

## Purging the Birdcage: The Dissolution of Space in Mina Loy's Poetry<sup>1</sup>

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*Mina Loy's writing is in every sense an embodiment of movement; indeed, she isolates "stasis" as a critical obstacle to creative freedom and to the very apprehension of real experience. She articulates her position on movement in close dialogue with her readings of philosopher Henri Bergson, who critiques the tendency of the intellect to consider matter as "provisionally final"—rather than in a state of flux, a tendency that is enabled by the encroachment of spatial terms upon conscious experience. This essay examines Loy's 'Ladies in an Aviary', a rarely discussed chapter in her unpublished novel *The Child and the Parent*, and her 'Feminist Manifesto'—two texts that encapsulate what I contend is a career-long task of emancipating language from space.*

"Feel me", drawled Time, "How endless I am, Feel how I am all bare, with nothing on for you to distinguish me by. Count me", jeered Time. Hoping to save myself in space, I turned to the room again and tried to cling to form; but design on a scene of devastation is so unruly that I could find nothing to sustain my equilibrium. I tried to balance mass, to rearrange pattern, and keep them in place, but everything fell back into the same wrong shape again as soon as I moved my mind.<sup>2</sup>

Time's challenge in Mina Loy's unpublished manuscript for *The Child and the Parent* dares the reader to impose upon it the constructs of space, to combat time's endlessness by counting it. Yet this attempt to 'cling' to form and ignore the continuous flux of time cannot keep up with the movements of the mind, for space collapses into the 'wrong shape' and cannot accurately document authentic experience. Experience, Loy cautions, cannot be safely contained in spatial terms. Nor is such containability desirable, for in her writing she alludes to a history of women being confined to their domestic spaces, and announces that in order for women to experience real life, spatial perimeters must be dismantled. At the beginning of her poetic career, Loy identified 'stasis' as a critical obstacle to lived and artistic freedom; she isolated tendencies to fix women in place in the Victorian etiquette of her childhood, and in the traditional Italian households near which she lived in Florence between the years 1906-1916. Thereafter, the threat of stasis pervaded Loy's career—that is, her idiosyncratic but significant conceptions of the poetic body, the body of the poetry, and her theory of creativity stem - at the outset - from this initial concern with space, stasis and movement.

Precisely what defines space for Loy demands particular attention, for it acquires various forms and is often difficult to pin down; indeed, it is the object of this essay to chart how space is formulated through her writing and how she dismantles its operations. Loy's conception of spatial constructs emerges in response to the Florentine domestic house; space comes to represent that which is bound up within limits and tidily contained. Yet to a certain extent, there

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<sup>1</sup>For permission to reproduce material from Loy's published and unpublished work, I am tremendously grateful to Roger L. Conover on behalf of the Estate of Mina Loy.

<sup>2</sup>Mina Loy, 'Arrival on the scene of an accident' in *The Child and the Parent*, Mina Loy Papers, Yale Collection of American Literature (YCAL), Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library (BRBML), Box.1 fo.12.

is also an undeniable paradox at play here, for to define space as it is set out by Loy is to set the term within its own limits, when it is the very notion of limits and parameters that Loy most furiously contests. It is perhaps of no surprise, then, that space arises in Loy's texts under many different guises, or that it is a particularly thorny concept that too readily eludes definition. Moreover, as Loy develops her idiosyncratic aesthetic principles in response to a variety of stimuli (Florentine houses, what she identifies as her Victorian upbringing, Bergsonian metaphysics, as well as Italian Futurism), her conception of space appears at times to be rather unstable. I contend, however, that each variation of space that appears throughout Loy's career is metonymically linked through the trope of the body: the corporeal real world body, bodies of matter, and bodies of text. Thus, these spatial perimeters are not confined to the literal spaces of the house (the physical limit which keeps gendered bodies circumscribed to domesticity), but extend to the divide between fiction and reality, the mutual-exclusivity of signifiers, and to the very containability of syntactical units in language.

It is thus the purpose of this essay to identify Loy's overarching aesthetics and to examine how it manifests in her writing. In Loy's own words, '[e]very time we recognise the work of any given master it is by the singularity of this map of his aesthetic system'<sup>3</sup>; I thus purport to uncover the map of this particular modernist master's aesthetic system and its textual operations. To this end, I take as my objects Loy's 'Feminist Manifesto', and her 'Ladies in an Aviary'. A rarely discussed chapter in her unpublished novel *The Child and the Parent*, two texts that encapsulate what I contend is a career-long task of emancipating language from space. I argue that the 'Feminist Manifesto' can be read as an early announcement of Loy's intentions towards her art; written in 1914, it signals that these intentions were already forming at the outset of her career. Further, the 'Manifesto' was penned while Loy was still living in Florence, and as such, it was developed at a time when she was most actively negotiating the consequences of Futurism for women and the threat of the domestic house. Indeed, the same period that gave rise to the 'Manifesto' also saw the production of her 'house' poetry<sup>4</sup> and her satires on Futurism.<sup>5</sup> 'Ladies in an Aviary,' on the other hand, was written some time during the 1920s. Yet despite the lapse in time between this work and her 'house' poetry of the previous decade, 'Ladies in an Aviary' has much in common with the earlier poetry; it exposes the same concerns about stasis, movement, and their connection to domestic spaces, and thus reveals a sustained interest in these issues. Read in tangent with one another, 'Feminist Manifesto' can be seen to lay the groundwork for an aesthetic that continues to be expounded in radical ways years later. Moreover, both texts embody more than one manifestation of 'space': the 'Manifesto' undoes the boundaries that circumscribe signification and meaning, but also the linguistic spaces of syntactical units; while 'Ladies in an Aviary' challenges the impenetrability of women's bodies, the domestic house, and also the parameters that circumscribe narrative space. Both texts, therefore, encompass a consideration of (and the leap between) differing manifestations of space that nonetheless are explored according to the same logic: to isolate their perceived boundaries and to reveal that they are artificial.

