

## ABSTRACT

HOFFMAN, NICOLE MARIE. Integration of Art and Self in the Poetry of Mina Loy. (Under the direction of Thomas Lisk.)

While more research on Mina Loy's poetry has emerged in the past ten years than at any time prior, there have yet been no studies that entirely focus on what I call her "art poems": poems that either explore specific artworks and artists, or that explore the process of making art. Because writing about art is a recurrent theme throughout Loy's work, discussing the tone of these poems — in relation to each other and to Loy herself — will fill an important gap in larger examinations of her poetry.

In this thesis I provide a close reading of nine poems, with particular attention to the speaker's attitude in each. In the first three poems, *Brancusi's Golden Bird*, *"The Starry Sky"* OF WYNDHAM LEWIS, and *Joyce's Ulysses*, the tone conveys intellectual and emotional admiration of the details of individual artworks, treating the pieces as entities outside the self. The tone in Loy's poems about specific artists (*Gertrude Stein*, *Poe*, and *Jules Pascin*) suggests more intimate admiration, praising the artists both literally and through imitation of form. The tone in the final three poems, *Nancy Cunard*, *Apology of Genius*, and *The Widow's Jazz*, are the most rife with conflict of the nine and the most emotionally intimate. These poems pit intellectual reactions against emotional, abstractions versus concrete imagery, and create complex hierarchies.

The differences between the tones of these groups of poems suggest Loy's journey from the external experience of viewing or reading art to the internal experience of being an artist, as well as increasing personal difficulty with that movement.

**INTEGRATION OF ART AND SELF IN THE POETRY OF MINA LOY**

by

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## **BIOGRAPHY**

Colie Hoffman spent her childhood in a small town in southwestern Michigan, playing in fields and swimming in the lake. At age thirteen, she moved with her family to Raleigh, North Carolina, and has (with a handful of escape attempts) lived in the surrounding area ever since. She went to Broughton High School, completed her undergraduate work at UNC-Chapel Hill in 1999, and is currently a writer, editor, and aspiring vagabond. She lives with her partner in Durham.

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## Introduction

Critically, Mina Loy (1882-1966) is a relatively new phenomenon, only gaining academic attention in the past ten years or so — particularly since the 1996 publication of Carolyn Burke's *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy*. Though Loy's poetry received praise from many of her contemporaries, including Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, and William Carlos Williams, her literary work has been largely ignored over the past half-century, despite her personal and professional path-crossing with other, more well-known artists, and her reputation as an avant-garde, modernist woman expatriate with new things to say and new ways to say them. Though one can "pick up almost any literary memoir from the period, and Loy is bound to pop up on this page or that," including those of Wallace Stevens and Ernest Hemingway, few critics have spent time on further exploration of her independent career (Weiner 2).

In addition to her collection of poetry (though she refused to call herself a poet), Loy's artistic oeuvre includes paintings, a novel, and quite an array of original lampshades and light fixtures. In addition to studying her poems, I explored her novel, *Insel*, which was so relentlessly abstract as to become unreadable after chapter three. Her paintings, in contrast, were rather well-received, for she exhibited them at the Salon d'Automne in Paris in 1906 along with Brancusi and several other successful artists, and ultimately considered herself a painter. While Loy's poetry has attracted more attention in recent years, it remains distant from the canon, though it is gaining popularity in academic settings.

Loy was born in London, but spent significant amounts of her artistic career in Florence, New York, and Paris, where she not only studied painting and wrote, but also

accumulated a circle of creative acquaintances with whom she interacted socially, romantically, and professionally. Her first husband, Stephen Haweis, never fully gave her writing his approval, but her second husband, the poet and boxer Arthur Cravan, inspired and encouraged her artistic pursuits — and circulated in the same social group — until his unexplained disappearance in Mexico in 1918.

Loy's interaction with other artists<sup>1</sup> of her time greatly inspired her writing, both in style and content, but their individual influence rarely lasts for more than a poem. When she writes about other artists, she pays near-homage to them both with her own tone and by adopting their writing styles. In "Jules Pascin," Loy describes Pascin via absence ("a shadowy persuasion"), much as Pascin's minimalist line-drawings define their subjects. However, hidden in her praise for these artists is a trump card: she is perfectly capable of stealing their styles without losing her own voice. Not only can she write in her own distinctive style, but she can try on other artists' shoes at her whim.

Loy's poems about specific artworks, however, convey a more unequivocally appreciative tone of support and praise: she dubs Brancusi's *Golden Bird* sculpture "The absolute act/ of art" and "this breast of revelation." Granted, Loy's praise may also emerge as denunciation of those who disagree with her — such as her characterization of mainstream Irish censorship of Joyce's *Ulysses* as "The Normal Monster" — but only with the purpose of backing the art.

However, once her poems move away from distanced observation and toward the integration of art into her life, her tone reflects this messy union with greater emotional

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<sup>1</sup> When I say "art" or "artists," I am including writing and writers.

attachment and vacillation between polarities. These vacillations represent her internal conflicts: intellectual perception versus emotional engagement, abstract thought versus concrete experience, and the struggle to create a sense of artistic order. The nine poems I will discuss all address these tensions and explore the possibilities of reconciling them, though the final three tackle them most intimately.

## Chapter I

### “More of the Head Than the Heart<sup>2</sup>”: Loy’s External Responses to Art

#### *Brancusi’s Golden Bird*

Mina Loy’s “Brancusi’s Golden Bird” uses a sculpture created by her friend Constantin Brancusi in 1919 to explore the emotional and intellectual experience of art. The thirty-five line poem begins with a freestanding statement that becomes a precursor to a series of imaginative vignettes describing various metaphorical interpretations of the artwork, as well as the actual experience of the mind as it forms an understanding of the work.

Thematically and tonally, the speaker struggles between understanding the sculpture abstractly and understanding it concretely — for example, first posing its creation by “God” controlling “the Alpha and Omega” and then seeing it as a “lump of metal,” or moving from an intangible “ultimate rhythm “ to the physical structure’s “crest and claw.” At various points she defines the work with sensual metaphors such as “curve” and “shrills with brass,” but eventually concludes that despite the sculpture’s external connection to her as an outside observer, its beauty ultimately lies in the wholly theoretical “immaculate conception” behind it, an event “inaudible” because it “occurs/ in gorgeous reticence.”

The poem’s form echoes the viewer’s transitions as we negotiate between these polarities. Each analogical sequence is contained within its own verse paragraph, and on a smaller scale, the speaker shortens lines as one analysis moves into another and as she completes thoughts. For example, in the second verse paragraph, after she poses that “the

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<sup>2</sup> Ezra Pound’s description of Loy’s and Marianne Moore’s poetry in “ ‘Others,’ ” *Little Review*, IV (March, 1918), 58.



ultimate rhythm/ has lopped the extremities/ of crest and claw,” “from” follows on its own line. This single-word line has us pause with her, ourselves trying to determine the core idea to which the sculpture (as opposed to an actual, live bird, perhaps) conforms. The subsequent line — “the nucleus of flight” — in which this origin is determined is then longer, for the speaker makes a transition into a new idea.

In addition to the tension between abstraction and concreteness, another significant conflict in determining the poem’s tone — that between simplicity and complexity — is reflected in its diction, sound, structure, and imagery. Inconsistency in tone helps portray the gulf between (and often, the irreconcilability of) the idea originating a work of art and the actual, physical result of that idea, exemplified by the fact that the viewer must experience art the opposite way of the artist — starting with tangible reality and attempting to discern the creative idea.

Loy’s word choice vacillates between easily accessible vocabulary selected to convey a single, straightforward concept, and more esoteric words chosen to portray more complex ideas or to add texture, a disparity that makes the poem feel disjointed. More specifically, juxtaposition of simple words such as “gong” with more specialized words such as “hyperaesthesia” creates a link between the two that evidences their difference but equalizes them for the purposes of the poem, perhaps implying the necessity and equal value of both in the creation of art. In an adjective-noun combination, this comparison is particularly important, because the necessity of each for the other (for the sentence to have any potency grammatically) is most clear. For instance, in line 22 (“an incandescent curve”), the word “incandescent,” despite its refined descriptiveness, would modify nothing — and thus, as an

adjective, mean nothing — without the easily visualized noun “curve” to balance its abstractness with the concrete. This return to simplicity keeps us from giving up on the poem when it becomes intellectually difficult. Similarly, while “curve” alone would make sense grammatically, such a simple and accessible image would be bland without the intellectual challenge of picturing it as “incandescent.”

Similar dynamics are created by the phrase “chromatic flames” and comparisons of simple, tangible images such as “toy” and “gong” with complex abstractions such as “the aesthetic archetype” and “polished hyperaesthesia.” “Chromatic flames” repeats the combination of abstract adjective and simple, concrete noun, while the latter juxtapositions, because of the visual space between the elements, encourage less immediate transition between concepts. For example, because “the toy” is both isolated to its own line and begins the poem, we instantly associate it with the title — it immediately follows the title and because they are both tangible objects. Because of these connections, we first equate the work of art with the connotations of youth, playfulness, and singularity conjured by “toy.” The next line, however, asks us intellectually and emotionally to reconcile such characteristics with “*the* aesthetic archetype” (emphasis mine) — not even an image, but a purely theoretical concept, and a unique one we must discern. This jump incorporates both the sculpture and the poem’s sense of playfulness, simplicity, and novelty, *as well as* a complex beauty and historicity we cannot even comprehend on a conscious level.

Conversely, “gong” in line 25 is also a single, tangible object, but one that evokes thousands of years of Eastern history, in contrast to the abstraction and manipulated newness of “polished hyperaesthesia.” This leap, too, is a difficult one, as the sound and definition of

“gong” ask for sensory attention and awareness, but “polished hyperaesthesia” — the meaning of which connotes intense attention and awareness — sounds so abstract and technical. Thus we have difficulty simultaneously grasping the abstract concept and appreciating the accessible simplicity “gong” offers. Consequently, we move from a visceral, affective reaction to a more distanced, intellectual one, but in this instance, are only allowed the latter as background, as the next three lines all describe sensual imagery. This combination forces our continued emotional reactions while our intellectual reaction registers the tensions between ancient and modern and the varying levels of accessibility in diction.

Structurally, “Brancusi’s Golden Bird” is composed of eight verse paragraphs, ranging in length from two lines to seven. After a definitive first phrase, Loy begins the second verse paragraph with the phrase “As if” set off to the left, and ends the poem with an ellipsis, an arrangement that presents multiple suggestions: that everything enclosed within the two is a fantastic sequence, that the enclosed lines are only one possibility of experiencing the sculpture; or, perhaps most significantly, that those lines are only a *part* of an ongoing process of experiencing the artwork. In any case, the setup certainly implies that we cannot directly experience the truth of the sculpture, but can only approach it through analogy.

Grammatically, the same structural variation that places most of the poem in an imaginative daydream makes it one long sentence with the subject “the toy,” followed by a series of clauses re-naming that toy: “lump,” “orientation,” “act,” etcetera. These various metaphors pull us away from Loy’s original description and encourage us to repeatedly extrapolate a more comprehensive understanding of the piece, to use it as impetus to think

creatively ourselves, to play intellectually. Despite the correspondence between the abstraction engendered by these comparisons and the verb “become” — the simple predicate of the poem’s long sentence — by grounding the sentence, “toy” also grounds us in the sculpture’s concrete physical reality. Thus we must reconcile the coexistence of these possibilities, accepting their mutual necessity to our experience of the artwork.

Another structural hint that Loy wants us constantly to integrate the recurrent thematic conflicts is the visual similarity between the poem’s initial phrase, “The toy/ become the aesthetic archetype” (notably, the only lines outside the bounds of “As if”) and the sixth verse paragraph, “This gong/ of polished hyperaesthesia.” In addition to the similarities between the relationships and tensions suggested by the diction choices, these are the only two verse paragraphs with the same number of lines, and those lines take similar shapes on the page, an arrangement that suggests a thematic parallel between them. Grammatical comparison of the two complements the tension between micro- and macrocosmic perception. The initial “the” can either be interpreted as setting up “toy” as a representative of a generic group or larger whole, or as a designation of its uniqueness and specificity. The later “this” implies the same about “gong” — simultaneously a mark of individuality and a suggestion that the gong and its connotations are only one of many, thus suggesting the universal. The repetition of this duality encourages acceptance of both possibilities at once — coinciding specificity and universality, so the mind excludes neither.

