretched muscles of a mouth.” Her use of “a mouth” instead of “my” mouth shows how she feels detached from it: now that she has gone beyond the pain, she starts to feel it as an external and unfamiliar force. And she feels the two polar sides of her sensation, both positive and negative: “exotic” and “wild.” The merging of these “opposing and resisting forces” creates a soothing pleasure in her body and mind, a “lascivious revelation”: she goes out of time and space.

On the level of poetic creation, Kristeva's conceptualization of the abject is relevant to the artistic power of the female poet as she undergoes a process of transgression in her act of writing by recognizing her corporeal reality—"the foam on the stretched muscles of a mouth / Is no part of myself"—and separating herself from the traditional literary forms. The female poet strives both to "traverse" herself and to "traverse" the boundaries to reproduce innovative linguistic forms: the "spatial contours" represent the limits of the poet. However, she wants to break the boundaries to recreate a new form of language. In this context, the "crucified wild beast" might be taken as a reference to the canonical forms. Once the artist reconciles with all the forms—the "positive and negative poles"—she can reach the climax, which will expand her capacity and bring about a new form of consciousness:

[AF 49] THUS shall evolve the language of the Future.

From the perspective of the artist, the persona transcends her struggle to reproduce new art forms. The "spatial contours" can then be understood as a metaphor referring to one of the basic art forms:

[AF 5] THE straight line and the circle are the parents of design, form
the basis of art; there is no limit to their coherent variability.

The limited and conventional aesthetic forms become blurred in the vision of the artist. The Futurist artist wishes to abandon them by "elusion of the circumscribed" and expects them to "Die in the Past" [AF 1], and this is the moment she anticipates the arrival of the new aesthetic forms:

[AF 2] THE velocity of velocities arrives in starting.

This is the only way to perceive the whole and reach the sublime: once the Futurist artist stops looking at the past and accepts the new forms by reconciling with them, she will then reach the "climax," the "summit" where the new art forms are produced. The unification of various art forms, of their "opposing and resisting forces" will give pleasure—"lascivious revelation"—to the avant-garde artist.

In this way, each narrator is transformed into an expanded version of themselves through the works they produce: a mother creates a child, an artist an artwork and a poet a poem. Each persona had a single identity at the beginning, but now they become fragmented, as they have duplicated and mirrored themselves through the works they have created.

The longest section of the poem, divided into three parts, describes the narrator's arriving at the relaxation stage, where she questions her new extended identity as well as her status in the natural process: birth, life and death. She comes close to death, as it is the end of consciousness, but soon manages to return to life and survives:

- [65] Relaxation
- [66] Negation of myself as a unit
- [67] Vacuum interlude
- [68] I should have been emptied of life
- [69] Giving life
- [70] For consciousness in crises races
- [71] Through the subliminal deposits of evolutionary processes

In the first part of this section, the pain is over and the baby is born; the speaker suddenly feels a sense of "relaxation" as a natural part of the postpartum process with the arrival of the baby. However, she also feels a physical loss in her uterus as a post-natal consequence—a "vacuum interlude"—as well as a mental emptiness inside of her, because she is detached from the baby. The mother, in other words, "negat[es] [herself] as a unit" and denies her current identity, the "false quantity," described earlier. She was feeling herself in the state of a mother with a baby, but now she feels alone again and turns back to her previous state; this is the moment the maternal figure becomes conscious of her

natural metamorphosis of the “evolutionary processes.” She thinks “[she has] been emptied of life” by “giving life” to another body.

These characterizations suggest that the artistic persona eventually reaches a stage of refreshing tranquillity, as the result of her efforts in producing the artwork. This “interlude” brings about a reformation at the mental level. The artist gets confused, and negates her current identity in which she exists “as a unit,” because she is detached from the reproduction she has created. However, she is now conscious of this natural change—this “evolutionary process”—and now faces another dilemma as she remains between death—“hav[ing] been emptied of life”—and life—“giving life.” Here, “giving life” metaphorically illustrates the new art form or “consciousness.” If death is associated with the past and life with the “future,” the present, which is in between the past and the future, seems to be the moment of a crisis:

[AF 28] TODAY is the crisis in consciousness.