Both 'Feminist Manifesto' and 'Ladies in an Aviary' are inscribed with Loy's most significant influences. The manifesto as a form was frequently employed by the Futurists, and its belligerent declarations resonate with Marinetti's writing, and 'Ladies in an Aviary' pursued the same line of thought as her earlier Florentine 'house' poetry—the key difference being that 'Ladies in an Aviary' appears in a novel that has strong biographical resonances with Loy's childhood, whereas her earlier poetry is expressly concerned with Loy's experience of Florence.

<sup>3</sup>Mina Loy, 'The Metaphysical Pattern in Aesthetics' in *Stories and Essays of Mina Loy*, Sara Crangle (ed.), Dalkey Archive Press, Champaign, 2011, p.263.

<sup>4</sup>'Italian Pictures' was published in 1914, 'Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots' in 1914, and 'At the Door of the House' and 'The Effectual Marriage of Gina and Miovanni' were both written around 1915.

<sup>5</sup>'Giovanni Franchi', 'One O'clock at Night', and 'Sketch of a Man on a Platform' were published in 1915, Loy's short plays 'Cittabapini' and 'Collision' were published in 1915, and her play 'The Pamperers' was published in 1916 (to cite only a handful of a large collection of Futurist-inspired writing).

Yet, while many of these influences have been previously examined at length, there remains, comparatively, a critical silence surrounding Loy's reading of Henri Bergson; I argue that Bergson's metaphysics are particularly productive for clarifying the operations of space in Loy's writing. This is not to suggest that his influence has gone unnoticed; indeed, Loy's debt to Bergson is frequently cited. These citations, however, are often fleeting and do not pause to evaluate in detail how this debt is manifested.<sup>6</sup> A notable exception is Kouidis's *Mina Loy: American Modernist Poet*, in which she identifies Bergsonian *durée* in Loy's 'Parturition' and 'Costa San Giorgio', and argues that *durée* fails spectacularly in the static imagery of 'Songs to Joannes'—however, Kouidis's monograph was published in 1980, and since then, sustained accounts of the workings of Bergson in Loy's writing practices have been curiously absent from published scholarship.

Yet, Loy's writing does not adhere to Bergson in a rigid way—indeed, as I noted earlier, Bergsonian metaphysics is but one of several influences. Rather, Bergson provides a springboard from which Loy's poetics make intuitive leaps. She thus takes Bergson's assertions that the intellect erroneously attaches itself to the solid and the static, and extends these in a radical way to both the experience of women, and to her craft. Bergson argues that the intellect 'deals only with the solid' and cannot grasp that which is fluid in matter, and thus 'whatever is life in the living will escape [the intellect] altogether'.<sup>7</sup> That is, in order for us to control matter effectively, we must make it discontinuous rather than fluid, must consider it '*provisionally final*' rather than in a process of change, and must split matter into measurable units: only of the discontinuous and the immobile does the intellect 'form a clear idea'.<sup>8</sup> And it is the discontinuous and the immobile that characterises the various spaces that Loy pulls apart. These differing spaces are interconnected through her contestation of solid and stable parameters, and through the impingement of these upon different 'bodies,' both literal and topological. And it is here again that Loy departs from Bergson, for she appropriates what is a metaphysics of consciousness, and interrogates its possible consequences for the gendered body, for signification, and for artistic practice. The concept of space is thus integral to Loy's understanding of the body and transgression in three ways: it reveals how stasis engenders a misapprehension of real life; it uncovers gendered power relations that aim to keep particular bodies locked inside domestic spaces; and lastly, it re-imagines the limits of poetry as that which can secrete beyond its own perceivable edges. The dismantling of space is thus critical to Loy's work, and it is in the 'Feminist Manifesto' and Loy's 'house' poetry that this is first enacted.

In Loy's 'Feminist Manifesto', this transgression occurs between signifiers, between the labels assigned to 'types' of women; when signifiers are conceived in terms of space, they become mutually exclusive, for like objects, no two words can occupy the same 'space'. Despite the troubled nature of many of its tenets, Loy's 'Feminist Manifesto' can thus be read as an announcement of Loy's intentions towards the treatment of space; it is an overt challenge to the

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<sup>6</sup>For example, Richard Cook notes that Bergson's appeal to 'inexhaustible possibility' were attractive to Loy, and a part of a 'continuum of ideals' including Futurism and Christian Science in "'The 'Infinitarian' and her 'Macro-Cosmic Presence'": the Question of Mina Loy and Christian Science' in *Mina Loy: Woman and Poet*, Keith Tuma and Maera Shreiber (eds), The National Poetry Foundation, Maine, 1998, p.458; Marisa Januzzi states that Loy's appropriates some of her vocabulary from Bergson in 'Mongrel Rose: The "Unerring Esperanto" of Loy's Poetry' in *Woman and Poet*, p.425; Janet Lyon notes that Loy's 'Parturition' reveals a "Bergsonian moment of *durée*" in *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1999, p.165; and Maera Shreiber mentions that Loy's spiritual journey "dip[s] into" Bergsonian metaphysics in 'Divine Women, Fallen Angels: The Late Devotional Poetry of Mina Loy' in *Woman and Poet*, p.469. Carolyn Burke, in *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1996, documents how Loy came in contact with Bergson and suggests that his theories help her to arrive at metaphysical truths (pp.121-122; p.130), but she does not read Loy's poetry through this lens.