The grammatical aberration “become” also signifies the transition from concrete experience to abstract analysis. If the line conformed to grammatical rules, the verb tense would instead be “becomes” or “became, “either of which conveys closure of resolution in a

manner that “become” does not. Instead, “become” gives us the sense that something is incomplete, as the verb itself is still happening. Since this verb, which links “toy” and “aesthetic archetype,” does not fit the available grammar rules, we must consequently improvise to define that connection. “Become” functions as a suggestion more than a verb, regardless of whether we interpret it to mean “undergoing change” or “being suitable for something.”

### ***“The Starry Sky” OF WYNDHAM LEWIS***

Loy’s verbal mimicry of Lewis’ painting both expounds on Lewis’ artistry and provides another medium to explore the sentiments and ideas it poses. Because she presents the poem as more of a translation than a reaction to the drawing (though it is inevitably also the latter), her tone emphasizes expression of the painting’s intellectual concepts over her emotional engagement in the observation. This air of objective detachment, however, fails to permeate the poem entirely, as Loy translates the drawing into verse. Her choices in diction, form and imagery reveal a more personal experience of the artwork, both intellectually and emotionally.

Both the painting and the poem examine the human body and the relationship between man and nature. According to critic Tom Normand, the cold bareness and angularity of the figures in *The Starry Sky* unequivocally suggest man’s emotional detachment from and discomfort with those relationships. The subjects’ constriction within the glacier-like base implies their physical immobility, says Normand, which is complemented by the thwarted intellectual capability implied in their elongated but carved

heads. In Loy's poem, phrases such as "celibate shadows," "austere theatre of the Infinite," and "light . . . all blown out" reflect this disconnectedness and lack of agency and embody the nondescript background against which the two figures appear. Despite the correspondence between her representation of the painting and Normand's position that Lewis characterizes the "attachment of human beings to nature" as "absurd" (42), Loy betrays herself with unashamed awe, as evidenced by her reference to "the aged radiance/of suns and moons" and "celestial conservatories/ blooming with light" (even though these ostensibly eternal entities eventually crumble).

Similarly, specific diction that initially evokes detached objectivity on further inspection provide more emotional insight. For example, in the second verse paragraph, Loy describes the figures in *The Starry Sky* as "pyramidical survivors/ in the cyclorama of space," which at first seems a strict description of the physical appearance of the drawing. However, despite the accuracy of the visuals conjured by "pyramidical" and "cyclorama" and their cold, academic tone, the juxtaposition of the former with "survivors" connotes a slightly warmer, more hopeful perspective, especially considering the implications of longevity and accomplishment (of both humanity and the artwork) evoked by the inevitable association with the Egyptian monuments. Of course, Loy's slightly more optimistic outlook is only a matter of degree, given that the Egyptian monuments are tombs and that "survivors" implies a minimal existence.

Loy's choice of form also echoes this trace belief in the validity of man's attachment to nature. Arranged in nine verse paragraphs, all contain two to four lines except the longest and most emotionally revelatory, noticeably longer at eleven lines. In addition to standing

out visually in length, this paragraph also attracts our focus as the only one designated by dashes beginning two of its lines. This demarcation asks us to consider the paragraph both as a cohesive body and as the individual units within it, and implies we are to make analogous interpretations regarding one person's connection to nature as well as mankind's as a whole. Unlike the stoicism in Lewis' painting, Loy departs from her masked objectivity and makes overtly emotional interpretations connecting man and nature, attributing the affective reaction to man: it is our "nocturnal heart" that is "pierce[d]" by "the rags." Notably, that connection is not one one-sided, as evidenced by "the nerves of Heaven/ flinching/ from the antennae/ of the intellect." Not only does Loy's perspective allot Heaven nerves, but those nerves react to man's intellect.

The last unit in the paragraph, notably *unmarked* by a dash, describes a place of compromise between the reaction of heaven to man and man to nature that evokes a coincident middle ground between heaven and earth. While no unit in the grammatical structure of the poem is a definite, concrete sentence, the three subunits of verse paragraph five logically may be descriptions of the way the "celibate shadows" from the previous verse paragraph "fall" — again, the way man interacts with nature in Lewis' depiction. In this case, the third subunit straddles a grammatical boundary, logically a descriptive phrase, but departing from the others in its capability to create an independent sentence. The subject of the phrase/sentence — "the airy eyes of angels" — incorporates both the human and celestial, and, like Loy's mention of "Heaven," adds an element not present in Normand's description of Lewis' painting: a perspective on nature that includes divinity. "Experiment in pointillism," besides a nod to the physical creation of the drawing, implies further ambiguity

in the boundaries between individual and mass and between human and divine creation. Loy's awe at these connections and their results is not detached, as though objective, but expressed overtly when she unites the phrases, "airy eyes of angels" and "experiments in pointillism," with the description "the sublime." So, despite her concluding the paragraph with "faded away," her emotional acknowledgement of human possibility and introduction of divine elements departs from Lewis' presentation.

Loy's use of religious metaphor, most often designated by capitalization, poses further questions about the differences and similarities between the perspective she offers and the one proposed in *The Starry Sky*. Normand asserts that Lewis' drawing portrays "human fallibility" and the "failure of the collective [human] will to rise above . . . the tragic conditions of being" (42). Loy, on the other hand, while fully acknowledging that tragedy, does not reach such an explicit one-sided conclusion about its result. Since the background of *The Starry Sky* is entirely beige and the same tone throughout, interpretation of any nod to divinity would be a stretch. Except for the glacier-like appearance of the figures and foreground, any suggestions Lewis even makes about the relationship between man and nature must also be gleaned from the painting's title. Loy, however, unequivocally and repeatedly approaches nature ("sun," "moons," "blooming," "entrails") and while her determinations may at points intersect with Lewis' — for several of her references to nature are indeed to "stars"— she ultimately adds an avenue to those proposed by the drawing. Instead of Lewis' "starry sky" with no stars in it except, perhaps, the trapped and pointy human figures, Loy furnishes us with descriptions of "the aged radiance/ of suns and moons," "ghosts of the stars," and "celestial conservatories/ blooming with light." While all of these



images are eventually denounced or destroyed, her descriptive acknowledgement gives them a brief nod of appreciation.

The poem's mention of specifically designated powers begins with general references, such as "the Infinite" and "the 'Presence'" (the latter self-consciously in quotation marks) and grows more explicit as it goes on, culminating in the "Nirvanic snows" of the last verse paragraph. This movement corresponds with variations in tone. In addition to their higher degree of generality, the initial references to higher powers construct an environment for the figures in the painting that is hollow and empty, an emotional and intellectual vacuum in which, as "survivors," they merely "perform" their being in an "austere theatre" with an attachment to nature that conforms to Lewis' presentation — even the "stars" are "ghosts." The moment those references gain specificity ("The nerves of Heaven/ flinching") at the beginning of verse paragraph five — the poem's visual center — they mark a turning point where man becomes the stimulus rather than the respondent. The following two references, religious and drawn directly from Judeo-Christian tradition, compose two of the most graphic images in the poem, both of which allow for the possibility of man's triumph over myth, perhaps via art. Here the figures in *The Starry Sky*, who exist only through art, are "enviable immigrants/ into the pure dimension" as well as "devourers of the morning stars of Job." While we could certainly interpret this nod to the Bible to imply, as do Normand's comments on Lewis' intent, that the devouring figures blindly and foolishly seek fulfillment from nature (and religion, though not noted in Normand's analysis), the Biblical acknowledgement may additionally suggest — especially considering the positive connotations of words such as "enviable," "pure," "immune," and "serene" — that the purer

man's communion with art, the less his need for attachment to nature or religion, and the greater his ability to destroy such constructions. Similarly, the penultimate verse paragraph captures this possibility for human ascendancy over faith in greater powers even more graphically, as the Biblical creation story — "Jehovah's seven days" — becomes the "silent entrails" of either Lewis or his drawn figures. Despite the internal unreliability suggested by "Chimeras," they are "geometric," implying their concreteness, practicality, and receptiveness to human calculation, and thus a faith in the human mind.

Ultimately, it is difficult to determine how much Loy intends her poem as a strict translation of Lewis' painting, and to what degree she intends extrapolation into separate and potentially incompatible ideas. Despite probable correspondence on many levels — for example, the barrenness of the world humanity inhabits and the ease with which we conform to its constrictions by solely "perform[ing] the 'Presence'" instead of living consciously and actively, Loy inevitably departs from Lewis' perspective because she proposes variant possibilities about human capability. She accomplishes this divergence through an objective, descriptive tone that gradually reveals greater degrees of reaction through intensifying diction, form and allusion, but retains our confidence that she is telling the truth in consistent, declarative statements.

### *Joyce's Ulysses*

The tone of "Joyce's Ulysses" occupies an ambiguous space between bitter denunciation and homage, which creates a hierarchical arrangement in which the reader's place is unclear. Through allusion, irregular form, diction, and sound, she sets up specific

dichotomies between perceiver and perceived, abstract ideas and concrete images, and intellectual processes and emotional reactions. The ambiguous tone suggests that the chaos resulting from these conflicts can be resolved only through manipulation of language.

“Joyce’s *Ulysses*” explores the artistic and political implications of James Joyce’s novel by contrasting his genius with the climate in which he created the work. Despite the connections between images and abstract concepts characteristic of most of Loy’s poetry, the poem follows a surprisingly basic pattern of argument: presentation of the problem, description of the difficulties the problem poses, suggestion of a solution and analysis of that solution’s merits, viability, and pitfalls; and finally, choice of the solution.

Loy begins the sixty-one line poem by discussing the flaws of Ireland’s prevailing intellectual climate, alluding to Joyce’s homeland as a literarily stagnant “Green Sahara” that is not only ignorant of its own stagnation because the sterility is so rife — “The Normal Monster” — but also patriotically righteous in that ignorance — “the image of God/ make Celtic noises.” Thus, the poem’s conflicts stem from the challenge inherent in the creation and presentation of extraordinary art — the “reasoned musics” of the fourth verse paragraph — in the environment of the “elderly colloquists.” In this setting, novelty becomes controversy, despite the irony that the “Hurricanes” of disorder created by the contradictions in the prevailing ideology makes that art necessary.

In the first three verse paragraphs, Loy presents the context of those contradictions by creating a constantly changing tone that evokes uncertainty. By repeatedly juxtaposing positively connoted diction, such as “Normal” and “lyrical,” with negatively connoted diction, such as “Monster” and “hells,” and abstract images with concrete (“the image of

God” and “The voice and offal”), she forces us — unlike the original recipients of Joyce’s novel — to be simultaneously aware of both the micro- and macrocosmic pictures the words present and thus understand fully the crux of the dilemma, rather than remain consciously aware of both perspectives but willfully blind to one. While we may initially react by questioning which series of our responses we should grant more serious consideration — our feelings about “Normal,” “sings,” “the image of God,” and “lyrical,” or those we experience from hearing “Monster,” “offal,” and “hells” — we eventually arrive at the result that we must accept both equally, and both at the same time. We reach this conclusion through intellectual and emotional reconciliation of the coexistence of vastly disparate, and indeed incongruous, concepts: not only must we accept that “Monster” and “Normal” describe the same entity (an emotionally difficult leap), but also that the “the image of God” and “hells” do, too (an intellectually difficult leap). However, the conclusion inevitably disconcerts us with the effect that Loy describes in verse paragraph four as “Hurricanes,” a suggestion of both *our* chaos as readers at this point in the poem and the chaos of a culture that rejects art in favor of current mainstream values.

Amidst this discord, the poem’s form provides guideposts which we can discern transitions in tone. For example, the first three verse paragraphs, governed by the tonal conflict of phrases such as “lyrical hells” and “offal/ of the image of God,” consist of two lines of three to five words each. Verse paragraph four, however, marks variations in both form and tone: three lines, each longer than its antecedent, and offers the first place the speaker transfers the perspective of the poem from the ambiguous description of a person *within* a chaotic situation to the more detached, “reasoned” observations of someone

watching chaos from *without*: “Hurricanes/ of reasoned musics/ reap the uncensored earth.” Ironically, while “Hurricanes” obviously denotes lack of control, the word’s intellectual and emotional accessibility and its visual isolation on the line disturbs us less than the incongruities of the previous six lines, easing that tension: we have only a single (internally conflict-ridden) word as stimulus, rather than a group of conflicts to reconcile.

