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Body and the Text/Body of the Text in Mina Loy's *Songs to Joannes*

By Lucia Pietroiusti¹

Abstract

This essay advances a close reading of Mina Loy's *Songs to Joannes*, a sequence of poems dedicated to her failed relationship with the futurist Giovanni Papini and published in 1917. Through a close analysis of the typographical complexities by which *Songs to Joannes* is characterized, I attempt to draw explicit connections between Loy's radical approach to physical existence and sexual activity in the poems, and her equally radical departure from the conventions of poetic form. In the systematic tension between form and content, then, I illuminate the ways in which Loy's poetry redefines the familiar concept of the 'body of the text' through a re-evaluation of two acts of reading: a 'horizontal' reading and a 'vertical' one. Drawing on the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure, I argue that *Songs to Joannes* – as both a long poem composed of various fragments, and a self-standing unit – might be placed in the position of the 'sign'. In support of this, I read *Songs* 'horizontally', drawing attention to the narrative and generic aspects of the poems as they unfold in time, and in succession. I then propose a 'vertical' approach to the *Songs*, in which theories of lexical semantics play a pivotal role. Finally, I consider the metonymical aspect of the *Songs*, making particular reference to the ways in which they problematize the concept of the 'sign'. Given that the term 'feminism' is now applied to a multitude of contradictory theoretical and socio-political positions, a special effort will also be made to define Loy's own peculiar brand of feminist thought, and to identify the nature of its influence upon her creative praxis.

Keywords: Poetry; feminism; embodiment

Introduction

In 1909, Marinetti's 'Futurist Manifesto' stated: 'Except in struggle, there is no more beauty. No work without an aggressive character can be a masterpiece. Poetry must be conceived as a violent attack on unknown forces, to reduce and prostrate them before man' (41-42). A few years later, in 1916, Hugo Ball declared in his 'Dada Manifesto': 'How does one achieve eternal bliss? By saying dada. How does one become famous? By saying dada. With a noble gesture and delicate propriety. Till one goes crazy. Till one loses consciousness' (221). These two exemplary statements illustrate the immense difference between pre- and post-war consciousness, and the gap separating the two ideologies (represented by so radically altering an event as the First World War) seems impossible to bridge retrospectively. Yet, puzzlingly, Mina Loy, poet, painter, designer of clothes and lampshades, and the friend of nearly every primary figure in early and late modernist artistic movements, is alternatively described as a Futurist, a Dadaist, and even a Surrealist, and also, very importantly, as a feminist. Her written work in particular illuminates – and to a certain

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extent justifies – the difficulty encountered in identifying, if not her aesthetic and conceptual concerns, at least the responses she proposes to them. If her ‘Feminist Manifesto’ of 1914 declares that ‘there is *nothing impure in sex* – except in the mental attitude to it’ (156) – a statement which demonstrates Loy’s apparent theoretical allegiance to sex radical feminists such as Emma Goldman and Margaret Sanger – earlier on in the same manifesto Loy also makes a claim for every woman’s ‘right to maternity’ (155), an assertion that would be criticized by the very same sex radicals, who supposed that the liberation of sex would depend precisely on the rejection of motherhood, patriarchy’s long-assigned role for women. In a parallel way, her ‘Aphorisms on Futurism’, also of 1914, mark her allegiance to the movement insofar as stylistic techniques are concerned (149), yet in ‘Three Moments in Paris’ the speaker works to undermine futurist principles, asking, ‘Anyhow who am I that I should criticize your theories of plastic velocity’ (15).