The Futurist sees the new art form as a prerequisite to attaining an expansion in aesthetic consciousness as well as the evolutionary process.

On a linguistic level, this means that the poet arrives at the stage of consciousness which brings about the state of “relaxation” when she composes her product in its new form as a creative text. The Futurist poet negates her present status in which she exists “as a unit” and feels an emptiness in her self-identity: “I should have been emptied of life.” This is the moment she separates herself from the text she has created: the singular identity—“as a unit”—of the poet is removed (“unit” also connotes detachment). The text is thus foregrounded when the literary work is disjoined from the writer,—this anticipates the argument later suggested by Roland Barthes in “The Death of the Author” (1967): by the performative act of writing, the authoritative role of the author is removed, and the text and its interpretation are liberated from the domination of the writer. As a result, both the writer and the text attain their own evolutionary process.

The Stage of Production and Identity Formation

When the baby arrives, the maternal narrator is conscious of her metamorphic stage, yet she is confused about her current identity. As she does not know how to feel, she compares her experience with the natural birth process of an insect, and questions herself through a moth’s cyclical rhythm of life. This is the second time the narrative voice uses a question mark:

- [72] Have I not
- [73] Somewhere
- [74] Scrutinized
- [75] A dead white feathered moth
- [76] Laying eggs?
- [77] A moment
- [78] Being realization
- [79] Can
- [80] Vitalized by cosmic initiation
- [81] Furnish an adequate apology
- [82] For the objective
- [83] Agglomeration of activities
- [84] Of a life.

Lexically, the word “moth” is also a hidden echo within the word “mother.” Moths are nocturnal winged insects which usually have distinctive colourful wings, but the speaker describes it as “white,” suggesting purity as well as a composition of all the other colours in nature. The narrator’s choice of “moth” creates a parallel with human beings in terms of the natural creation process or “cosmic initiation”: the life cycle of moths has four stages—the egg, the larva, the chrysalis or pupa,

and finally the moth (the imago).¹⁵ The “dead white feathered moth,” which has a short lifespan, lays many eggs to increase the chance of more moths surviving in nature, and this also increases the life of the mother moth, which transforms itself into an expanded version of itself.¹⁶

However, the “dead white feathered moth” represents “death,” which can be associated with the speaker’s subliminal feelings and fears, while the “eggs” suggest the offspring she has given birth to. She becomes conscious about the moment of death while delivering her baby; now the mother is aware of her new identity, which she still negates. She “furnish[es] an adequate apology,” defending herself against all the struggles she has experienced between contractions and expansions in this circular process of birth. And she is “vitalized by cosmic initiation,” because as a mother, she reconstitutes herself as well as the identity she produces for her baby.

From a creative perspective, this suggests that the Futurist artist reaches an aesthetic consciousness following the creation of her reproduction in the new form. The identity reformation comes with a heightened awareness for the artist; however, since she is still struggling with breaking the boundaries, she feels she is in the dilemma of the cyclical evolutionary process—birth, life and death—so she identifies herself as a “dead white feathered moth,” who undergoes a course of metamorphosis. This image represents the artist who detaches herself from the work she has produced, and the “eggs” signify the vitality which the artist breathes into her artwork. If the “moth” represents the way the artist perceives herself, then it is the moment the artist is transformed into a new expanded identity—“vitalized by cosmic initiation.” The process of all this “agglomeration of activities,” the cycle of birth, life and death, constitutes a new “life,” as the new Futurist artist—“the moth”—manages to survive in her new identity.