With “Hurricanes” as a descriptive bridge, the rest of the verse paragraph offers a mollification of the previous conflicts through language. Rather than perpetuate the hierarchy between the beauty of “sings” and the baseness of “Monster,” the “reasoned musics of literature” provide a palatable alternative to forced ignorance of one end of the spectrum or the other, a path aurally smoothed by the internal “z” sounds in “reasoned” and “musics” and the progressive motion of the “r” sound toward the outside of the lines, harmoniously enclosing the final line on both ends: “Hurricanes/ of *reasoned musics/ reap the uncensored earth.*” Free (though chaotic) flow of language, left “uncensored” in sounds and ideas, is the only way to temper the stark opposition between the extreme abstraction of “God” and “hells” and the harsh tangibility of “offal” (noting the pun on “awful”) and “Monster.”

Once Loy proposes this transition, the end words of verse paragraph five evidence the results of the compromise, for while “consciousness” and “things” remain opposed as abstract and concrete, the greater detachment in tone creates less polar connotations. “Consciousness” is indeed an abstract concept, but a less intellectually overwhelming one than “God,” for the former characterizes animals (including ourselves), with which we are tangibly familiar, and the latter an infinite and unquantifiable idea. Similarly, while “things” is concrete, it is less specific than “offal” or even “noises.” As Loy’s choice of more

abstract, less emotionally charged diction implies (“loquent consciousness of living things” versus “Hurricanes” and “lyrical hells”) and the last line of verse paragraph five states explicitly, the crucial element that facilitates resolution of the conflicts presented in the first six lines is permission for “torrential languages” to “pour” “uncensored.” If the “reasoned musics” — or artistic impulses — are allowed to operate freely within the “Hurricanes,” the conflicts temper themselves.

Although Loy alleviates the tonal conflicts, she doesn’t resolve them, and they thus emerge again when language is misused or repressed — when “the Spirit and the Flesh/ are out of tongue” — ostensibly lending validity to the practices employed by the censors Loy so adamantly decries. If misused language exacerbates conflict, and one side of that conflict is darkness (the “offal” and “Monster” of the poem’s beginning), then shouldn’t potentially inflammatory language be restricted? No, as the next structural transition warns, with a switch from three-line verse paragraphs to a two-liner in which one polarity is destroyed by the other: “The Spirit/ is impaled upon the phallus.” The abstract is negated by the concrete, and the top position of the hierarchy demoted by the lower. This destruction — since only one pole is left — would seem to render the original conflict moot, but in this case, language forces it to renew itself by creating distance from the tension through expression, just as the poem’s form reverts to two three-line verse paragraphs again, in which Loy detachedly describes chaos rather than embodying it (“pandemoniums” instead of “lyrical hells”) and mitigates the harsh concrete imagery (“phallus” becomes “wings”).

Separation from conflict allows us — and Joyce’s critics — greater intellectual objectivity and emotional temperance, but it does not destroy conflict altogether. On the

contrary, while the phrase “wings/ flap pandemoniums” presents a less chaotic and extreme picture than “lyrical hells” or “impaled upon the phallus,” that picture clearly reminds us that disorder is inescapable. But Loy does suggest a remedy:

Phoenix  
 of Irish fires  
 lighten the Occident  
  
 with Ireland’s wings  
 flap pandemoniums  
 of Olympian prose.

Initiating dialogue via “Olympian prose” is the only effective way to pacify the “Phoenix” of the disturbances caused by natural (and inevitable) entropy.

After explicating the detrimental results of dichotomized approaches to literature and spending at least three verse paragraphs earnestly suggesting language as the remedy for the very chaos it creates — “Hurricanes/ of reasoned musics/ reap the uncensored earth,” “The loquent consciousness/ of living things/ pours in torrential languages,” and “with Ireland’s wings/ flap pandemoniums/ of Olympian prose” — Loy doubles the lines in the following verse paragraph to explicitly decry Ireland’s self-satisfaction with its own values. She proclaims that without language in its freest, most potent form, those values destroy that which the country seeks to preserve:

and satirize  
 the imperial Rose

of Gaelic perfumes  
 — England  
 the sadistic mother  
 embraces Erin —.

Specifically, in order for Ireland to warrant the patriotism it receives, “Olympian prose” must, as the end “z” sounds and rhyme of “prose” and “Rose” imply, be permitted to “satirize/ the imperial Rose/ of Gaelic perfumes.” In other words, if the blind, unbridled loyalty described in the latter two lines remains glorified and unchecked, as suggested by the consistency between their tones and the word “perfumes,” the result is an exacerbated version of the poem’s chaotic beginning — minus the comfort offered by willful ignorance.

Loy’s dashes in the lines “ — England/ the sadistic mother/ embraces Erin —” designate a consequence we cannot ignore, as they enclose the evolution of the control (or lack of it) Irish patriotism resists most: the “larger context of British imperialism, which surrounded and oppressed the Irish” (Jaskoski 367). While increased tonal consistency in other parts of the poem indicates greater resolution of conflict, in this instance, acute bitterness (“sadistic mother/ embraces”) illustrates Loy’s message more effectively than any subtler approach.

If Loy’s proposing language as a vital expression and mediating force has convinced us of the necessity to permit free exchange of ideas, the structural variation in verse paragraph 11 — the poem’s halfway point — marks a transition into ambiguous literary territory more difficult for us (and would-be censors) to accept. Unmistakably denoted by a three-line introduction set off to the left of the page: “Master/ of meteoric idiom/ present,”



the next four verse paragraphs explore the inevitability that though unrestricted language may augment understanding and mollify conflict, it will also expose the darker, more unpleasant facets of human nature — indeed, that the *finest* language accomplishes *both* ends. The introduction, “Master/ of meteoric idiom/ present,” reveals the greater danger that even a “Master” of language cannot fully control it, as he is limited by several factors: the distance between ideas and the words that describe them, as implied by “idiom,” the “meteoric” unpredictability and power of words, and the dual suggestions of “present” — that his expression is restricted both by temporal and cultural contexts and by the ways in which he can arrange words meaningfully. Loy’s willingness to expose the flaws in her own proposition, while these flaws may cede argumentative ground to censorious criticism, adds to the objectivity of her tone and strengthens her argument.

While the next three verse paragraphs acknowledge the perils of language and evoke emotional disturbance through concrete imagery, the reactions they encourage remain more congruous with one another than those in the poem’s beginning. Allusions such as “Don Juan” and “The word made flesh” and clear connections between one line and the next — “feeding” and “fangs,” for example — increase our comprehension of the immediate message, but make it no easier to understand the larger picture the poem presents. Most often, in order for us to extract anything meaningful from even one or two lines of Loy’s poetry, we must intellectually associate images and ideas, because of her highbrow diction (some of which is invented) and juxtaposition of dissimilar concepts, such as “erudite[ition]” and “fangs.” The intensity of this engagement requires nearly all of our concentration, and

forces us to respond primarily with intellect and secondarily with any remnant emotional energy. In these few verse paragraphs, however, the opposite is true:

The Press — — —

purring

its lullabyes to sanity

Christ capitalised

scourging

incontrite usurers of destiny

— in hole and corner temples.

Because of the simpler, more sensual relationships between images in these lines — such as “purring” and “lullabyes” — the lion’s share of our connection to the poem is affective and immediate, while intellectual response remains significant but accessory. Though this reversal allows us to experience the poem more fully, both methods of soliciting our investment are so labor-intensive that neither can elicit comprehension of more than a few connections simultaneously. In the first three verse paragraphs, tonal ambiguity preoccupies us with the reconciliation of intellectually and emotionally incompatible concepts like “Normal Monster”:

The Normal Monster

sings in the Green Sahara

The voice and offal

of the image of God

make Celtic noises

in these lyrical hells.

However, the consistency in tone in verse paragraphs 14 and 15 — however troubling that tone — allows us to engage emotionally with our disquiet because we are not pushed away by intellectual distance.

For example, it is certainly logically incongruent to picture “Christ” — supposedly an embodiment of divine love — abusing his power by “scourging” anyone, but intellectually, we can conjure that image more easily than “The voice and offal/ of the image of God,” especially after we just absorbed the grotesque concept of “flesh/ feeding upon itself” (images we connect instantly to each other on a sensual level because of visual proximity and the repeated “f” sound) and were warmed up by Biblical references to “Judea” and “The word made flesh.” Though these representations are not pleasant, they illustrate the complexity of the self-awareness gained when “erudite fangs” are permitted the “sanguine/ introspection of the womb” — intellectually challenging images to conceive (no pun intended), but not to the extent that our effort to do so precludes emotional reaction.

Similarly, prior conflicts persist between abstract and concrete imagery and between the elements of various hierarchies, but despite the tone, these tensions are less polarized than earlier in the poem. “Christ” and “incontrite usurers of destiny,” for example, given little context in the first three verse paragraphs — as the connections we had to make there were more intellectual — are here associated through the more tangible, violent activity of

“scourging.” Christ engaging in such a vengeful, punitive act also reduces our perception of his divinity and makes us see him as human, while the “incontrite usurers” are divine indeed if they are lending “destiny.” Likewise, the “Press,” who ideally acts as a factual information source — necessarily with greater knowledge and authority than the general public — is demoted to the reliability of a complacent lunatic, as it “purr[s]/ its lullabyes to sanity.”

Like any convincing argument, the last section of “Joyce’s Ulysses” succinctly restates the faults in the opponent’s position and confidently advocates the solution Loy champions. The lack of indentation to denote the introduction that announces this intent — “And hang” — and its near-overlap with the following line visually enact Loy’s imperative that literature continue to expose the truth of “the soul’s advertisements” precluded by “the ecclesiast’s Zoo,” as it is physically connected to the former and separated from the latter. Because of her scientific-style description and thus detached tone in “A gravid day/ spawns,” and the simultaneous presentation of both perspectives of the preceding argument, it is difficult to discern with which side we need to associate them. Do they belong to “the soul’s advertisements” or “the ecclesiast’s Zoo,” since the hierarchy implied by those encapsulations encourage us to ally with only one perspective, and to vary that response according to Loy’s tone? Despite her vehement attitude against censorship, the tonal uncertainty here suggests that the perverse hierarchy in the next two lines, “guttural gargoyles/ upon the Tower of Babel,” can apply equally to either side of the argument. This acknowledgement forces us — even in the face of an articulate proposal that requires our full engagement to comprehend — to refuse to follow that guidance blindly. Loy poses a direct challenge to us to participate in the poem’s ideas by determining its truths for ourselves. We

must be simultaneously active and observant, and rather than allow the “elderly colloquists” to rank our values, understand that we are creating both the hierarchies and our positions within them.

Ultimately, regardless of its potential for confusion and offense, Loy explicitly places language closest to the top of any consistent hierarchy in the poem. It ousts Christ from His own metaphor (“the word made flesh”), saves Ireland from its destructive patriotism (the “Master/ of meteoric idiom” saves “Erin” from her “sadistic mother”), and even kills “the Spirit” when disallowed free expression (“out of tongue — — —/ The Spirit/ is impaled upon the phallus.” Despite the “guttural gargoyles/ upon the Tower of Babel” in the penultimate verse paragraph — the embodiment of linguistic disorder and a possible result of language uncensored — the least tonally ambiguous lines in the entire poem are in the final verse paragraph, in which Loy unequivocally trumpets “Joyce,” as a master of language, as the “rejector — recreator” of the “Empyrean emporium” who “flashes the giant reflector/ on the sub rosa.” Though Loy ultimately pushes Joyce as a character into the poem’s background, what he represents remains at the forefront. Chaos still exists, as implied by the juxtaposition of a marketplace and the heavens, and Joyce is the *recreator* and *reflector* as opposed to the originator, suggesting he does not possess complete power. Compromise through free exchange of language, Loy urges, is the most effective tool with which to reconcile the disorder inherent in human nature.