<sup>7</sup>Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution* (1911), Arthur Mitchell (trans.), Dover Publications, inc., Mineola, 1998, p.153.

<sup>8</sup>*ibid.*, pp.154-155. Italics Bergson's.

cultural compartmentalisation of women's bodies into tidy, hermetically sealed groups. The manifesto launches an explicit attack against the mutual exclusivity of the concepts of mother and mistress:

The first illusion it is to your interest to demolish, is the division of women into two classes *the mistress, & the mother* every well-balanced & developed woman knows that is not true, Nature has endowed the complete woman with a faculty for expressing herself through *all* her functions—there are *no restrictions* the woman who is so incompletely evolved as to be un-self-conscious in sex, will prove a restrictive influence on the temperamental expansion of the next generation; the woman who is a poor mistress will be an incompetent mother—an inferior mentality—& will enjoy an inadequate apprehension of *Life*.<sup>9</sup>

Loy refers to the exclusivity of the terms 'mother' and 'mistress' as a 'division'—a spatial separation that must be upended. Failure to do so will result in an 'inadequate apprehension of life', a statement that resonates with Bergson's claim that 'metaphysics must transcend concepts in order to read intuition'.<sup>10</sup> It therefore depicts the trappings of grafting a rhetoric of space upon language. Thus while both Loy and Bergson are engaging with different disciplines (art and metaphysics), there is nonetheless an overlap between their approaches; for Bergson and Loy, the relationship between space and language is equally treacherous as the two establish each other reciprocally. Bergson posits that the very operation of language depends upon spatial constructs. It demands that we

establish between our ideas the same sharp and precise distinctions, the same discontinuity, as between material objects. ... It may be asked whether the insurmountable difficulties presented by certain philosophical problems do not arise from our placing side by side in space phenomena which do not occupy space.<sup>11</sup>

Bergson asks if it is not the very nature of language, of our externalisation of one term from the next, which results in philosophical aporia. One of his earliest criticisms of the traversing of spatial terminology into non-spatial concepts is his differentiation between intensity and extensity in the opening of his text, *Time and Free Will*. He defines the extensive as that which can be quantifiably measured against another object. In contrast, intensity refers to internal states—including conscious thought and the impression of sensation—which cannot be compared to one another in any quantifiable way.<sup>12</sup> In other words, in order to speak of measurement we can deal only with extensity; intensity, as it is not bound by the limits of space, cannot be contained, measured, and sat side by side other intensities. This tendency to think of language in terms of extensity is thus not true to the experience of real life; our intellect and the language in which it expresses itself is 'bewildered' when it turns to the living.<sup>13</sup>

Loy's refusal to keep the categories of 'mother' and 'mistress' separate is precisely a resistance to the externalisation and spatialisation of ideas. And yet Bergson argues that concepts are in fact discontinuous, and so his question of whether the discontinuity of language circumvents a true understanding of real life is not extended to abstract concepts which, he

<sup>9</sup>Mina Loy, 'Feminist Manifesto' in *The Lost Lunar Baedeker: Poems of Mina Loy*, Roger L. Conover (ed.), Farrar Strauss & Giroux, New York, 1996, p.154.

<sup>10</sup>Henri Bergson, *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903), T.E. Hulme (trans.), Bobbs-Merrill, Indianapolis, 1955, p.30.

<sup>11</sup>Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* (1913), F.L. Pogson (trans.), Dover Publications, New York, 2001, p.xix.

<sup>12</sup>ibid., pp.1-2.

<sup>13</sup>Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, pp.161-162.

contends, are 'outside each other, like objects in space; and they have the same stability as such objects on which they have been modeled [sic]'.<sup>14</sup> Thus we are confronted by a paradox within Bergson's writing: he contends that the placement of ideas side by side artificially circumvents philosophical inquiry by presenting us with 'insurmountable problems', and yet while he suggests that the comprehension of concepts in terms of space is erroneous, he simultaneously proposes that the human intellect has no choice. Loy is rather more optimistic. Where Bergson does not query the sustainability of the separation between concepts, Loy does. She takes Bergson's critique of extensity's hold over language and pushes it to its logical conclusion: if an understanding of language and concepts is limited by spatial terms, then we must emancipate language from space.

Her 'Feminist Manifesto' performs such an emancipation; it reveals a scepticism about language's tendency to make everything discontinuous, and tries to undo this by using words as a weapon against themselves. Indeed, Burke proposes that Loy's study of Bergson enabled Loy to creatively rethink her real-life struggles with religion, and citizenship; Bergsonian introspection

might show her the way past the painful inner division of which she was so conscious. In the realm of pure duration, perhaps, the contradictions between being Christian and Jewish, British and foreign, respectable and commercial, might dissolve.<sup>15</sup>

Although Burke does not expressly argue it, the part of Bergson's philosophy that enables such a reading is his rejection of the 'gradual incursion of space into the domain of pure consciousness'.<sup>16</sup> Yet, intensive forces are still referred to in spatialised terms. Loy's concern with being 'Christian and Jewish, British and foreign, respectable and commercial' is caused by pitting seemingly dichotomous entities against each other; for example, if we think of being 'British' or 'foreign' in the same manner as we think about matter and extension, these entities are impenetrable and separable in the same way as two measurable objects placed side by side. Bergson contends that we are naturally inclined to think of space even when the object of our inquiry is intensive. Even here in my own sentences it is apparent how space encroaches upon intension: the reference to 'objects' and 'entities', intended as they are to denote intensities, evokes a sense of matter and the extensive. If Bergson's theories of extension and intension could provide Loy with a means to understand how 'British' and 'foreign' rely upon an *extensive* and spatialised mode of comprehension, then indeed Bergson could have provided a means for Loy to overcome these 'painful inner division[s]—provided she resist the same scepticism that Bergson demonstrates towards language and meaning.