On a textual level, the poet arrives at a Futurist literary consciousness after inventing the creative text in the new form; however, she still experiences a dilemma in the procreative cycle of her text—birth, life and death—because she needs to:

[AF 32] UNSCREW [her] capability of absorption and grasp the elements of Life—*Whole*.

That is, she still strives to break the limits of her literary capacity (“expansion”) because the identity transformation proceeds both inside and outside of her. In this sense, the “dead moth” may be considered as a representation of the poet who goes out of existence after creating her text in the new form, and the “eggs” as the text produced by the poet. The poet is therefore “apologizing,” writing a defense of the painful stages—“Agglomeration of activities”—she has lived through during the process of “Giving life” to her work. This is the moment when the poet is furnished with her new identity—“vitalized by cosmic initiation.”

In the stage of reproduction, the speakers at all these levels—maternity, artistry, authorship—in which they question the natural process of birth, life and death, undergo a rebirth in their identities. The “moth,” like a “butterfly,” evokes the idea of independence as creating a new life. Its vitalizing of a new body—“laying eggs”—signifies how even a small change can create a huge transformation in the universe, a “rebirth.” The stanza finishes with a full stop, signifying the end of the first half of the poem, which reaches “life.”

The speaker now depicts the process that occurs upon reaching “LIFE” in the second half:

- [85] LIFE
- [86] A leap with nature
- [87] Into the essence
- [88] Of unpredicted Maternity
- [89] Against my thigh
- [90] Touch of infinitesimal motion

¹⁵ See “The Life Cycle of Butterflies and Moths (Lepidoptera). www.ukleps.org/morphology.html.

¹⁶ As Darwin suggests in *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, “. . . natural selection acts only by taking advantage of slight successive variations; she can never take a great and sudden leap, but must advance by short and sure, though slow steps” (Darwin, 1859, p. 162).

- [91] Scarcely perceptible
- [92] Undulation
- [93] Warmth moisture
- [94] Stir of incipient life
- [95] Precipitating into me
- [96] The contents of the universe

Having gained access to “LIFE,” the speaker goes backwards in time to the moment of impregnation, and depicts how and when it started. “A leap of nature / Into the essence” stands for the change which initiates the natural chain of life—sexual intercourse. The “unpredicted maternity” suggests undesired and unplanned pregnancy, the speaker’s regret for the intercourse she had as well as the state of motherhood she is currently experiencing. From this perspective, the female figure for whom the “fashionable portrait painter [is] running upstairs” may also represent the speaker, since she sees herself as a woman, the one who pays the social, physical and emotional price in the society, while she finds the male irresponsible.

The “touch” (of the male organ, of intercourse) is insignificant—“infinitesimal” and “scarcely perceptible”—in the whole cycle of birth, life and death. Through the “Undulation” or wave-like motions occurring “against [her] thigh,” she receives the fertilizing cells of the male as “the contents of the universe,” described as a natural event, a “precipitati[on]” flowing into her with “Warmth” and “moisture.” Both the male figure and the baby are out of focus in this larger process, which is only challenging for the woman.

In terms of artistic development, the “leap” characterizes a change of focus, and this is the moment an artist breaks the conventions of the past forms, creates new forms and makes a change in the universe, an “undulation.” On the level of the text, the “leap with nature” metaphorically describes the moment a creative Futurist poet begins to set her thoughts free, and the beginning of the poet’s consciousness of her capability is in this sense, “unpredicted maternity.”

The change of the poet’s identity as well as the change in her writing style or “consciousness” is suggested by the “stir of incipient life / precipitating into [her].” Once the poet breaks the boundaries and expands her independent capacity, she will embrace “the contents of the universe.” This brings about the rebirth of the Futurist poet.