## Chapter II

### The Sincerest Form of Flattery: Loy Among Peers

#### *Gertrude Stein*

In “Gertrude Stein,” the shortest poem of the bunch, it is the small words — prepositions and articles, which ordinarily perform minor functions — that create much of the poem’s structure and impact. Loy explores the art of language by metaphorically comparing it to scientific study, and effects this examination on a foundation of connected relationships: between the abstract and the concrete, between elements of language and science that vie for power, and ultimately, between objectivity and ambiguity. The poem’s little words define and describe both these relationships, and consequently play a subtle but significant role in the creation of tone.

Loy compares Stein to Marie Curie, one of the first women to receive recognition for her achievements as a scientist. By enacting the same verbal deftness she lauds (a spin on the “play within a play” technique) Loy also parallels herself with Curie via her own scientific “extraction” of “a radium of the word:” a concise poem with short lines that efficiently conveys its point. This structure — “Curie” at the poem’s beginning, two- and three-word lines that force an almost methodical reading, small and large words sharing equal significance, and only nine lines total — compares Curie and Stein by crafting language (Stein’s forte) in a straightforward style that embodies the values of science (Curie’s forte): objectivity, efficiency, and definitive results. As implied by the visual juxtaposition, similarity in sound, and equal number of syllables in “laboratory” and “vocabulary,” Loy equates the two as methods of searching for “a radium of the word.”

Loy creates tension between the ambiguity of language and the objectivity of science by presenting science as authoritative but undermining its power with language, initially via diction. The largest and most conspicuous words in the first five lines — “Curie,” “laboratory,” “vocabulary,” “crushed,” and “tonnage” — set up landmarks along a path paved by smaller words like “of,” “she,” and “the.” The smaller words create the relationships that direct us from one stop to another, while each landmark conveys a trustworthy authority that convinces us we are making progress. For example, starting the poem with “Curie” — the name<sup>3</sup> of a distinguished scientist — suggests that the poem to come follows (or at least describes) the principles “Curie” connotes: lack of bias, dedication to testing suppositions before assuming their truth, propensity for order (or at least for classification and nameability), and finally, genius. Along these lines, “laboratory” conveys the concrete search for an objective truth, and “vocabulary” suggests the naming and categorization, or ordering, of those findings. “Crushed” and “tonnage” both imply power relationships: the former, one of physical and intellectual domination (and thus authority), and the latter, depending on its definition, either domination or the authority presented by tangible numbers and sheer physical bulk.

At the same time these words suggest factual authority, however, they undercut their implied claims by questioning that authority. For instance, while the first word, “Curie,” stands confidently alone on the line and states an unequivocal comparison via metaphor —

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<sup>3</sup>Notably, the *surname*, a significant diction choice considering that the time period of the poem (1924) would dictate that references to women — even in professional settings — at least include their given name, a custom that creates greater intimacy and feminization of the speaker’s relationship to the person in question, as opposed to the purely professional connection that indeed exists. Present-day professional athletics exemplify the same principle: rarely, if ever, do sports announcers include male athletes’ first names when referring to their activities on the field/court/arena. However, more often than not, they refer to female athletes using only the athletes’ first names — or, in some cases, both first and last names.

rather than the room for doubt a simile's "like" or "as" would allow — its position as the first word after the title (and as another name) forces us to reconsider the poem's focus: is it Stein or Curie? Stein, we conclude, but the pause we experience plants the seeds of ambiguity. So though Stein is the poem's subject, her identity within the poem becomes meaningless without Curie as a catalyst. Similarly, while "laboratory" and "vocabulary" imply order and objectivity, each also suggests the permeability of the distinction between the known and the unknown. For example, the experiments in a "laboratory," in their efforts to discover reasonable explanations of phenomena, often either create or expose new phenomena altogether. "Vocabulary," while describing words already known and classified, also describes words yet to be learned and words particular to certain cultures or fields of knowledge. Even "crushed" and "tonnage," apparently the least ambiguous and most authoritative of the bunch, harbor their own insecurities: we can't be certain whether "she crushed" modifies "vocabulary" or "the tonnage," and "tonnage," while implying weight, is inherently defined by its relationship to a ship — an entity outside the word itself — and thus may suggest various interpretations that chip away at that authority. For instance, the association of "tonnage" with ships, displacement of water, capacity, and ports all imply the transition and fluidity of movement. In contrast, the authority "tonnage" suggests requires a singular inflexibility in order to set and enforce rules and perpetuate its own power.

Following this initial disorientation, Loy sneaks the smaller words in to subvert the authority the larger words assert — *during that assertion* — by suggesting different power structures than those posed by the larger words. As opposed to the power structure the larger words imply, which is based on immediate interpretation that these words signify "authority"



(and that we should consequently accept that authority and not question the poem's statements), the smaller words present a more intricate network of hierarchical links between these "authoritative" words. The latter structure, by creating a subhierarchy within the previously singular authority of the larger words, demystifies that power and pushes us instead to understand subtleties that equalize the significance of the large and small words. This knowledge lessens the clout — and assertion of objectivity — we may otherwise grant to the large words.

For example, six of the poem's nine lines begin with small, tentative words such as "of," a," and "the," but the three that don't — the first, fourth, and seventh lines — instead begin with words certain of their importance: "Curie," which begins the comparison (and the poem) and is capitalized, "she," which is set off by an indentation and is the agent of the first verb ("crushed," implying the power of "she"), and "congealed," the only verb at the beginning of a line and one that conveys the solidifying of various elements (a process that generally ends in a whole more potent than its parts). If *every* line began with an article or preposition, or *every* line with a longer, more independent word, we could bank on a certain manner in which we should interpret the poem's tone. Articles, for example, mark their referents as independent entities, separating them from nearby words: "*the* laboratory," "*a* radium." Prepositions, on the other hand, designate relationships between the words around them, which creates a flow between the connected elements: "the laboratory *of* vocabulary," "a radium *of* the word." Thus an article-heavy poem, regardless of diction, would feel choppy and more abstract than a preposition-heavy poem. "Gertrude Stein" contains a mix

of the two evenly disseminated throughout the poem, so neither isolation nor connection dominates the tone.

Sound and rhythm also make significant contributions to the poem's ambiguous tone, particularly in the repetition of internal vowel sounds. The same articles and prepositions that create hierarchical relationships between larger words set up a rhythm that places audible stress on the similar syllables in those words, which in turn connects them more intimately. In the first two instances — in lines two and three — the lines begin with “of,” which we pronounce with minor stress: “*of* the laboratory/ *of* vocabulary,” with greatest emphasis on “lab” and “cab.” Loy then connects “cab” (and inherently “lab”) to the main stressed syllable in line four, “crushed,” via alliteration, and links “crushed” to the primary stresses in the next two lines, “*tonnage*” and “*consciousness*,” via assonance. But what do these subtle aural similarities mean for our experience of the poem?

In the first example — the rhyming syllables in “laboratory” and “vocabulary” — the syllables are not only associated by sound, but also by their position in the line's rhythmic pattern (as they are both the third syllable on their lines and the most stressed). By physically alerting us to the similarity between these words as we read the poem aloud, these connections (complemented by the similar endings “-ory” and “-ary”) blur the boundaries between the words' connotations in our minds, each becoming capable of embodying characteristics of the other. Consequently, we are likely to emphasize the creative, experimental implications of “laboratory” and the more defined, empirical implications of “vocabulary” in order to reconcile the parallels in sound. We adopt a similar strategy to make sense of the connections between “crushed,” “tonnage,” and “consciousness.” Because

“crushed” and “tonnage” convey concrete concepts — namely of power and weight, which metaphorically imply seriousness — and the “tonnage” is *of* “consciousness,” we no longer associate “consciousness” with only an abstract intellectual concept, but instead experience the physical sensation of the vast size of that concept.

Despite the hierarchical relationships Loy creates in her description of the dance between the values of literature and science in “Gertrude Stein,” she resists placing one above the other, and instead chooses to merge the two, leaving us to grapple with their coexistence. Not only does “a radium of the word” represent the culmination of the efforts of this merger, but also the process involved in that effort, no element of which we can deny: as “a” implies, “radium” is not a single discovery, but one of many, all of which compose parts “of the word”: the two are inextricable parts of one another, each perpetuating the other’s existence.

### ***Poe***

In “Poe,” Loy explores the conflicts between the intellectual and emotional and between the abstract and concrete to emphasize a larger conflict between ephemeral and lasting elements of art. By repositioning stereotypically romantic images against a backdrop of cold and death, as Poe’s work does, Loy forces us to evaluate our perceptions about the inherent beauty of these images. Through sound, diction, and form, she creates relationships that disallow polarization of the beautiful and grotesque and pushes us to question the connection between the two.

The aural connections the poem makes perform two functions that eventually create a third. First, rhythm and internal aural associations relax us into a playful, childlike comfort with our imaginations. Poe uses this technique in poems such as “Annabel Lee” (“She was a child and I was a child,/ In this kingdom by the sea”) and “The Raven” (“Once upon a midnight dreary, while I pondered, weak and weary”). While the ten-line poem contains only one perfectly rhyming set — “nights,” “lights,” and “rites” — repetition of internal sounds joins with the pattern of stresses to establish a playful rhythm that begs us to read it aloud. For example, in the first three lines —

a lyric elixir of death

embalms

the spindle spirits of your hour glass loves

— the fantastic quality of the dark yet romantic images of “lyric elixir of death” and “embalms/ the spindle spirits” is emphasized by the soothing pronunciation of repeated “l”s and a trimetric rhythmic pattern that mimics that of nursery rhymes, as if Loy is lulling us to placidity. The combination of this sing-song rhythm and the sound of “lyric elixir” creates a tone of playful freedom that is not quite interrupted by the sobriety of “death” and “embalms.” Poe accomplishes this same juxtaposition in “Annabel Lee” by interrupting the story of his childhood romance with “shut her up in a sepulchre.” The second, third, and fourth lines of the next verse paragraph evoke a similar reaction —

icicled canopy

for corpses of poesy

with roses and northern lights

— as the stress pattern and repetition of “c,” “p,” and “r” sounds creates a waltz-like rhythm. These combinations of light, palatable rhythms and magical images lure us into near-relaxation into the very setting Loy wants us to criticize: romanticism of love and mortality.

However, as we are not children (and therefore trust logic as well as our affective responses), we cannot ignore the punctuation of these lullaby rhythms and catchy aural connections with images of our attempts to resist mortality. Instead of a “lyric elixir” of *life*, which would cohere with the tone of untainted magic and imagination by evoking both childhood belief and legendary adult pursuits of immortality (the Fountain of Youth, Dracula, etc.), we are confronted by “a lyric elixir of death” in the first line of the poem. Similarly, “embalms,” “spindle,” “icicled,” “corpses,” and “frozen” — images that imply a reluctance to accept death — are aurally connected to stereotypically romantic images. “Embalms,” for example, an actual physical masking of death, connected by the “l” and “e” sound to “lyric elixir,” most overtly demonstrates this resistance. “Spindle,” connected to “lyric elixir” (via “l” and “i” sounds) and “spirits,” forges a subtler but darker path to reveal our relationship with our mortality, as it gives us a choice: if we interpret it as “paper,” we can keep a safe, emotional distance from death by writing about it and creating art, an affectively easier implication. However, if we interpret “spindle” as suggesting “impaled,” the penetrative violence of the image fails to allow much emotional separation between us and death. In a similar fashion, the “c” sound in the second verse paragraph’s “icicled” connects it to both “canopy” and “corpses” — on one hand suggesting our emotional desire to preserve the romance we have constructed around death, and on the other disallowing our denial of the

intimate connection between these images. Tellingly, “corpses” in turn connects aurally with “poesy” and “roses,” and as the most graphic death image, forces our headfirst confrontation with the gap between our perceptions of death and its cold reality.

Structurally, “Poe” is arranged in two verse paragraphs with loose internal connection, each designated by an unindented first line. The similarity between the two paragraphs — in tone, rhyming end words, and physical appearance — smooths the transition between the abstraction of the images in the first and the concreteness of those in the second. This movement continues the romantic element of the tone while darkening the imagery, subtly inuring us to the perversion of the romance the images portray. For example, of the nouns in the first verse paragraph — “elixir,” “death,” “spirits,” “loves,” and “nights” — the most concrete is “elixir,” a word that not only connotes magic and mystery, but also is difficult to define exactly (we know what “elixir” means, but we couldn’t tell you specifically what’s in it or how it came to be). In contrast, “canopy,” “corpses,” “roses,” “nightingales,” and “aisles” — nouns in the second verse paragraph — describe concrete, easily defined entities. Loy lures us into the poem emotionally through the nebulous, romantic concepts in the first verse paragraph, and then uses the more jarring, tangible images of the second to push us to face the morbid — and according to the poem, inevitable — side of that idealism. For in order to make sense of affectively incongruous images such as “corpses of poesy” and “frozen nightingales,” we must first reconcile them intellectually: we may know that beauty and the ugly details of our mortality necessarily coexist, but rarely do we acknowledge, much less spend time with the relationship between the two.