The manifesto further enacts the negation of completion not only through its disruption of complete bodily categories and their very possibility, but even in the syntax itself, through the obliteration of enclosed sentences. That is, Loy's experimentation with the rules of punctuation is not only a challenge to accepted conventions of language, but is also expressive of Loy's aesthetic and polemical principle first articulated in the manifesto: that bodies cannot be neatly and seamlessly contained. 'Bodies' here refers not exclusively to corporeal bodies (like those of the bird-women in the aviary), but also to bodies of matter—in this instance, the matter out of which text is created. The scarcity of full-stops in the manifesto results in the compounding of one sentence—a 'body' of language insofar as it is a coherent and sealed unit constituted by its words—upon others:

To obtain results you must make sacrifices & the first & greatest sacrifice you have to make is of your "*virtue*"

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<sup>14</sup>ibid., p.160.

<sup>15</sup>Burke, p.122.

<sup>16</sup>Bergson, *Time and Free Will*, p.126.

The fictitious value of woman is identified with her physical purity—is too easy a stand-by—rendering her lethargic in the acquisition of intrinsic merits of character by which she could obtain a concrete value—therefore, the first self-enforced law for the female sex, as a protection against the man made bogey of virtue—which is the principle instrument of her subjection, would be the unconditional surgical destruction of virginity through-out the female population at puberty—. <sup>17</sup>

'Feminist Manifesto' is constructed entirely by these kinds of troubled units of language. I employ the term 'troubled' to depict a deliberate complication of the coherence and severability of each consecutive 'sentence', such that each sentence can hardly be called a sentence anymore. The end of a sentence in the above example is implied with the line break that follows 'virtue', and yet with no full-stop to demarcate its completion, this unit of language is both separate from the next (literally severed by the line break) and yet still a part of it, as the sentence has not been formally completed. At many points in the manifesto, em-dashes function as quasi-full-stops; in the above example, this occurs between the words 'value' and 'therefore' in the fifth line. In these instances, there is an indication that one 'sentence' has ended and another has begun, as the dash becomes a replacement for a full-stop that separates two full sentences. And yet, the dash also signals continuity and denotes that the sentence is not yet finished; the 'sentences' here are both symbolically separated and literally connected, and thus they are neither one nor two as the dash renders each syntactical unit a kind of excess or adjunct to the other.

In addition to sentences, em-dashes also end paragraphs. In the above example, an em-dash, followed by a full-stop, marks the conclusion to the paragraph, suggesting both that the paragraph is finished—completed by the full-stop—and at the same time that something critical is missing, as the dash implies an omission. Once again, this depicts a unit of language that, like its sentences, are neither whole nor unfinished. Moreover, the appearance here of both the dash and the full-stop suggests that the dash is not to be understood as a mere symbolic replacement for the missing full-stops in other sentences, for if the two were interchangeable their coexistence at the end of this paragraph would be redundant. In other instances, an em-dash alone marks the end of a paragraph (discernible as a possible end of a paragraph from the presence of line-breaks), such as occurs at the separation between: 'Every woman of superior intelligence should realize her race-responsibility, in producing children in adequate proportion to the unfit or degenerate member of her sex—' and 'Each child of a superior woman should be the result of a definite period ...'. <sup>18</sup> Like the sentences in my first example above, the em-dash suggests a continuation from one moment of thought to the next, while the line break enforces a separation; both 'paragraphs' (to the extent that they can be labelled as such) are both syntactically severed and united.

The tension between the finality suggested by the deployment of line breaks and the continuity by the absence of punctuation not only results in uncontainable linguistic units in Loy's manifesto, but moreover splinters the meaning of the words themselves. It becomes difficult to distinguish which 'sentence' a particular phrase belongs to; for example the phrase 'free of stress' in the following excerpt could belong to both its preceding and proceeding lines:

For the harmony of the race, each individual should be the expression of an easy  
& ample interpenetration of the male and female temperaments—free of stress  
Woman must become more responsible for the child than man—<sup>19</sup>

A severance between the first two lines and the last is created both by the line break and the capitalisation of the 'W' in 'Woman'. Or is this capitalisation indicative not of a new sentence,

<sup>17</sup>Loy, 'Feminist Manifesto', pp.154-155.

<sup>18</sup>ibid., p.155.

<sup>19</sup>ibid., p.155.

but of 'Woman' as a collective noun? And can this line break alone signify a new sentence in the absence of punctuation? Could we, rather, designate the dash before the words 'free of stress' as the marker of separation between key ideas? Depending on where we decide the sentence ends and begins, the meaning of the words change: 'free of stress' could describe the interpenetration of female and male temperaments or, by contrast, the responsibility of Woman for their children. Or—as one sentence seems to bleed into the next—'free of stress' could be a description of both. The dismantling of cohesion and of sealed units in the manifesto is thus extended beyond the conceptual categorisation of bodies to the linguistic construction of the text, and this proliferates the possible meaning of the words themselves. 'Feminist Manifesto' is much more than its belligerent declarations—it is a complex announcement of an aesthetic principle that structures much of Loy's writing.