Towards Becoming One with Cosmic Consciousness

The maternal, artistic and poetic personas go back in time and remember the “incipient” state of their identity transformation. This is the moment their level of consciousness is elevated and reaches the summit; they are each aware of the significance of the change they have contributed to the immense universe, as well as their new, self-creating identities:

- [97] Mother I am
- [98] Identical
- [99] With infinite Maternity
- [100] Indivisible
- [101] Acutely
- [102] I am absorbed
- [103] Into
- [104] The was—is—ever—shall—be
- [105] Of cosmic reproductivity

The speaker now raises herself to her new title, “Mother”. This is the moment she feels herself as the creator of her baby. What asserts the metamorphosis in the narrator’s identity is that while she depicted herself as the “centre of a circle of pain” at the beginning, she is now the centre of the universe, and senses herself as an “indivisible” part of it. Being in harmony with the “cosmic reproductivity,” she sees maternal experience as a universal and “infinite” act.

As a Futurist artist is the creator of her artwork like a “mother,” she thinks of herself as “Identical With infinite Maternity” and is “absorbed” into the universe. Now, the artist is aware of her capability:

[AF 32] UNSCREW your capability of absorption and grasp the elements of Life—*Whole*.”

Feeling herself an “indivisible” part of the universe, as representing “cosmic reproductivity,” the artist creates her innovative artwork as if she was creating the universe. It is a long process, as she is a part of the past, the present and the future, The typography used in this line also gives the impression of a visual artwork, emphasizing the significance of each stage separately.

At the same time, the poet is now aware that she is the procreator or “mother” of her poem created in the new form; however, she does not feel like an author figure, as she is absorbed into the universe as an indivisible part of “cosmic reproductivity.” What she experiences is a universal procreation rather than an individual act. The unusual syntax reflects the new language form the poet has used: “The was—is—ever—shall—be / Of cosmic reproductivity.”

This is the moment when each of the personas reaches a heightened level of consciousness, as they become the self-creators of both the universe and themselves: they create not only new bodies in the universe as a part of themselves, but also their new identities. The mother metonymically represents the artistic and poetic “procreator,” the one who gives birth to a new body not only as a mother, but also as an artist and a poet.

The speaker now remembers the time of conception and birth, and represents it with another natural image, like the “crucified wild beast” and the “dead white feathered moth.” The corporeal and psychic transformation occurring in her identity is now compared to the situation of a parturient mammal—a cat, connoting other forms of life in the universe as well as the fragmentation taking place in the identities of the narrators lacking conscious perception:

[106] Rises from the subconscious
[107] Impression of a cat
[108] With blind kittens
[109] Among her legs
[110] Same undulating life-stir
[111] I am that cat

The speaker imagines herself as a mother cat who has given birth to her kittens, with the “same undulating life-stir,” suggesting the analogy as well as the conflicts and wave-like motions occurring in her subconscious metamorphic space. Her reproductive and self-creating identity is emphasized as she vitalizes new bodies. Like the moth and the cat, she is capable of creating the same cycle of birth, life and death and participating in the “same undulating life-stir.”

The cat with its blind kittens also suggests an artist who goes deeply into her inner state. The “kittens” metaphorically evoke the artwork the artist produces in the new aesthetic form; the adjective “blind” suggests their state of being newly born to the universe. The Futurist artist sees herself as a universal figure, so she emulates her “self-creator” identity with a non-human living thing—“a cat.” The potential Futurist artist and the universe are united with a God-like power:

[AF 16] . . . the great man proportionately must be tremendous—a God.

The Futurist artist plays a vital role in the prospective process of individual development of mankind, and the “undulating life-stir” is her reproductive power in the natural development of life, vitalizing new art forms and reshaping her new identity and artistic consciousness.

And from a textual perspective, the poet, after putting forward her identity as a “self-creator,” she now imagines herself alongwith the work she has created in the form of a non-human but living being. The “kittens” are depicted as “blind,” evoking the speaker of the “Aphorisms”:

[AF 8] YOU prefer to observe the past on which your eyes are already opened.

And being “blind” represents the “ignorance” of those who ignore the “Future”:

[AF 9] BUT the Future is only dark from outside.