In order to force our acceptance of this relationship, the two verse paragraphs correlate the movement from abstract to concrete with a similar transition from emphasis on the images' ephemerality to a focus on permanence (or at least the illusion of it). For example, in the first verse paragraph, the only word that connotes natural endurance through time is "death," for "elixir" and "embalms" represent human efforts to combat time's effects. Even "hour glass loves" and "moon spun nights," while describing the passage of time, are manipulated: "moon" and "nights" are connected by "spun," implying subjectivity to an outside force that weaves the two together, and "hour glass loves," in addition to the separation of the word "hourglass" (suggesting the divide between our measurements of time and its reality), the phrase is homophonic with "our glass loves," mocking our desire for the permanence of romantic attachment, a concept that is inherently fragile — and our desire to make it tangible through man-made, idealistic constructs, such as certain objects or images.

Conversely, while adjectives in the second verse paragraph such as "icicled," "frozen," and "ilix" do not imply eternal stasis, they do emphasize the illusion of temporal pause rather than time's passage. The ephemerality suggested by "corpses of poesy," "roses," and "northern lights" appears at first to balance that stagnation, but in fact, the prepositions in the following lines

icicled canopy  
for corpses of poetry  
with roses and northern lights

indicate that these images are elements in a hierarchical setup in which "corpses" — an unequivocal image of mortality — occupies the dominant spot. "Icicled canopy" is set *for*

“corpses,” “poesy” is *of* “corpses,” and “roses and northern lights” — “set” *with* “corpses” but subsequent to them — function as accessories to corpses’ central role. The “frozen nightingales” similarly dominate the last two lines, as “Where” and “in ilix aisles” describe *their* location, and *they* perform the action (singing). So despite nearly equal numbers of romantic and morbid images, morbidity exerts greater influence over tone because we perceive the dark images as more potent than the beauty of “roses” and “northern lights.”

While the imagery encourages us to move from romantic (though dark) enchantment to disillusioned morbidity, the poem’s structure and verbs encourage the opposite. Excepting the first line, both verse paragraphs are shaped like staircases that descend from left to right. If we focus on the end word of each line — visually, the point at which each step becomes the next — and follow the poem as if we were traversing it on foot, we experience the steepest drop after the first line, ending on “death.” In fact, until we pass “a lyric elixir of death,” we are unable to enter the staircase and begin the descent at all. Once we pass this drop, we are cradled by “embalms,” and walking toward “loves” and “nights” — and while the former acts as a support behind our trek, the latter two only drop off to another staircase, as if to deny us answers to the tonal contradiction they have created by evoking feelings that oppose those engendered by “death” and “embalms.”

Our entry into the second verse paragraph —

sets

icicled canopy

for corpses of poesy

with roses and northern lights



Where frozen nightingales in ilix aisles

sing burial rites

brings us to a more regular and basic set of stairs, as if we ourselves will inevitably succumb to a romanticized viewpoint, because the lines of the staircase all end in romantic images: “canopy,” “poesy,” and “northern lights.” The position of “sets” also adds to the implication of our complacency in this regard, for the longest plateau we walk (in an otherwise regular pattern of steps) immediately follows “sets,” implying that our impressions are fixed in place with no room to change. While the last two end words, “aisles” and “rites” could continue the trend of stereotypical romantic imagery, as they could connote a wedding ceremony, the break in the staircase pattern suggests otherwise, especially since the final line forms an upside-down step. Considering this departure from the pattern — and given the right-hand alignment of both “aisles” and “rites” — Loy asks us via the poem’s structure to move past our blind, fantastic view of these images toward a more objective perspective of them. Instead of reflexively imbuing them with the sacred significance of “rites,” “burial” insists that we put our idealized notions of mortality to rest.

The structural, aural, and dictional arrangement of “Poe,” and the conflict caused by intellectually and emotionally disparate images, encourage us to swing back and forth between the beautiful and the grotesque without submitting to constructing one or the other as more valuable — just as Poe’s work does. Like Poe, the ambiguity Loy creates pushes us to accept both simultaneously. For though the poem concludes on “burial rites” — an image

we would ordinarily consider an unambiguous description of death — the poem asks us, if we have paid attention, to perceive both beauty and mortality, both abstraction and tangibility, both intellectual and emotional significance, and both ephemerality and longevity. Poe asks the same of us at the conclusion of “Annabel Lee”: “In her tomb by the side of the sea.” Certain images offer us a middle ground with which to approach both at once: “corpses of poesy” suggests our ability to handle these conflicts through art, “ilix aisles” implies existence of a lasting pathway between the polarities, and “rites,” as the final word, suggests that the very constructions we create to distance us from death — the same ones Loy asks us to question — are those that preserve us by marking significant points along our “aisles.”

### ***Jules Pascin***

Written following Pascin’s suicide, Mina Loy’s “Jules Pascin” explores the effects of the artist’s death on the speaker, the art world, and the future. Loy’s attitude toward this examination dances ambiguously between playful and darkly bitter, always maintaining a pretense of objective distance such that we can trace any emotional effect back to ourselves rather than the speaker. She attempts to make sense of the death by juxtaposing descriptions of its physical reality with snapshots of Pascin’s demeanor while alive, each echoing the tone of the other in a manner that makes distinguishing between the two difficult.

Structurally arranged in nine verse paragraphs, ranging from three to five lines apiece, the poem’s 37 lines vary greatly in length. Though there is no set rhyme scheme, the end words of many lines connect either by consonance, assonance, or another similarity in sound,

producing a definite but unstructured rhythmic quality in an oral reading. Action verbs appear scarcely, contributing to the somber stillness that traps us between tones, and most of the other verbs either evoke dark connotations in the context of the suicide — “tossed,” “dangle,” and “bleeds” — or are in past tense, such as “cocked” and “slashed.” The most active verb in the poem is negatively attributed to the behavior of those affected by Pascin’s death — the “changeling women” who “*jostle* the prodigal son.”

Loy begins most verse paragraphs with physical descriptions of Pascin, and moves into portrayal of his character through elaboration on that description. For example, the second verse paragraph begins, “Pascin has passed,” a basic acknowledgement of his present physical condition, and continues with “his affectionate swagger/ his air/ of the Crown in the role of jester” — a picture of his physical demeanor while alive that metaphorically implies his personality and motivations and straddles the line between warm remembrance and jaded distance. As the poem progresses, the verse paragraphs begin with less direct references to Pascin, replacing immediate mention of him with description of the effects of his death — first on his art (“Ceased to dangle/ demi-rep angels”), then on mankind’s need for his art (“Silence bleeds/ ...the dim homunculus/ ...cries”), and finally concedes to the actuality of mankind’s disappointing response (“a pigeon-toed populace/ ...jostle the prodigal son”). In a similar pattern, the poem’s tone and imagery become grimmer and more vehement as the poem progresses. Loy makes the transition from phrases such as “immaculate leer” and “tossed his destiny” to connote the darkness of Pascin’s nature, to the likes of “slashes wrists” and “satyric squander,” a trend that ends the poem with an ironically sinister

perversion of a stereotypically promising tale when she describes the reality of the women interested in Pascin's legacy as "swine/ Cinderellas awander."

While very few lines' end words rhyme — even imperfectly — the poem presents an intricate but irregular network of sound patterns that reflect various phrases in the speaker's processing of Pascin's death. The poem begins, for example, with the only perfect rhyme — "occasion" and "persuasion" — perhaps implying the initial appearance of normalcy, that she has yet to accept the death. Within the same verse paragraph, this disbelief is accentuated and slightly broken by the growth of "shadowy" in line four. While the repetition suggests a lack of emotional and intellectual progress, the change from noun to adjective, as well as the choice of diction, denotes the slight but important transition between report and description as her shock slowly hatches into comprehension.

Alliteration, consonance, assonance, and imperfect rhymes in the rest of the poem continually evidence the speaker's level of reconciliation with her loss and also bespeak connections between the image that are related by sound. The end words "eye," "destiny," "boy," and "irony" in verse paragraphs three and four, for example, all share the same final sound, though it is purer in "destiny" and "irony" than "eye" and "boy." Exploring the relationship of these words to the subject matter, as well as their order of appearance, evinces several possibilities as to the speaker's perception of Pascin personally and thus her emotional and intellectual perceptions of his death. The aural and spatial proximity between "eye" and "destiny," for instance, suggests a connection between Pascin's vision (both artistic and physical) and his suicide — perhaps even a cause-and-effect relationship, considering the presence in the same verse paragraph of two of the only verbs in the poem

directly attributed to Pascin as an agent, “cocked” and “slashed,” and the result of those actions. At the same time, this connection encourages us to ask whether Loy feels what Pascin could see and believe *was* his destiny, or was what *prevented* him from accepting his destiny.

She approaches and complicates this question by first aurally connecting “destiny” to “ivory boy,” bridging the two verse paragraphs, and finally by connecting all four words to “irony.” The first link poses similar suggestions to the one between “destiny” and “eye” — that Pascin’s death or artistic possibility (depending on the interpretation of “destiny”) is inextricable from what he could see ahead of him, but this connection adds connotations of playful childishness and youthful innocence. As “irony” completes the pattern, the ultimate association between these words prompts further questions: does the speaker feel it ironic that the end of Pascin, a playful character here defined by his artistic potential, was a fate that thwarted that potential? Or does she think his “destiny” was to have the vision to create more and greater art, and thus find irony in his inability to fulfill that?

Perhaps as a reflection of Pascin’s minimalist, primarily line-driven drawings, the trickiness in defining Loy’s intended tone in this poem partly springs from confusion at the fact that her descriptions repeatedly center around what the object *isn’t* rather than what it *is*, forcing us to define it for ourselves and thus embodying the elusiveness of what she describes. The first verse paragraph, “a shadow/ to a shadowy persuasion” cues us to expect this intangibility, but it feels no less labyrinthine when we encounter verse paragraphs five and seven, in which we disentangle ourselves from our emotional reactions just long enough to realize we are lost among the “in” words (“ineffaceable,” “innubile”) trying to discern

whether two negatives make a positive, or just two negatives, and then must attempt to regauge our emotional reactions based on the meaning of the lines.

For example, the implications of the first line of verse paragraph five — “Pascin has ceased” — are clear in the context of the subject matter, but the following line, “to flush with ineffaceable bruises,” requires translation into more direct phrasing in order to be understood. First, we must reconcile the permanence of “ceased” with the ephemerality of “flush,” and then harmonize both qualities’ simultaneous presence in “ineffaceable bruises.” “Flush” and “*efface*” coincide in their connotation of shy humility, and join with “bruises” via suggestion of impermanence and change, but “ceased” and “*ineffaceable*,” in this context, imply the opposite — that which is certain and immutable. Prefacing the statement with his death indicates the speaker’s belief that while he lived, Pascin *did* “flush with ineffaceable bruises” — that the artist’s wounds never healed, and that he exposed them on a regular basis through his art. However, another grammatically plausible rephrasing of the sentence — one allowing the two negatives of “ceased” and “ineffaceable” to cancel each other out — suggests that during Pascin’s life, he *did* “flush with *effaceable* bruises.” This latter interpretation implies untempered congruency between the ephemeral words and depicts Pascin as a creature of change and cyclical movement.

The speaker’s juxtaposition of these incompatible concepts, her allowance of only minimal clarity (and that only following scrutiny and grammatical restructuring), and the ultimate ambiguity of her characterization suggests that the only resolution Loy can reach is a view of Pascin as indefinable — a person who appears to embody both mutability and stagnation, and who does so elusively enough to render her unable to distinguish confidently

his true nature. Verse paragraphs beginning with phrases such as “Pascin has passed” and “Pascin has ceased,” then, are *of course* confusing and inconclusive, because his death has extinguished any opportunity she had to evaluate his character further, and consequently leaves her in a position of immutable resolution and uncertainty.