The manifesto is productive precisely because it announces that the body cannot be contained—that gendered binaries cannot be maintained by measuring the one body against the other—and by performing an unravelling of the kind of logic that this pursuit entails. When writing on Loy's surreptitious use of puns in the poem *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose*, Marisa Januzzi asserts that a full appreciation of the transgressive power of Loy's language 'almost always requires a certain amount of playfulness, faith in her intelligence, and sympathy on the part of the reader'<sup>20</sup>; the same is applicable to 'Feminist Manifesto', and while it is easy to be confronted and consumed by the aggressive typography, the bombastic declarations of war against hymens, and her railing against circulating modes of feminism, the real force of Loy's feminist vision lies within her performance of the dismantling of space. Terms like 'mother' or 'mistress' or even 'woman' cease to refer to clear and uncomplicated signifieds, and are revealed as artificial constructs that are fraught with political trappings. Loy's text demonstrates the 'Absolute Demolition' of any attempt to curtail the body through an effort to rationalise it, not through argument—for this would be implicated in the very process of argumentation that she is trying to upend—but through rhetorical performance. Thus, where it has been previously proposed that Loy's dissolution of the boundaries between mistress and mother makes women both intellectually and sexually 'complete'<sup>21</sup>, I would argue that there is an error in suggesting that completion is a possible, or even desirable, end.

Bergson's challenge to the dominance of extensity is experimentally applied by Loy to the perimeters of the domestic household in her poetry in a way that is in close dialogue with what she identifies as Victorian and Florentine preconceptions of virtue. Like the 'Manifesto', what is at stake Loy's 'house' poetry is the dismantling of archetypes of women that are held in place through spatial imposition—in the case of the 'Manifesto', this imposition is enacted through language, whereas in this instance, it is the walls that enclose the house that keep particular kinds of bodies separated, and the boundaries of narrative space that keep a body of text intact. Although the space of the house represents, according to Bergson's theorisation, extensive rather than intensive matter, Loy radically deploys his distinction between extension and intension. Moreover, although this entails an examination of a more literal space than that of the 'Manifesto'—that is, the house enclosed by its walls and the parameters that circumscribe a body of text—it requires a further leap from Bergsonian metaphysics. For where Bergson negates the application of extensive qualities to conscious thought and *durée*, Loy questions whether this same criticism can indeed be deployed in order to free from existing strictures both gendered relations and the very art she uses to represent these. For while the house *is* a space with definitive perimeters, Loy suggests that a conflation of the parameters of the house with the experience of women is a misuse of spatial constructs: although a house can be contained by the outside world which casts both interior and exterior as extensive matter, to suggest that 'women's space' can be similarly contained is to erroneously extend extension to incorporate woman's movements. Loy attempts an unravelling of the binary of men's and women's spaces

<sup>20</sup>Marissa Januzzi, 'Mongrel Rose: The 'Unerring Esperanto' of Loy's Poetry' in *Woman and Poet*, p.411.

<sup>21</sup>Natalya Lusty, 'Sexing the Manifesto: Mina Loy, Feminism and Futurism', *Women: A Cultural Review*, vol.19, no.3, 2008, p.254.

by undercutting the separations that artificially keep them intact. Thus when Loy dismantles distinctions between interior and exterior, it is precisely the notion that woman have an enclosed 'place' that she is contesting.

Evocations of entrapment are therefore a prominent feature of Loy's early poetry as she begins to explore the relationship between women and domestic spaces. This initial challenge to the gendered status-quo of sexual politics takes the form of an investigation into the role of the house in manufacturing and containing sexually acceptable women, and rapidly evolves to probe the connections between the interior of the house, stasis, and freedom—both sexual freedom and the freedom to move beyond the confines of the home. Mark Wigley argues that the nature of architecture is disciplinary<sup>22</sup>; he illustrates a history in which the house domesticates and exerts control over 'women's sexuality, the chastity of the girl, the fidelity of the wife'.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, Loy's early poetry—acutely aware of gendered politics of space—works to confront the issue of sexuality and space in a way that architectural discourse, according to Wigley, systemically resists.<sup>24</sup> In Loy's writing, the disassembling of the space containing women frees them from their previous stasis and bestows them with movement. And it is here that Loy most ambitiously pursues what Bergson describes as free will. Bergson takes to task Immanuel Kant's assertion that freedom only exists outside of time and space by contending that they must not be conflated, for while freedom cannot be found in space, it is locatable in *durée*; there cannot be any juxtaposition or comparison of separate moments for they cannot be set next to one another like objects, and thus the very notion of causality is confounded. Loy's idiosyncratic appropriation of this principle pushes it to more imaginative limits: what if space, when imposed upon gender through the house or upon art through literary convention, enacts similar constraints upon free will that are equally artificial?