On the other hand, the “blind kittens” also suggest the creative text, written in the new language form the poet is currently experimenting within the new literary movement of Futurism. “Undulating life-stir” thus also echoes the dynamism and cyclical motion of the Futurist movement, as well as the techniques the potential Futurist poet borrows from it.

Each of the poem’s personas is thus directed towards their inward space and experiences the identity transformation in a different way. They metaphorically associate their products—the conscious individual, the Futurist artwork and the creative poem—with a cat’s kittens. They are all aware of their self-creating power in this “undulating life-stir.”

The “sub-conscious” state of the narrative voice and its animal images continue in the next section, where they are connected to the natural cycle of life which generates the conscious identity transformation in the speakers’ physical and mental spaces:

[112] Rises from the sub-conscious
 [113] Impression of small animal carcass
 [114] Covered with blue bottles
 [115] —Epicurean—
 [116] And through the insects
 [117] Waves that same undulation of living
 [118] Death
 [119] Life
 [120] I am knowing
 [121] All about
 [122] Unfolding

Here the speaker imagines “death” through different animal figures, recalling the earlier image of the “dead white feathered moth.” The mother sets her sub-conscious feelings free, associating herself with a “small carcass,” and the “blue bottles” with the baby; this is defined as “Epicurean,” literally referring to the devotion to pleasure and hedonism which takes its name from the Greek philosopher Epicurus.¹⁷ However, on the semiotic level, the “small animal carcass / Covered with blue bottles” can be related to the well-known Aristotelian theory of “spontaneous generation,” also known as “abiogenesis,”¹⁸ according to which life can arise from non-living matter. Karen R. Zwier, in “Methodology in Aristotle’s Theory of Spontaneous Generation,” explains that “Aristotle . . . believed in the occurrence of spontaneous generation,” (2018, p. 356) and this tradition continued into the early nineteenth century. In these contexts of classical and Biblical authority, Loy’s “blue bottles” spontaneously arise from the dead body—the “small animal carcass”—and maintain their natural motion through the “undulation of living / Death / Life.”

Another semiotic and intertextual connection is that the sign of the “blue bottles” evokes a biblical story from the Old Testament (Judges 14) about Samson,¹⁹ who, according to the legend, tore a lion apart on his wedding day and later found that a swarm of bees with some honey had developed

¹⁷ See the meaning of “Epicurean.” www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/epicurean.

¹⁸ Here, “abiogenesis” also recalls Loy’s speaker’s depiction of the Futurists’ male fantasy: “asexual reproduction” as “Man’s immediate agamogenesis” in Loy’s “Lions’ Jaws.” Here, Loy’s narrator ironizes the idea that the reproduction through “agamogenesis” will protect men from “carnivorous courtesan[s]” (*LLB* 1996, p. 47).

¹⁹“What is the Significance of Honey Inside the Lion’s Carcass?” See hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/17290/what-is-the-significance-of-the-honey-inside-the-lions-carcass.

in its carcass. Samson took the honey out and ate it with his family, without telling them that he had killed the lion to take it from its dead body. The bees are believed to have spontaneously self-generated from the dead body of the lion and produced honey. Thus, the “blue bottles” reproduced from the “small animal carcass” can semiotically be associated with the bees that emerged from the lion’s dead body in the Samson story.

As regards the symbolic motifs of the bees and the honey in the story, a number of allegorical references are argued by scholars, one of which is suggested by Dr. Martin Emmrich. Emmrich comments, “We note first of all that we are confronted with a most extraordinary situation: bees are not known to settle in a carcass! That in this case they did, is almost as miraculous a feat as the killing of the lion itself” (2001, p. 69). The reason why it is miraculous is that the cadaver of a lion would probably dehydrate itself very soon, because bees cannot live in moist places. Therefore it can be said that the dead lion carcass provides a suitable environment to revivify the bees so they produce honey; Loy’s “small carcass” is a favourable environment for the survival of the “blue bottles.”²⁰ The “blue bottles”—the baby—are depicted as a living organism that seems to have arisen from the dead body of the “small carcass”—the mother. In this way, a new life comes after death. This is the moment the mother breaks her boundaries and attains her limitless individuality with her expanded form of identity. From the feminist perspective, it is the women who vitalize a new body and turn death into a new life. Now that the speaker is aware of this process and discloses herself; it is the female consciousness that has developed through the act of labour.