Evidencing her ultimate perplexity and augmenting ours, the concluding line of verse paragraph five — “his innubile Circes” — is not only similarly logically confusing, but also feels like a value judgment, a renaming and attempt to make sense of the conflict caused by “ineffaceable bruises.” While Circe was a manipulative, vindictive seductress, she did not always remain a force against Ulysses; eventually she aided him by providing his men with supplies and warnings about future dangers. The incongruity between these parts of her nature, and the added possibility for misinterpretation caused by yet another grammatical negative undoubtedly mimic the poet’s inability to assuredly define either Pascin’s character or her feelings about him.

### Chapter III

#### Loy's Integration of Art and Self

##### *Nancy Cunard*

In “Nancy Cunard,” Loy uses conflicts between abstract and concrete as a centerpiece around which the poem’s other tensions — our intellectual versus emotional reactions and the struggle between elements of “good” and “evil” — unfold. In this way, she mimics the artistic and romantic dynamics surrounding Cunard’s role in the literary and art communities in 1920’s Paris. Through manipulation of sound, form, and diction in a tone rich with irony, Loy explores the gap she perceives between the appearance and the reality of Cunard’s character.

While not a successful artist or writer herself, Nancy Cunard — a wealthy American expatriate — created a solid spot for herself in the artistic circles of Paris in the 1920’s, having affairs with several well-known writers and serving as a muse for novelists and painters alike, including Huxley, Hemingway, Eliot, and Waugh, among others. Her establishment of the Hours Press (the first press to publish Beckett) and unconventional political ideals further marked her place in these communities. Unlike Cunard’s appearance in other poems and novels, in which the writers create a fictional character using her as a model, Loy’s depiction of her not only confronts Cunard’s identity directly by using her name and second-person pronouns, but also may describe an actual physical portrait of the socialite — in effect, making the poem a picture of a picture (much as Loy describes her experience of viewing the painting in “The Starry Sky of Wyndham Lewis”).



The 24-line poem is arranged in six distinct verse paragraphs, ranging in length from three lines to five. Loy quickly moves between descriptions of Cunard's physical characteristics — for example, her voice, hands, and eyes — and more elusive descriptions of the energy that surrounds her — such as “Your lone fragility” and “your moonstone whiteness” — often within a verse paragraph. In addition to jumps between concrete and abstract illustrations, Loy's constant contextualization of Cunard against fantastic backgrounds introduces yet another equally significant element that demands our attention, suggesting that the allure of Cunard lies just as much in the milieu she inhabits as in her person. The sophisticated, surreal quality of settings such as “ancient Christmas/ helmeted with masks” and “long-vanished dragons” performs several functions: initially, it associates Cunard with things unknown, mysterious, and sacred. Later in the poem, however, the sacred element is replaced by beauty and romanticism. Eventually, all three — the mysterious, the sacred, and the beautiful — are subsumed by the ironic revelation that Cunard has no inherent identity, but exists only in relation to the personalities around her: “framed in the facing profiles/ of Princess Murat/ and George Muir.”

Throughout the poem, Loy's jumps between concrete and abstract images — besides surprising us — quickly establish the distance that will remain between Nancy Cunard and us. Almost simultaneously, she invites us in to Cunard's immediate physical presence (“eyes diffused with holly lights” and “silken nostrils”), evoking a visceral emotional attraction, and then pushes us away to the realm of metaphor and religion (“ancient Christmas,” “helmeted with masks,” and “receding as a sin”). She invites us to evaluate the scene morally and our place in it, a place we never seem to locate because it is either veiled (“masks”) or removed

from us (“receding”). We rely primarily on intellect for the latter assessment — but for some readers, regardless of our acceptance or rejection of these concepts, the connotations of “Christmas,” “masks,” and “sin” may evoke nearly unconscious emotional responses of, for example, joy, guilt, pleasure in the forbidden, or reverence.

In addition to the temporal connection between these reactions, the aural links between the opposed images prompts us to connect them. For example, the “s” sounds and short “i” in “eyes diffused” are followed on the next line by the same sounds in “Christmas.” Similarly, “cardinal airs” (in line five) — an abstract religious image — follows “silken nostrils” (in line four) — a tangible image that invites admiration of physical beauty, the phrases intertwined through shared “k,” “l,” and “s” sounds. Therefore, not only must we reconcile possible gaps between our intellectual and emotional responses, but we must also make sense of the connections between the images themselves: how does “diffused” relate to “Christmas,” “cardinal,” and “silken nostrils” — especially considering that the first line of all the verse paragraphs but one also contain short “i” words?

Well, similarities in sound incline us to ascribe resemblances in meaning between the images. So, on a certain level, we equate the abstract with the concrete images — including paralleling Cunard’s physical characteristics with religious concepts (with “Christmas” the connection implies holiness, while with “sin” it implies evil). Later in the poem, aural connections prompt us to associate Cunard’s “chiffon voice” with “soft mystery” and “vigil carnival,” and her “lone fragility” with “mythological” and “long-vanished” entities of “disillusion” — connections that ask us to link her to images we can access only via imagination.

Once we make these associations, we succumb to Loy's encapsulation of Cunard's appeal — simultaneously occupying both extremes of a continuum. For example, aural comparisons of “dragons” and “queens” to Cunard's physical body invite us to experience both darkness and reverence, and comparisons to her temperament leave us on both ends of fantasy and reality:

Your lone fragility  
of mythological queens  
conjures long-vanished dragons —  
— their vast jaws  
yawning in disillusion.

In this series of images, Loy deliberately confuses the fantasy and reality of the entities that govern Cunard's “lone fragility,” as well as those that are subject to it. She describes “queens” — actual, tangible figures — as “mythological,” while “dragons” — fantastic but physical beings — are “long-vanished,” as if they once in fact existed. So, though Cunard bows to the influence of real entities that appear imaginary, she exerts power over what appears real but is not.

Loy's diction choices cement the gap between Cunard's appearance and her reality, for once we resolve the conflicts sprouting from opposing images modifying the same entity, we must reconcile the tension within each image. For instance, in the fifth verse paragraph, Loy describes Cunard's “drifting hands” as “faint as exotic snow.” The implication is that Cunard's enchantments can transform the common into the foreign and mysterious. But on one end of the line, the image is vibrant, and on the other, it is “faint,” so we have difficulty

wholeheartedly subscribing to either presentation. Along these lines, “drifting hands” implies transience and emotional distance, but in the verse paragraph’s last line, those “faint,” noncommittal hands “spread silver silence” — a rather potent act, considering the authoritative alliteration, permanence of “silver,” and absoluteness of “silence” (spreading it would be quite the feat). As with our difficulty distinguishing between fantasy and reality in “mythological queens” and “long-vanished dragons,” here we cannot decide whether Cunard is passive or active, potent or weak. Similarly, the “vast jaws” of “long-vanished dragons,” an image that connotes both imposing physical power and its absence, are “yawning in disillusion,” at once removed from life and jumping into it head first by confronting an unforgiving reality that fails to conform to expectations.

Amidst the complexity of the perspectives these connections encourage, as we remain both captivated and confused by simultaneous adoption of opposing points of view, the poem’s structure offers several landmarks. In all verse paragraphs but one, a single line, longer than the others, juts out to catch our eyes. Alliteration and assonance in the end words of these lines encourage us to examine them as an half-excised group — a small poem in which their similar lengths do not separate them from the other lines:

Your eyes diffused with holly lights  
beyond your moonstone whiteness  
a lily loaded with sucrose dew  
conjoins long-vanished dragons —  
framed in the facing profiles.

The arrangement of these extracted lines offers a concentrated, less ambiguous dose of the themes that emerge more slowly in the original poem: concrete versus abstract (“holly lights” and “moonstone whiteness”), the contrast between good and evil (“whiteness” versus “dragons”), and appearance versus reality (“conjures long-vanished dragons”). Unlike the larger poem, which ends with portraits of specific, actual people to whom Cunard had relationships — and thus implies that Cunard’s reputation “as a fondant nun” depends on its placement between the fame of other, extant figures — the smaller poem concludes that, grammatically, Cunard’s power and mystique (her possession of “moonstone whiteness” and role as a “lily loaded with sucrose dew”) wholly depend on our perspective — how our “eyes” are “diffused,” the propensity of our imaginations to “conjure long-vanished dragons,” and the manner in which we “frame” the outward appearance, or “profile,” we “face.”

Despite the gaps between polarities that Loy’s depiction of Cunard refuses to fill, our inability to reconcile these conflicts is exactly what makes the portrait attractive: it pushes us to accept opposing extremes of multiple continua at the same time, offering only context as resolution (“framed in the facing profiles/ of Princess Murat and George Muir”) — and even that token is full of holes. Princess Murat, while a real person, could easily represent several different actual people, and George Moore, despite his paternal relationship with Cunard, may or may not have been her biological father<sup>4</sup>. Indeed, based on these unrelenting polarizations, Loy suggests that ascribing beauty and mystery to the relationships between them is the only avenue by which we — or Cunard — create meaning and identity.

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<sup>4</sup> Moore had an affair with Cunard’s mother, and Cunard suspected she might be his daughter.

### *Apology of Genius*

As in “Joyce’s Ulysses,” the tone in “Apology of Genius” relies primarily on irony for its power. What she titles an apology is not conciliatory at all, but rather a modern representation of the medieval apologia, or defense, of the license allowed artistic minds, and a defiant diatribe against critics and censors. As she vacillates between presentation of the geniuses’ perspective and that of the onlookers, her tone moves between irony, harsh criticism, and self-assured declaration that the hierarchy she presents is the truth. Loy reflects these transitions and the impact of each perspective on the other through her choices in diction, form and imagery.

“Apology of Genius,” one of Loy’s least tonally ambiguous poems, explores the dynamics, particularly conflicts, between geniuses and the world they inhabit. Rather than presenting a romanticized picture of the genius as a poverty-stricken, misunderstood loner who finds success after death, she describes an acridly factual hierarchy in which geniuses occupy a distinct, divine position: “Ostracized as we are with God.” They may be indeed poor — “We.../ feed upon the wind and stars/ and pulverous pastures of poverty” — and misunderstood — “unknowing/ how perturbing lights our spirit” — but in Loy’s depiction, these difficulties exist because no one recognizes their nature as higher beings. According to the poem, no amount of love and understanding can change this caste, though “You may give birth to us/ or marry us,” for geniuses are only on earth to fulfill the call of their brilliance and therefore constitute their own class.

Despite Loy’s characteristically difficult diction, the words most crucial to tone in “Apology of Genius” are, unexpectedly, the small, mundane ones. As with “Gertrude Stein,”

here she carefully selects and strategically places prepositions that determine the direction of the perspective she presents. The initial and most striking example occurs in the first line and immediately differentiates Loy's angle from that of her intended audience when she prefaces her report of events with "Ostracized as we are *with* God" (emphasis mine). Since the preposition we expect to follow "ostracized" is "from," as "ostracized" by definition divides one entity from another, generally more powerful entity, and one of the entities here is "God," "with" forces our attention to who the pronoun "we" designates. At first the tone feels intimate, as the possibility that "we" includes Loy and ourselves — humanity — in an elite group that is "with God. However, the next several lines introduce other groups, such as "the watchers" and "lepers of the moon," as well as "you," between which we must distinguish in order to determine which group fits into which category. This distraction is important, considering the disparities in value, as one group is associated "with God," while the others are "magically diseased" or connected to "civilized wastes." The otherwise relatively insignificant "with," then, becomes essential, as it establishes a question that pervades the rest of the poem — who is "with" whom? Who is on whose side? Where do we, as readers, fit into the scheme? Our ability to answer these questions and comply with the consequent categorization determines our rejection or acceptance of the higher plane on which Loy places herself and the other artists (assuming the latter constitutes "we").

Other prepositions in critical locations pose similar dilemmas. In line 13, for example — "until you turn on us your smooth fools' faces" — the word "on" implies a metaphorical betrayal that the expected "to" or "from" would not. "Turn on us" evokes a confrontational, adversarial intent that "to" or "from," because of their clearly designated directions and

allegiances, do not. “On,” on the other hand, carries suggestions of both physical connection and betrayal, of the “you” as simultaneously joined to and separated from the poem’s “we.” Similarly, the choice of “upon” in line 16 (“who feed upon the wind and stars”), while not necessarily more or less commonplace than the possible alternative “from,” places the “we” above the “wind and stars” — atop them — and in effect, equal to or greater than the forces of nature.