Critical discussion on Loy's exploration of space tends to trace the parallels between the structure of the domestic home and *Woman*, taking the house as a metaphor for her body and the consciousness. In her biography on Loy, Burke argues that the 'image of the house evoked all possible modes of linkage between world and self'—it is the 'dwelling place of the soul', but one that chokes upon remnants of the past.<sup>25</sup> In particular, she delimits Loy's claim that the position of woman will remain unaltered unless her sexual currency before marriage is overturned and she no longer has to 'house' her virginity—both the walls of the house and the marriageable young women must resist pressure to remain 'intact' if *Woman's* commodity value is to be undone.<sup>26</sup> Suzanne Churchill's *The Little Magazine Others and the Renovation of Modern American Poetry* is similarly concerned with the architecture of the American modernist magazine *Others* and the structures of the works of its contributors—of which Loy was arguably the most notorious. Churchill argues that the architecture of houses is formative of Loy's feminism—the interior of the houses that Loy seeks to disclose are intimately linked with the interior of the female psyche, a psyche which is characterised by instability, permeability, and violent sexuality, and which is intended to jolt the reader out of their 'conventional mental habitations'.<sup>27</sup> Churchill contends that Loy's identification with the figures in 'The Effectual Marriage or the Insipid Narrative of Gina and Miovanni' results in a collapse of the boundaries that separate the internal poetic fiction and the external artist; as such, Loy cannot extricate herself from the contextual restrictions of the poem and thus 'fail[s]' to emancipate herself from restrictive gender limitations—although this failure is 'spectacularly interesting'.<sup>28</sup> In contrast, I

<sup>22</sup>Mark Wigley, 'Untitled: The Housing of Gender' in *Sexuality and Space*, Beatriz Colomina (ed.), Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1992, p.328.

<sup>23</sup>*ibid.*, p.336.

<sup>24</sup>*ibid.*, p.329.

<sup>25</sup>Burke, *Becoming Modern*, pp.205-206.

<sup>26</sup>*ibid.*, p.199.

<sup>27</sup>Suzanne W. Churchill, *The Little Magazine Others and the Renovation of Modern American Poetry*, Ashgate, Burlington, 2006, p.75.

<sup>28</sup>*ibid.*, p.181.



argue that Loy's 'inability' to dislodge herself from the workings of her poetry is not so much an inability—or failure—to do so, but a *refusal*, for Loy takes to task our attempts to readily separate interior and exterior.

The threat of entrapment posed by the domestic house is made explicit in Loy's unpublished novel, *The Child and the Parent*, in which chapter seven—'Ladies in the Aviary'<sup>29</sup>—portrays women as metaphorical birds kept in cages. Their confinement to the cage is permanent; kept on display for the visiting men, they 'are so lovely and they cannot get out'. The young bird-women are detained within the perimeters of a definite and unassailable space, whereas the men—external to their prison—come and go at will. The birds are restrained in every way: they are restricted to the confines of their cage, but they are also trapped by the demands placed upon their bodies. The narrator asks, 'Why are these ladies kept in captivity with their bodies almost severed in the middle—they appear to be tame?' The answer here is twofold: firstly, the corseting of their bodies is 'fashion'. The binding of the birds is necessary so that they remain visually pleasing to their captors; indeed, the decision to corset themselves is not the birds' to make, for their 'plumage is not their own'. This sense that the birds' bodies belong to someone beyond themselves suggests that they have a commodity value—like objects, they are owned. Secondly, the birds are restrained in their tight clothing for their own 'protect[ion]'; it is a necessary 'morality' required in order to safeguard them from their own 'scourge'. Such a scourge locates the potential for deviation and affliction within the bodies of women themselves—Loy warns that an endorsement of traditionally gendered spaces must result in the shifting of all fault to Woman. In addition, this reference to a 'scourge' calls to mind Christabel Pankhurst's suffragette text, *The Great Scourge and How to End it*,<sup>30</sup> an early twentieth-century text that propounds sexual purity as an answer to gender inequality—a proposition that Loy famously found repugnant.<sup>31</sup> Thus for Loy, any feminism cloaked in notions of virtue perpetuated the same limitations imposed upon women as the very traditions that the suffragette movement purported to usurp.

The loveliness of the ladies is tied closely to their captivity; they are bound to their cage so that they can continue to give pleasure to the men who watch them. Thus the worth bestowed upon them as women is intrinsic to their sacrifice of movement in exchange for the impositions of domestic space. Yet their loveliness serves as a further mode of entrapment, as they can only maintain their allure as long as they remain imprisoned, for 'at every doorway lurks a downfall for virgins who go wandering, and for women who dare challenge their captivity lies the impending threat of an 'ailment known as impurity'. Impurity here is figured as a disease; it is contagious, 'incurable' and, most alarmingly to the beautiful birds in the cage, disfiguring. Impurity results in a 'spiritual moulting' that 'deprives them of their wings', a warning that spiritual failings will be registered upon the body. The bodies of broken birds are ugly, deformed, defective, and yet still on display. Private 'failings' are thus made public and serve as a source of shame, and this admonishes other birds from tempting the same fate (and compels them to ostracise the inflicted bird—this disease is, after all, contagious). In this way, 'Ladies in an Aviary' departs from Loy's earlier 'house' poetry; the cage is a more pernicious version of the house, for its transparent walls enable transgressions to be put on display. This punishment is severe, for it is not only disfiguring but debilitating—a bird with no wings is irrevocably incomplete and can no longer fulfil its function: it cannot fly. Women who stray (in both senses of the word) are thus stripped of their femininity and become failed women. Further, the capacity for flight is also the capacity for movement; if a bird breaks out of her cage,

<sup>29</sup>Mina Loy, 'Ladies in the Aviary' in *The Child and the Parent*, Mina Loy Papers, YCAL, BRBML, Box.1 fo.15. An excerpt of Loy's 'Ladies in an Aviary' has been published in Mina Loy's *The Last Lunar Baedeker*, Roger L. Conover (ed.), Jargon Society, Highlands, 1982, p.316. However, I refer to the full version found in the archives at Beinecke.