From the aesthetic perspective, the artist continues to unveil her sub-conscious state through the images appearing in her mind. The “animal carcass” suggests traditional artistic forms which lack artistic consciousness, and the “blue bottles” can be regarded as the new forms emerging spontaneously from the dead conventional artistic forms. The “undulation of living [as] Death [and] Life” suggests the tension between the past and the future; the past is metaphorically associated with death and the future with life:

[AF 1] DIE in the Past
Live in the Future.

As “Death” and “Life” are metonymies of “past” and “future,” the persona attains the aesthetic consciousness at the end of the section—“I am knowing / All about” and reveals this state of “Unfolding” as an expression of her individual and conscious development.

As regards the act of poetic creation, the Futurist poet continually reveals her subliminal state through other imaginary figures. The “small animal carcass” represents canonical, traditional language forms—“Death”—and the “blue bottles” can be associated with the new and revolutionary textual techniques—“Life”; new language forms arise from the old ones. These old forms must be negated and must “DIE in the Past so that the language of the Future can continue. Furthermore, the “small animal carcass” suggests the death of the poet, and the “blue bottles” the text emerging in its new and modern form, once it is detached from the authoritative hands of the writer and attains its liberation. The “Undulation of living” therefore implies the reproductive characteristic of the Futurist poet, expanding herself by breaking and exceeding boundaries. This “unfolding [of the mind]” paves the way for multiple interpretations of the text, which evolves into the new form—“consciousness”—and absorbs the whole universe:

[AF 30] CONSCIOUSNESS has no climax.

[AF 31] LET the Universe flow into your consciousness, there is no limit

²⁰ This argument evokes Charles Darwin’s “Theory of Natural Selection”: “Darwin simply brought something new to the old philosophy--a plausible mechanism called ‘natural selection.’ Natural selection acts to preserve and accumulate minor advantageous genetic mutations. Suppose a member of a species developed a functional advantage (it grew wings and learned to fly). Its offspring would inherit that advantage and pass it on to their offspring. The inferior (disadvantaged) members of the same species would gradually die out, leaving only the superior (advantaged) members of the species. Natural selection is the preservation of a functional advantage that enables a species to compete better in the wild. Natural selection is the naturalistic equivalent to domestic breeding.” www.darwins-theory-of-evolution.com.

to its capacity, nothing that it shall not re-create.

The parturient, artistic and poetic personas are each conscious of their contributions to the natural process of the universe by both breaking their own limits and reforming new forms, as a consequence of surviving the two challenging stages of “contraction” and “expansion”—“within” and “without.” They are now aware of their self-creating power: the female individual gives life to a new body as well as a new identity to herself; the Futurist artist revitalizes an old traditional form and “rehabilitate[s]” it; and the Futurist poet breaks her restraints to open the way for independent and multiple interpretations by the ideal reader.

Sublimity at the Post-Reproduction Level

After going through all the stages, the speaker wakes up to a different time and space the next morning:

- [123] The next morning
- [124] Each woman-of-the-people
- [125] Tiptœing the red pile of the carpet
- [126] Doing hushed service
- [127] Each woman-of-the-people
- [128] Wearing a halo
- [129] A ludicrous little halo
- [130] Of which she is sublimely unaware