The structural arrangement of “Apology of Genius” further evidences the conflicts presented by Loy’s diction. The first verse paragraph (of nine) is set apart, as if it were a preface stating the crux of an argument to be explored in the rest of the poem — a la Sir Philip Sidney’s *Apology for Poetry* — and the first line is further to the left of the pages, as is a heading that would begin a letter (if Loy were writing a specific person an apology). As a preface, it sets up the parties who will vie for control throughout the poem — the “we” and the “watchers,” the opposition between them evident in ostracism, the passive/active roles inherent in watching, and the fact that “the watchers/... reverse their signals on our track.” In the battle of the opposing parties, it is clear that the “we” is allotted far more agency in that battle, as “the watchers” are initially denoted by their role — their position as part of a larger, dominate whole — instead of by a more personal and conversational pronoun. If a letter heading, in addition to its location on the far left, the first line is followed by a dash, which sets apart “Ostracized as we are with God” as the part of the letter that would use a term of address or affection and the addressee’s name, reinforcing our initial and later confusing invitation into the solidarity of the marginalized “we.”



Structural variations in the last half of the poem also designate transitions between perspectives that indicate whether Loy voices the sentiments of “you” or “us.” In the sixth and seventh verse paragraphs, for instance, on either side of “The cuirass of the soul/ still shines,” lines enclosed in dashes, are arguments presenting opposition between two warring parties. The separation of that line indicates (much like the dashes following “we are with God” and “our destiny”) the existence of a third, less tangible entity to which “we” are closer but that also includes “you.” Both interrupting the argument and making a statement free of either party, the aesthetics of this entity are universal in that they “still shine” regardless of the understanding between “you” and “us” and render both opposing parties less powerful in its presence: “*we* are unaware” and “*you* confuse.” Likewise, the separation and capitalization of “the Beautiful” in the penultimate verse paragraph starkly divides the “we” who “forge the dusk of Chaos” from “your eyes,” the greater force again bridging the two lesser, conflicting forces.

Also like Sidney’s *Apology for Poetry*, Loy’s poem justifies art by placing the artist in a hierarchical position above man but below God. Despite the cutting irony of much of the poem and as vehement as some of her criticism of man is — a description of him as “buttocks bared in aboriginal mockeries,” for example — Loy never allows man or genius (in Loy’s circles, “genius” undoubtedly means “artist” or “writer,” and “man” means everyone else) to lose humility and connection to one another, as evidence by the ambiguity in her choices of imagery. For instance, in the second verse paragraph, it is not entirely clear who the “lepers of the moon/ all magically diseased” includes, though these folks are obviously part of a rejected, stigmatized group. The following lines imply inclusion of both “we” and

“you” — distinguishing, of course, that “we” are different, “innocent/ of our luminous sores,” but acknowledging the likeness between the two in their shared suffering. The bathos of geniuses as “sacerdotal clowns” conveys even greater self-effacement, and though they “feed upon the wind and stars,” they also feed (with the common man) upon “pulverous pastures of poverty,” alliteratively harsh to reinforce the suffering both groups face. In addition, genius and man must both struggle to accept incomprehension of something greater than themselves. For man, it is genius and certain artworks; for genius, it is the forces that shape him. “Disciplines,” while “beyond...laws,” are still “curious” to the genius, and “the cuirass of the soul” still renders him “unaware.” This concept comes to fruition in verse paragraph eight, where the geniuses, in the theoretical, intangible “raw caverns of the Increate” must “forge the dusk of Chaos,” with the end result of that effort with something universally aesthetically pleasing and concrete: “jewellery.”

So, although the irony of the poem requires the hierarchy of man, genius, God, and it remains throughout the poem’s entirety, specific diction choices, structural variations, and imagery create an ambiguity that grants the hierarchy fluidity. The subtlety of these choices — for example, using prepositions to make points just as crucial to the poem as image would, or continuing an interrupted argument to detract excessive attention from the interrupting phrase — reinforce the poem’s irony by illustrating that “the censor’s scythe” will seek to destroy only that which it can obviously discriminate against: the “ostracized...lepers of the moon.” However, it will also fail to understand the artistic threat of those who walk among the masses and share its difficulties. The fluidity of the hierarchy Loy presents is precisely what allows its continued existence.

*The Widow's Jazz*

Rather than stressing intellectual process over emotional reaction through subject matter or writing style — as does much of Loy's poetry — "The Widow's Jazz" explores a personal emotional crisis, and its tone reflects that distress. So instead of luring us into the poem by challenging us with confusing abstractions, Loy elicits our affective response, and thus immediate connection to the poem, by attracting us sensually. The poem charts the journey of the poet's inner conflicts with her physical desires and memories of her lost lover, and seeks resolution in five stages: solace, confusion and anger, despair, a short bout of hope, and finally, nihilistic distance. Despite the distinctions between them, these phases are tied together by an undercurrent of unrest that manifests itself in tension between abstract and concrete imagery, form, and power struggles between the poet and her environment.

While the latter half of the poem explicitly laments the loss of Arthur Cravan, Loy's second husband who disappeared in 1918, the first half finds her immersed in sensual pleasures — sex couched in the language of jazz, and jazz couched in the language of sex. Barraging us with concrete, easily accessible images at the poem's beginning, such as "white flesh," "wail," and "a tangle of pale snakes," and the simple excitement of "Chicago! Chicago!," Loy initially encourages us — unlike in most of her poems — to react emotionally and immediately, and to leave the moment "uninterpretable." Phrases such as "groves of grace" and "maiden saplings" suggest that this Epicurean absorption in the present inspires actualization, as the plant metaphor begins when Loy connects the sensual to the spiritual with "Haunted by wind instruments."

Once she awakens to “the furtive cargoes of the floor,” however, the metaphor becomes perverted, reflecting the companion effect of the sensual immersion: eventually the “brazen shallows of dissonance” overtake “the slant to the oboes” and spiritual inspiration turns into “black brute-angels.” Tonally, she then descends into detached despair, able to refer to Cravan only in the third person, and once she wholly exposes her emotional vulnerability and addresses him as “you,” she reverts abruptly to immersion in the present physical experience of “cajoling jazz.” By this time, though, the sensual is little consolation, as she dismisses “the echoes of the flesh” as “a synthesis/ of racial caress,” and mires her hope between the two extremes — “The seraph and the ass” — before again settling into detachment.

Caught up in the excited tone of the poem’s beginning, we may fail to notice the emerging struggle between chaos and order that mirrors Loy’s internal struggle. Dichotomies are obvious in the first line — “white flesh” juxtaposed with “negro soul” — but we get distracted because the opposed elements, rather than battling against one another in a logical and grammatical continuation of the sentence, focus on the more important draw of the excitement around them: “Chicago! Chicago!” These dichotomies present order through polarization and parallel (though opposed) adjective-noun constructions, and the verb and preposition arrange the pairs in a hierarchy — “quakes to” suggests fear or awe, with “the negro soul” as its object. At the same time, the location of the verb “quakes” right between opposite elements of a binary relationship foreshadows the exposure of internal turmoil the sensual experience eventually engenders. However, the dismissal of this structure through the spontaneity of “Chicago! Chicago!” as evidenced by the next two lines,

propels the order into a chaotic “tangle” in which music, by degrees, subtly transforms the abstract and concrete into their opposites. “White” becomes “pale” and “flesh” becomes “snakes” — and the replacement structure grants the previously reactive entity agency, as “stirs” implies more thoughtful emotional response than the visceral “quakes.”

Though inconsistency evidences her internal battle, verse paragraph three reverses the setup: untempered impulse on the outside, restraint of that impulse on the inside. Specifically, Loy encourages us to linger on the emotional immediacy of “lethargic ecstasy” through its diction (and the fact that even the “uninterpretable wail” is subject to its entrancement), and to forget everything except prolonging the moment’s pleasure. Despite the attention we pay it, though, that “ecstasy” is bound by controlling forces on both sides that enclose it within an organized power structure: it dictates the influence of “An uninterpretable wail” and is under the command “of steps.” This hierarchy belies the spontaneity of “tangle” and “ecstasy” and exposes Loy’s gravitation toward the comfort of order, despite efforts to free herself from it. The “wail” begins as an “uninterpretable” expression, but is indeed soon interpreted as pleasure, then as “steps,” and finally and reluctantly, as the single entity “primeval goal,” the last a turning point where sexual metaphor, progression toward greater order, and sudden shift to abstraction simultaneously propel Loy to the height of physical and intellectual capacity and complete emotional withdrawal.

Her sudden transition into dialect and perfect rhyme in the fourth verse paragraph attempts to resolve this conflict by reinstating the order of the polarized categories of the first two lines: “White man quit his actin’ wise/ colored folk hab de moon in dere eyes.” This

time the singular and more formal “White man” versus the many and colloquial “colored folk” — with language that expresses a concrete, overt facet of culture that focuses our attention on the sound of the words rather than their meaning. By pulling us into the moment again, Loy distracts us from her lapse into intellectual detachment, making us subject to the face she presents to the people around her (and, according to the poem, to herself) and ignorant of her grief.

The beginning of the plant metaphor in verse paragraph five signals Loy’s attempt to straddle the boundary between the sensual comforts of the present and acknowledgement of that solace as unfulfilling. By juxtaposing concrete images with abstract concepts through connections that disallow polarization, she keeps either element from dominating and briefly maintains an equilibrium that admits the emotional edge on her retreat to abstraction, a concession that prevents her (at this point) from believing that absorption in abstract, intellectual analysis will quell her disturbance any more effectively than immersion in the immediate physical environment. While not ultimately consoling, this balance momentarily fuses her intellectual and emotional processes into a larger, spiritually ordered growth. For instance, “instruments,” “groves,” and “saplings,” the tangible images, exist only in partnership with abstractions that transform them into metaphors of the ethereal — “groves of *grace*,” “*Haunted by wind* instruments” — all of which participate in cause-and-effect relationships that attempt to create a spiritually sensible structure to which Loy’s experience can conform. Even the hint of sexuality in these lines — a crucial and overt facet of Loy’s previous immersion in the sensual present — is iced with Victorian euphemism: “the maiden saplings slant to the oboes.” Isn’t that a pretty description of sex? Yes, a little too pretty, as

the order purported by these relationships endows the concrete elements with influence: she is “*Haunted by wind instruments*” and the “*saplings/ slant to the oboes,*” the increase in specificity suggesting the intensity of her focus on them.

So, though this structure imposes order, its hierarchical arrangement implies an imbalance toward the physical that belies the lack of the same resolution it is intended to elicit. The reader, too, because of our precedent concentration on the immediate sensual stimuli, is more likely to notice “instruments” and “groves” and pay attention to the feeling of “gr” sounds than to focus on “Haunted” or “grace” — or at least to interpret them in a more concrete sense, conjuring the musicians’ physical grace or the propensity of “wind instruments” to loiter at jazz clubs. Until we see physical power destroyed — “the electric crown/ crashes” — we remain mired in the present.

When this strategy fails to provide her resolution, Loy abandons the abstract and reverts to the sensual inundation of the first three verse paragraphs, with “and shampooed gigolos/ prowl to the sobbing taboos” — this time with sadness instead of pleasure. “Taboos” — the only abstraction — is so aurally connected to the emotionally intense “sobbing” and the other concrete images that it practically becomes tangible, nearly completing a return to the logical comfort of polarization and a departure from the ephemeral balance of verse paragraphs five and six. Her continued and more dispersed use of concrete imagery in verse paragraph seven to enact the hierarchy’s speedy demise and her admission of the order as a coping construct (rather than a fixed reality) mark a transition into the next phase of mourning. Not only is the “crown” — the top position on the hierarchy — “electric,” implying its subjection to a hand at a switch, but it is connected to “An,”

suggesting that it is one of many, and via its plurality less significant than “the,” the article we expect to accompany “crown.” As this post, which represents the veneer and highest, most outward point of Loy’s attempt to impose structure on her own psychological state, “crashes” to the bottom, she exposes her hand: nothing “crashes” *to* “the floor,” because the “furtive cargoes” — her unresolved, hidden emotions — have been “*of* the floor” all along.