<sup>30</sup>Christabel Pankhurst, *The Great Scourge and How to End It*, Lincoln's Inn House, London, 1913.

<sup>31</sup>Lusty, p.252. Burke also writes that Loy was 'not optimistic about feminism's ... direction' between 1914 and 1916 in *Becoming Modern*, p.179.

her recourse to movement will be obliterated and she will become trapped not by the limits of the cage, but the limits of her disfigured body.

In 'Ladies in an Aviary', the imposition of stasis upon the birds is thus closely related to the control of sexual impulses, and any transgression or appeals to movement (through either escape or sexual deviance) results in corporeal punishment. For it is the body which perpetrates such a transgression, and as such, the castigation of the body not only serves as retribution, but moreover occludes any opportunity for further movement. The public repercussion for one failed bird is portrayed as total bodily disintegration. She undergoes a sudden and uncontrollable dissolution:

A sudden tremor stirs her arms to motion, to graceless gesticulation in a down-pour of infinitesimal particals [sic] that fill the air; her arms are flung out before her to avert the assailment, or fall in consonance with her bowed back; to mow, in spasms, at something inimical that has surged about her feet. For the Earth not only reclaims her offspring, but seemingly outraged at being inhabited, with the aid of the winds and the friction of her swarms, pulverizes her superficies and all waste products of like ...

The engulfing corporeal experience renders the bird 'graceless'—her erratic movements immediately differentiate her from the 'slender sighs' of her fellow inmates. She fits and 'spasms', denoting both dysfunction and pain, as the transformation of her body is excruciating and total. Her bowed back and spasmodic movements suggest at once a seizure and, as Loy terms it in 'Songs to Joannes', a 'seismic orgasm'<sup>32</sup>; sexual deviance thus promises not pleasure to the bird, but pain, as the difference between climax and suffering is collapsed. This echoes the sexual (and marital) experience of Ada in the previous chapters of *The Child and the Parent*, 'The Dissatisfied Bride'<sup>33</sup> and 'A Certain Percentage of Women'<sup>34</sup>. Ada, who hopes for pleasure when she consummates her marriage, is punished for her expectation of 'beautifical lightning' by the dwindling of her desire into 'an excruciating cramp'<sup>35</sup> that 'leaves her as nothing but a tangle of snapped nerve cables or wounded feelers dripping with a vital sap that she had drawn from him'.<sup>36</sup> Ada's disappointment is chided by her doctor, who admonishes, 'No nice woman ever likes it'.<sup>37</sup> For women (and the birds) in *The Child and the Parent*, sexual deviance is therefore not limited to premarital engagements, for any pursuit of bodily pleasure—before or after marriage—will be both thwarted and castigated. But the consequences for the not-yet-married bird are far more severe, as she has to endure a kind of bodily death, a pulverisation that collapses her into 'infinitesimal particals [sic]'. Like the birds who try to escape their cage, her wings have vanished and in their place remain 'arms ... flung out'. Moreover, this punishment does not stop at the woman in question but extends to the illegitimate offspring of her encounter, who are figured here as 'waste products' that are swallowed up by an earth enraged by the spoils of sexual aberrancy. It is of no consequence that the sexual act appears to be the result of an 'assailment'; the woman's body, and the body of her child, are nevertheless fouled and must be destroyed.

The rewards for obedience and chastity, however, are menial and degrading and hardly compensate for a life behind bars. The male visitors bring cubes of sugar to the cage, but while this sugar may be momentarily 'sweet', it is also the 'sugar of fictitious values'. The man

<sup>32</sup>Loy, 'Songs to Joannes' in *Lost Lunar Baedeker*, p.66, (Song XXIX, line 29).

<sup>33</sup>Mina Loy, 'The Dissatisfied Bride' in *The Child and the Parent*, Mina Loy Papers, YCAL, BRBML, Box.1 fo.17.

<sup>34</sup>Mina Loy, 'A Certain Percentage of Women' in *The Child and the Parent*, Mina Loy Papers, YCAL, BRBML, Box.1 fo.18.

<sup>35</sup>Loy, 'Dissatisfied Bride'.

<sup>36</sup>Loy, 'Certain Percentage of Women'.

<sup>37</sup>Loy, 'Dissatisfied Bride'.

withholds his gift—the birds must earn their sugar, and therefore ask, ‘What would you like us to be?’ They are commanded to be ‘angels’, and so they sit quietly ‘as if on clouds, waiting, with wings sedately folded’. In order to receive their reward, the birds must perform for their visitors, demonstrating their obedience and their ability to alter themselves to suit the whims of their suitors; the sugar and the submission of the birds thus become commodity objects for exchange. Moreover, the birds engage in market-like activity and compete for their reward:

There is a tremor of ribbon, a nasty sweep of feathers as inquisitive ladies, running to eat out of his hand, agitate these tassels of the soul in their impatience to be satisfied; and it is very wistfully that they recompose their ruffles on retiring from the scene to gnaw a pocket-handkerchief or fall into a faint.<sup>38</sup>

The birds turn against each other; the silence and demureness of the angels-in-waiting gives way to tremors, gnawing, and the frantic flying of feathers as the birds contest viciously against one another. Fighting for an opportunity to ‘eat out of his hand’ suggests at once the feeding of sugar, and the very submission of the birds who must figuratively eat out of this man’s hand in order to win the right to do so literally. And yet the wild rush for the sugar proves too vigorous for the usually poised and restrained birds who either fall into madness (gnawing their handkerchiefs in the shadows of the cage) or into a faint.