In her article “Moths and Mothers: Mina Loy’s Parturition,” Tara Prescott comments that “the speaker imagines her servants performing ‘hushed service,’ aligning them with servants of God. Given the context of the labouring woman surrounded by nun-like ‘wom[e]n-of-the-people,’ one could infer that the speaker is imagining her servants as nuns in a Catholic hospital” (2010, p. 207). Prescott also notes that “[Loy’s] own identification as a mother was problematic; she left her children for months at a time in the care of a nanny in another country, and they were mostly raised by others. The issues of motherhood clearly weighed on her mind, as she wrote ‘Parturition’ over a decade after her last pregnancy” (2010, p. 208). However, in order not to base this argument on the biographical accounts of the writer, it is suggested that the idiomatic expression “woman-of-the-people”²¹ represents an ordinary woman who leads a mundane life or a life of routine.

As regards the women “doing hushed service,” Loy’s biographer Carolyn Burke, in her *Becoming Modern* (1996, p. 175) comments that “the speaker is imagining her servants as nuns in a Catholic hospital. In 1914, Loy volunteered as a nurse in a surgical hospital in Florence, and her experiences there inform several poems.” I would here argue that these women move silently—“tiptoeing”—because they are “doing hushed service,”²² as if they are worshipping while the hymns are being read in a church. The context of the “wom[e]n-of-the-people tiptoeing the red pile of the carpet [and] doing hushed service” suggests that these women, as the servants of the speaker, metaphorically wear “ludicrous halo[es].”

“The “red pile of the carpet” is a symbol of domesticity; however, it also signifies the fabric laid on the floor of a church. What these women are doing is ironized by the narrator, as they are portrayed wearing “a ludicrous little halo.” However, they are characterized as women who lack the capacity of consciousness and perception: they are “sublimely unaware” of the challenging experiences of the parturient women as well as their own status in the society.

The “ludicrous little halo” reflects the satirical view of the speaker towards such women, who are depicted as “sublimely unaware” of their behaviours. This figure also echoes the traditional image

²¹ See the meaning of “woman of the people.” (idioms.thefreedictionary.com/woman+of+the+people.)

²² See “Tenebrae Service and Good Friday.” (www.michelleule.com/2016/03/25/tenebrae-service-and-good-friday/.)

of purity and holy resistance;²³ however, here, the “ludicrous little halo” is used to ironize women’s roles in society. The signification of the “halo” image semiotically recalls Loy’s iconic painting, *Househunting* (c.1950), where the shape of the female figure’s head resembles a halo.²⁴

In contrast to the powerful and reproductive women who are capable of reproducing a new body for the universe by breaking their boundaries and struggling to survive, these women have stereotypical identities: they lead an ordinary life and only serve God; like nuns,²⁵ they are “blind” and unfamiliar with the experiences of other women. Here, the speaker satirizes the way these women gain value—a “halo”—in society, in contrast to women of her own type, who go through challenging social, physical and emotional experiences to survive in society. From the perspective of art, the ordinary type of women characterized as “tiptoeing” and “doing hushed service” suggests beautiful, faithful and inactive women depicted in previous canonical art forms, such as those produced in the Renaissance or the Victorian period.

At the same time, the Futurist poet critiques women writers who cannot break their boundaries in the literary world and so remain under the oppression of the male writers: they are “sublimely unaware” of what they are doing, while the Futurist male writers fantasize a world detaching them from literary circles.

The poem ends with a satirical biblical reference, subverting the conventional concept of the Christian god:

[131] I once heard in a church
[132] —Man and woman God made them—
[133] Thank God.

Here, the grammar and the syntax may be read ambiguously: “man” represents a general group of human beings, while God is defined as “woman God.” The last line can be interpreted as the speaker’s commanding human beings to “Thank [woman] God” for her endowing them with life.

Alternatively, the image of God can be interpreted as both “man” and “woman.” In the more standard idiomatic reading, Loy is paraphrasing the *Book of Genesis* in the King James version of the Bible (1:27): “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them” (2), where God is depicted in the image of both a man and a woman; thus, in the last line, the speaker ironically thanks God and declares that he, and/or she made those women—the “wom[e]n of the people.”