In this light, I would like to focus on Mina Loy’s *Songs to Joannes*, her 1917 composition dedicated to her failed relationship with the futurist Giovanni Papini. More specifically, I would like to explore the ambiguities that stem from, and shape, Loy’s descriptions of physical existence and sexual activity in the *Songs*, while also considering the material presentation of the poem itself. In the systematic tension between the two, it will be interesting to observe the extent to which Loy’s poetry redefines the familiar concept of the ‘body of the text’ through a re-evaluation of two acts of reading: a ‘horizontal’ reading and a ‘vertical’ one. These two types of reading derive from Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic theories, according to which a sign (the product of a signifier and a signified) exists in a system of relations both to the other signs in the same utterance (through grammatical and/or logical contiguity) and to the signs by which it could be replaced (as a consequence of syntactic or semantic interchangeability). In the context of this essay, I would like to situate *Songs to Joannes* – as both a long poem composed of various fragments, and a self-standing unit – in the position of the ‘sign’. I will first attempt to read *Songs* ‘horizontally’, drawing attention to the narrative and generic aspects of the poems as they unfold in time, and in succession. This reading will be followed by a ‘vertical’ approach to the *Songs*, to which lexical semantics will be key. In the juxtaposition between the two, finally, I would like to consider the metonymical aspect of the *Songs*, making particular reference to the ways in which they problematize the concept of the ‘sign’. Given that the term ‘feminism’ is now applied to a multitude of contradictory theoretical and socio-political positions, a special effort will also be made to define Loy’s own peculiar brand of feminist thought, and to identify the nature of its influence upon her creative praxis.

Reading ‘horizontally’: the disjointed body

As Rachel Blau DuPlessis explains in “‘Seismic Orgasm’: Sexual Intercourse and Narrative Meaning in Mina Loy’, both psychoanalytical and structuralist critics have examined the ways in which narrative plots follow the basic movements of the sexual act (46). Peter Brooks, for instance, indicates that the act of reading involves undergoing an ‘imposed delay, [an] arabesque in the dilatory space of the text’, leading to a ‘final discharge’ (107-9) at the end of the narrative. Similarly, Barthes’s description of the ‘Oedipal plot’ involves a process whereby the reader attempts ‘to denude, to know, to learn the origin and the end’ (10). Read together, these descriptions posit not only the male experience of sexuality as the framework for the act of reading, but also the text as a physical entity, a ‘body’ that needs to be unveiled through the action of reading, or interiorizing, the meaning of the single utterances.

As scholars such as Teresa De Lauretis and Hélène Cixous have remarked, this approach to textual interpretation turns on a system of binary oppositions, in which femininity is insistently situated as dark and mysterious. This gendered system of binary oppositions, which is often understood as the basis of Western metaphysics, is famously described by Cixous in 'Sorties':

Where is she?
Activity/Passivity
Sun/Moon
Culture/Nature
Day/Night
Father/Mother
Head/Heart
Intelligible/Palpable (578)

The intelligible understanding of manifest truth, or plot, the 'light' shed on a narrative, is thus unavoidably placed, if one follows Brooks's and Barthes's models, in opposition to an 'obfuscating', 'physical', or at any rate 'anti-semantic' femininity. Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* is a perfect example of this type of narrative: Sarastro, the male purveyor of daylight, overpowers the Queen of the Night in a manifest triumph of Enlightened philosophy, and of the patriarchal system that underlies it.

If one reads Loy in the light of what Susan Winnett terms the traditional 'Masterplot' (508), it becomes clear that this narrative unfolding is seriously undermined by the fragmentary presentation of the events. For instance, allusions to an abortion having occurred are particularly noticeable in fragments III, IV, XVII, XXIV, XXX and XXXI, through references to blood, as in 'We might have given birth to a butterfly/With the daily news/Printed in blood on its wings' (III, 54). Likewise, references are made to a painful experience in a clandestine pseudo-clinical environment: 'I don't care / Where the legs of the legs of the furniture are walking to/(...)Red a warm colour on the battle-field / Heavy on my knees as a counterpane' (XVII, 60). These passages are interrupted by descriptions of the cataclysmic effects of the erotic encounter, as constituted around graphic references to body parts and sexual fluids, as in fragment IX, where the speaker writes of 'spermatozoa / At the core of Nothing / In the milk of the Moon' (56). The experience of orgasm takes on an equally cosmic resonance in fragment XXIX: 'Let them clash together / From their incognitos / In seismic orgasm' (65).

The disturbed chronology of *Songs* means that the relationship Loy describes alternates randomly between success and failure. The reader's ability to establish a coherent understanding of this relationship is further undermined by Loy's use of modal auxiliary verbs, which work to blur possibility, desire, and reality: 'We might have coupled / In the bed-ridden monopoly of a moment' (III, 54), or 'We might have lived together / In the lights of the Arno' (XVI, 59). Loy's use of the verb 'might' foregrounds a tension between reality and fantasy, implying that no single word can be read as a stable conveyor of meaning.