Once her house of cards no longer provides protection, Loy loses her illusions about her control over both the pieces in her fractured internal structure and her place as a unit within a larger hierarchy, and consequently the poem’s tone changes to confusion and bitterness. Predicated on those illusions, the comfortable, comprehensible “contours” in her internal and external worlds “dissolve” because she can no longer believe they are “pruned” into meaningful shapes by her or a higher power, emphasized by the poem’s first instance of a lower case letter beginning a sentence. Having exhausted the safety of the concrete, the once pleasure-inducing jazz metaphor falls apart (“wind instruments/ in groves of grace” become “the brazen shallows of dissonance”) as she again reverts to abstraction, and intertwines confusedly with a dark, frightening perversion of the plant metaphor, now governed by supernatural evil that takes the “contours” of human shape in order to manipulate her: “The black brute-angels/ in their human gloves/ bellow through a monstrous growth of metal trunks.” Rather than finding comfort in spirituality, then, she views it as “encroaching” upon her actualization — and in a self-conscious regression to childhood, mocks it in its own language for spoiling her fun: “and impish musics/ crumble the ecstatic loaf/ before a swooning flock of doves.” Jazz’s “uninterpretable wail” is degraded to “impish musics,” the “lethargic ecstasy” of sensual immersion turns into a bitter parody of



Christ's breaking bread, and doves, ordinarily symbolic of peace — a position of kind control — submit to the power of a higher entity and only have influence over the now-defunct solace of music. The exposure of Loy's imbalanced physical absorption as a default escape instead of true resolution triggers her ire toward *both* the havens she sought, rendering the abstract and the concrete failed consolations. Similarly, the destruction of any faith she has in internal and external order through hierarchy — however loose the requirements — not only removes such structure as potential emotional comfort, but, as evidenced by her fusion of metaphors and backward growth, also hampers her ability to create that structure intellectually.

With nowhere to retreat, Loy concedes to despair and announces her mourning unabashedly with the single-word line beginning verse paragraph thirteen: "Cravan," her lost husband's name. In reaction to the blow of the admission, she quickly swings back to the perceived safety of describing her feelings through abstractions such as "colossal absentee" and "incandescent memory." Progression of these metaphors toward greater intangibility as the lines grow longer in an effort to prolong her distance from inevitable suffering, implies that regardless of its inability to quell her turmoil, *any* degree or period of removal is preferable to full understanding of reality's horror.

While the diction here is far less immediately emotionally evocative than "black brute-angels" or "monstrous growth of metal trunks" because of both the intellectual process required to react to its abstractions and the softness (but not quite musicality) of its pronunciation — "black brute-angels," for example, is slower out of the mouth and more aurally jarring than "incandescent memory" — Loy's sudden regression to more abstract

imagery evidences her affective state via its stark disparity from her state in the verse paragraphs stocked with concrete images. For example, while “colossal absentee” and “substitute dark” both elicit our immediate reactions to physical stimuli (the “colossal” form of Loy’s husband, a heavyweight boxer, and “dark”), the visceral impact of those stimuli is greatly tempered by their juxtaposition with the abstractions “absentee” and “substitute.” We must so engage our perception in making intellectual sense of these phrases (particularly considering the sudden tonal shift between the 12th and 13th verse paragraphs), and primarily contextualize them through each other instead of finding the meaning of a single abstraction surrounded by concrete images, that the intellectual intensity required renders us unlikely to pay close attention to her emotional withdrawal or respond to it affectively.

In effect, Loy exerts control over her emotions by voicing them ironically on her own terms, expressing emotional intensity through intellectual absorption and emotional distance through sensual absorption, a strategy that forces us to react *opposite* to what she feels, rather than experience her emotions in tandem — and consequently keeps us at arm’s length.

While the next few verse paragraphs still find Loy in a state of admitted despair, she repeats the transition into compromise between the emotional and intellectual and between the abstract and concrete that she moved into after her revelation of the failure of polarity in verse paragraph five. For example, the balance achieved in verse paragraphs 15 and 16 —

seared by the flames of sound

the widowed urn

holds impotently

your murdered laughter

— expresses her pain through a combination of veiled references to Cravan’s death and the reintroduction of the jazz/sound metaphor, which both spares her the agony of explicit emotional vulnerability and builds a bridge with the reader by embodying that distress in language with which we are already familiar. An elusive phrase such as “incandescent memory,” for instance, furnishes us with plenty of room to read a multitude of meanings which may or may not coincide with Loy’s, and which may or may not connect to her pain. “Suttee/ seared by the flames of sound,” on the other hand, does not allow much ambiguity — or emotional distance — especially considering the contrast between the implication of sound here and in the first half of the poem.

The search for balance (and thus order) is also evidenced, as in verse paragraphs five through eight, by a series of causal relationships that struggle to create sense from an inherently senseless event. This chain begins with the abstractions in verse paragraphs 13 and 14 — “the substitute dark/ roll[ing] *to* the incandescent memory/ *of* love’s survivor...seared *by* the flames *of* sound.” The process ultimately ends with the tangible world in the position of power, leaving Loy and her intellectual absorption “impotent” and confined in “the widowed urn.” Despite (or perhaps because of) her increased candor, the strategy of balance again fails, as immediately following a perfect merger of short and long lines, direct naming of the difficulty (“Husband”), and fusion of the physical and ethereal (“cuckold” and “death”), she returns to envelopment in the sensual and restates the original intention of the music metaphor: “while this cajoling jazz/ blows with its tropic breath.” While she now appears to understand the guaranteed failure of pushing this strategy to its end, as illustrated by her transition to abstraction after only two lines of tangibility and aural

sensuality (rhythmic, intricate assonance in “cajoling jazz/ blows with its tropic breath”), her near-complete vulnerability only a few verse paragraphs before has enabled her to negotiate the polarities she integrates throughout the poem. The following ten lines, unlike the rest of the poem, strike a delicate balance between tranquility and affective withdrawal.

Grounded by acceptance of her loss (as much as she achieves within the poem, at least), Loy gains the capacity to experience pleasure and hope without dependence on physical or intellectual extremes. Unlike the sensual and intellectual intensity of most of the poem (as evidenced by her inability to go more than a few lines without an emotionally loaded action verb such as “prowl” or “quakes”), verse paragraphs 19 and 20 (and the first two lines of 21) contain not “the flesh” but its “echoes,” verbs that remain calm, such as “converse” and “receded,” and the only verbless verse paragraph in the poem, which is anchored instead by the conflict-resolving “synthesis.” So, rather than thrashing from abstract to concrete and emotional to intellectual like a trapped animal, Loy discovers “this unerring esperanto” through interaction both within and between high and low points in the hierarchy she presents: “among...The seraph and the ass.” Notably, while the high and low demarcations remain meaningful, the “synthesis” requires moderation on both sides. For the elements of the hierarchy to connect successfully, they cannot view the other elements as extremes or opposites, but only as complements in need of one another. Hence “The seraph and the ass” — entities that occupy high and low positions, but not the *highest* or *lowest* — “converse” (alone on a line to imply its significance to the process) “of everlit delight.”

Despite improved equilibrium, though, the structural anchor of prepositionally-denoted causal relationships exposes Loy’s remnant allegiance to the physical world she

primarily inhabits. She exists “among the echoes *of* the flesh,” and however perfect, her “esperanto” is ultimately “*of* the earth,” a location that engenders interactions “*of* everlit delight.” She characterizes both that pleasure and her inherent human “desire” as governed by eventual and inevitable gravitation “*to* the distance of the dead” — ultimately subject to corporeal influence. However, her less passionate attachment to that draw (in contrast to the first 18 verse paragraphs of the poem) imbues nouns that, dependent on context, we would view as either concrete or abstract, with both qualities at once. “Dead” and “desire,” for example, if introduced in graphic scenes of corpses or sex, conjure tangible images even though the words themselves describe states of being. If surrounded only by abstract concepts, we interpret them as metaphorical, intellectual descriptors. For instance, when we read “as my desire/ receded/ to the distance of the dead,” we hear about Loy’s emotions, but don’t feel them ourselves. Loy prefaces this verse paragraph with a series of images that she balances between the two extremes, so we experience the relationship between the physical and the abstract — and consequently, emotional and intellectual — connections.

In light of her struggle with the physical and the inherent human difficulty of denying its existence, Loy’s conclusion of the poem with *the absence* of the tangible, *defined by* the tangible, strongly suggests that despite her hope and recent brush with “everlit delight,” Cravan’s physical absence still overpowers her consciousness, and that she is ultimately unable to interpret the loss — and her environment — without his disappearance as a lens. Despite the presence of alluring sensual stimuli, such as “cajoling jazz/ blow[ing] with its tropic breath,” Loy’s “search” is, in the end, characterized by a perceived *lack* of sound (“silence”) and physical humanity (“unpeopled space”), with no clear affective attachment to

that journey. Physicality remains the barrier between her and him, and she attempts to cross that separation by defining her environment through emotional detachment from the physical — in effect, pushing her “desire” to “recede/ to the distance of the dead” by considering an aurally arousing milieu “silence.”

Though Loy’s intimacy with us ebbs and flows, overall she keeps the reader, too, at a calculated distance throughout the poem. As part of the physical world, we are subject to the separation she creates between sensual provocation and affective attachment: we are people, but exist in “unpeopled space,” as if her stoicism toward our presence negates the meaning of physical reality, and thus of our relationship to her. Consequently, in order to determine her actual affective state, we must navigate through her efforts to remove herself from us, process the poem intellectually the same way we read her other poems, and succumb to her game, as we are denied full connection with either the world as she sees it or her internally created environment.

Except for a few overt expressions of her despair, such as “Husband/ how secretly you cuckold me with death,” she equips us with sparse tools — roundabout, complicated allusions to her feelings: capitalization of words (“Cravan,” “Husband,” “The seraph,” “The black brute-angels”), variations in form (the switch in line 17 from two-line verse paragraphs), struggles between hierarchical elements (“the encroaching Eros/ in adolescence”), and negotiation of the relationship between the concrete and the abstract. Always leaving us a step behind, she forces us to determine her former emotional state by signaling us when she transitions to a new phase of resolution. Consequently, we experience her loss as she does: immersed in the immediate and suddenly confronted with jarring

changes, we must return to previous verse paragraphs to find out what we missed and attempt to create an understandable pattern of logic that makes that change meaningful.

## Conclusion

Loy's exploration of the conflicts created when we experience art provides no answers, and indeed, the closer sources of art come to her personally, the more polarized her reactions become. She can make relatively objective, intellectual observations about art as a medium for philosophy, as evidenced by her appreciation for Futurism's reverence for the abstract in "Brancusi's Golden Bird," and still retain some distance when discussing her fellow artists, as she does in "Jules Pascin": "So this is death/ to rise to the occasion/ a shadow/ to a shadowy persuasion." However, once those abstractions enter her world in concrete terms — when she discusses her friends' Muse ("Nancy Cunard"), the role of herself and other artists in an unaccommodating milieu ("Apology of Genius"), and her attempts to find artistic consolation after the disappearance of her husband, she becomes "the binarian's nightmare...marked by so many seeming contradictions, counter-allegiances, and inconsistencies that she was often considered unbalanced" (Conover xiv).

It is precisely these "contradictions" and "counter-allegiances" that make Loy's poetry interesting and challenging. Given a poem with two conflicting tones — as is the case with all her art poems — we are challenged to resist alliance with one tone or another, but to accept both simultaneously (no matter how incongruent), and thus gain a more profound understanding of the conflicts she presents. Readers who are unwilling to do this work will probably ignore Loy, because the diction, aural dynamics, form, and subject matter of her poetry are neither easily accessible initially nor neatly wrapped up at each poem's end. Instead, these poems engender more questions than they answer, create more conflict than they resolve, and are not warm or playful in tone, and make no attempt to apologize for their



difficulty. Aside from Loy's sheer skill in creating these intricate difficulties, her unabashed confidence and unwillingness to release her readers from conflict begs for canonization, though Loy herself would not care one way or the other. If for no other reason than the provocation of literary debate — for “you either become a sworn believer or a fast enemy” (Conover xix) — I would love to see *The Lost Lunar Baedeker* in the hands of more students.

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