Conclusion

Mina Loy’s idiosyncratic poem “Parturition” not only describes the act of parturition as a female metamorphic experience of giving birth and attaining a heightened level of consciousness and identity reformation, but also reveals the act of an individual’s physical and mental separation from his or her own identity to form a new one. Loy’s persona redefines stereotypical female types—mother, wife, lover, virgin—and their social roles, and subverts traditional perceptions of the act of labour to create an exceptional context of identity transformation through which it takes shape in three different layers: the rebirth of an artist, of a poet and of a mother.

The fluctuation between “contraction” and “expansion,” in which the persona struggles with extreme spasms of pain proceeding “within” and “without”—the metaphorical depictions of internal and external worlds in her body—signifies breaking and re-forming limits in the circumference of self-identity. Thus, this expansion as an extension of one’s identity becomes paradoxical as it also contracts throughout the process. This leads to a revolution in the body and mind of the speakers, each

²³ The “halo” image is used in representations of Christ in Medieval Renaissance art, particularly in religious iconography.

²⁴ For a detailed analysis, see Karabulut, T. (2020). Futurism and Feminist Performativity: Mina Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto,” *Househunting* and *Christ on a Clothesline*. *Women Studies: an interdisciplinary Journal*. 49(1), 1-30.

²⁵ See also Loy’s related poems: “Babies in Hospital” (*LLB*, 1996, pp. 24-26) and “Aid of the Madonna,” (*LLB*, 1996, p. 115).

of which goes through the same two stages: converting one form into another as an extension of herself by breaking the limits and, at the same time, giving birth to a new identity by re-forming boundaries with an elevated level of consciousness in their corporeal and psychic spaces.

Stylistically, and through its multiple voices, the poem's diction is precise and self-conscious in revealing the subliminal layers of the narrative voice. The unique typographical characteristics of the poem—unusual and non-standard hyphenation, capitalization and spacing patterns—also feature a scientific style of diction, where medical, geometrical and astronomical terms are used to depict the stages of labour as well as the identity conflicts of the speaker. The poem features a “fragmented narrative” structure, which is divided into three fragmented narrative personas in distinctive contexts—an avant-garde artist, a creative writer and a parturient woman—each of which is self-aware of her own transformational process. As the text evolves, each persona evolves herself and takes a turn in the process. Finally, all the identities are merged at one point: the rebirth of a female individual who resists the domestication of women in the society, and is aware of her reproductive power; an artist who subverts the canonical traditions and aesthetic forms and re-forms the new ones; and a creative poet who overthrows the conventional language forms, and reconstructs a new form—Futurist language.

The act of reading that enables to decipher the intertextual and semiotic engagements between the signs, assert the dynamic and evolutionary nature of the narrators. In this sense, Loy's unique artwork, *Ansikten*, is intertextually analogous with “Parturition” as it is the visual narration of the poem's fragmented personas. Their common feature is that the visual and textual narrator break their boundaries, and expand themselves with a heightened level of self-realization. The journey of Loy's narrator's evolutionary fragmentation into various narrative voices, and ultimate merging to become one with mental and corporeal consciousness shows how the narrators could become both objects and subjects, which, through their reciprocity, enable them to form a composite identity.

The purpose of this article, through an intertextual reading, is to discover the shifts and engagements among the hidden voices behind the textual and visual personas as well as the signs and images in Mina Loy's “Parturition” and, *Ansikten*, with intertextual references to Loy's “Aphorisms on Futurism.” The article also questions the entanglements between Futurism and Feminism in dialogue with the contemporary modernist and feminist trajectories and outside the biographical and historical accounts of the author's life and her works. Thus, this intertextual and semiotic analysis reveals the evolutionary nature as well as the mental and bodily fragmentation of Loy's narrators, and invites readers to view the textual and aesthetic works from a creative perspective, and actively participate in the construction process, which opens up countless alternatives of interpretation.

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