However, the sugar is unlike the capital of regular transactions as it cannot be reused once consumed to purchase their independence. In exchange for their acquiescence, the birds only receive momentary satisfaction; in the long run, they are left with nothing tangible. The sugar is paralleled with the ‘even sweeter’ offering of marriage: both involve a transaction that involves the exchange of the birds’ obedience, virtue and freedom, and both ‘evaporate’ almost immediately after ‘they taste of it’. In marriage, the initial sweetness rapidly gives way to emptiness. Yet the birds lack the foresight required to realise that their rewards (in the form of a sugar cube or a wedding) will yield only limited and transitory pleasure, and continue to perform their virtue for an immaterial end. Indeed, there appears to be no alternative, as the man holds up a piece of sugar declaring ‘Here is Love’—once again drawing connections between the sugar with the promise of marriage and love with a capital ‘L’, and setting up all three (sugar, marriage, Love) as objects of commerce—while asserting that these are ‘woman’s whole existence’. Having made a sacrifice of their freedom, these birds have nothing other than sugar and marriage to look forward to.

It appears, then, that there is little realistic option for the birds whose escape will entail disfigurement or disintegration. And yet, ‘Ladies in an Aviary’ is structured such that an escape must have successfully taken place, for the distinction between the internal fiction of the writing and the external reality of the author is collapsed. The chapter begins with an aside from the author: ‘These chapters come in as attempts of a woman constantly interrupted to begin a book she is too *shy* to write’. Loy thus inserts herself into the narrative by making the writing of the chapter a part of the action itself: ‘Ladies in an Aviary’ is at once an allegory about women waiting for marriage, and about women who dare challenge the gendered status-quo by writing this allegory, and whose most significant obstacle is the demureness that they have been expected to cultivate. The author must conquer her shyness—a flaw that is akin to the feminine coyness of the caged birds—in order to pen her narrative. The fact that this narrative has been written reveals that at least one bird has triumphed over her metaphorical bird cage. Escape, although difficult to achieve, is therefore possible.

Moreover, the dismantlement of the parameters of the narrative when the author enters as a character herself depicts a double escape that links narrative structure to domestic space: through the writing act, Loy disassembles both the limits of the cage and the perceived boundaries of fiction itself. The author moves in and out of the prose, creating distance between herself and the birds in statements such as ‘They are so lovely and they cannot get out’, and collapsing this

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<sup>38</sup>Loy, ‘Ladies in an Aviary’.

distance in the initial aside that points to the author's own artistic and personal struggle. This is further enacted through the shifting of personal pronouns throughout the chapter. While Loy most frequently employs the third person—for example, 'they cannot get out', 'they do not demur', and 'they inquire in a flutter of modest aspiration'—which reinstates the distance between the narrative and its author, the writing occasionally slips into the collective first person:

Fashion alone, in varying her adornment, saves this being, who, unable to invent *herself*, is available to be fitted to any shape Society considers plausible, from sinking into complete inanition; and it is impious to mock at *her* frivolities as whims beyond reason, while *our* intellect is powerless to apprehend the intentions of a creator whose Species may also have been designed as models for antediluvian [sic] spring.<sup>39</sup>

This excerpt begins by using third-person pronouns: the being cannot invent *herself* and *her* frivolities are mocked. Yet those who might mock her are not limited to the other birds of the cage and the visiting men; Loy's deployment of the word 'our' implicates the author and the reader in the narrative, and troubles the ready distinction between those within the prose, and those outside of it. Thus, although at first there appears to be no escape for the birds inside the cage, Loy and her reader move in and out of the narrative, dismantling the distinction between the interior and exterior of the text. The spatial limitations of the cage thus cannot be imposed upon the text itself, which has no clear divide between its interior and exterior. If these boundaries cannot be forced upon the text, then there must exist ways to disassemble the limits of space where they have been inappropriately enforced. One way that this can be achieved is through the practice of art. The act of writing itself overcomes aesthetic constraints and provides a means for her to escape the fate of the women in 'Ladies in an Aviary'. It is therefore not only the space inside of a cage or house that must be dismantled; in order for artistic freedom to be achieved, the body of the poetry cannot have unassailable perimeters. In 'Ladies in an Aviary', this entails the movement of the poet and her reader between the interior and exterior of the poem—a transgression of the boundaries of the textual space itself.

Loy's writing is thus in every way an embodiment of movement, and it critiques and resists all attempts to keep it contained. She proposes that to consider particular spaces as 'gendered' is an erroneous imposition of spatial constraints, for gender itself is not an extensive quality and thus cannot be contained. Indeed, the very instant that something is framed in spatial terms its creative potential is thwarted, and as this encroachment of space onto the non-spatial is closely bound up with language—for it is the very trickery of language that compels us to misconceive real experience in terms of extension. Loy aims to emancipate language from space by disrupting our readiness to think of concepts, syntactical units, and bodies of text as hermetically sealed. And it is here that Loy departs most radically from Bergson, for rather than abandon language to the artificially constructed realm of the spatial, the stable, and the static, Loy reinvigorates the written word with movement and wrenches it from this designation as 'static' and disempowered.

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<sup>39</sup>Loy, 'Ladies in the Aviary'. Italics mine.