The fragmentation of the romance narrative usefully problematizes the genre to which the poem ostensibly belongs: the love lyric. As Jeffrey Twitchell-Waas suggests, this genre would 'conventionally...be taken as most appropriate for a female poet, the most quaintly "poetic" genre yet also the most easily dismissed for its lack of high seriousness' (112). Indeed, the concept of the female-authored love lyric can be traced back to the Heroides, Ovid's fictional series of letters from mythical heroines

to their lovers. Although these letters do (albeit fictionally) place the woman in the authorial role, they still posit the absent lover as the necessary element to each heroine's sense of identity: 'Let this verse, alone, appear on my marble tomb', writes Dido to Aeneas, 'Aeneas offered a reason to die, and the sword. / Dido killed herself by her own hand' (VII. 1. 87-89). Loy notoriously declared her *Songs* to be 'the best since Sappho' (qtd. in DuPlessis 64), choosing to position her work in relation to that of the most famous female poet of ancient Greece, and not within the masculinized Ovidian tradition.² If Loy revolutionizes a widely developed lyrical genre by denying the narrative development of the traditional Oedipal 'Masterplot', she also rejects traditional, holistic approaches to the representation of the subject: every element of both the speaker's and the lover's body is separated from its whole: hers are the 'mucous-membrane' (I, 53), the 'finger-tips' (II, 54), the 'pair of feet' (VII, 55), the 'lungs' and 'nostrils' (VII, 56), the 'store-house' (VIII, 56), the 'battle-door' (X, 56), the 'eyes' (XIII, 58), the 'knees' (XVII, 60) and the 'pestilent/Tear drops' (XXIV, 62). His are the 'skin-sack' (II, 53), the 'hair' (II, 54), the 'eye' (VI, 55) and the 'candle-ends' (VIII, 56), the 'spermatozoa' (IX, 56), the 'shuttle-cock' (X, 56), the 'nervy hands' (XI, 57), the 'eyes' (XIII, 56), the 'sun' (XXVIII, 64), the 'cymophanous sweat' and 'Etiolate body' (XXVIII, 64-65), the 'smoke from your house' (XXVIII, 65) and the 'prig of passion' (XXXIII, 67). In the moments of sexual encounter, the two characters share 'flesh' (III, XII, 54; 57), 'lips' (III, 54), 'eye-lids' (IX, 56), 'breath' (XII, 57) 'lighted bodies' (XIV, 59) and 'tongues' (XVI, 59). Loy, again, resists idealizing the human body by 'exceeding' in two opposite directions; her descriptions tend either towards medical precision or, alternatively, out towards quasi-surrealist sublimation. In fragment XVII, for example (59-60), 'Red' (blood) draws attention to the 'knees' and the 'towel' – two tangible elements of the scene under description – but its connotations are imaginatively extended beyond this specific and bounded setting through Loy's reference to another, geographically remote, scene of violence: the 'battle-field'.

There is, in *Songs to Joannes*, an intensely physical relation between the text and the experiences delineated within it. The physicality of the *Songs* is conspicuously foregrounded through typographical, stylistic and phonetic devices that necessarily determine the way in which the text is read. In this sense, the individual sentence structures are distorted or modified by Loy's ambiguous grammar – a grammar that is established in the first fragment of the *Songs*:

Spawn of Fantasies
 Silting the appraisable
 Pig Cupid his rosy snout
 Rooting erotic garbage
 'Once upon a time'
 Pulls a weed white star-topped
 Among wild oats sown in mucous-membrane (I, 53)

Although this fragment is structured around a number of verbs, these first lines remain strangely static: indeed, only one verb, 'Pulls', is in the present tense, whereas present participle forms ('Silting', 'Rooting') and past participles ('star-topped', 'sown') maintain the fixity of the scene. Furthermore, the rhythm with which one reads the stanza alters its syntactical elements: with the absence of punctuation, 'Pig Cupid' can

be read as the culmination of the previous lines ('the appraisable / Pig Cupid'), or it could be understood as the subject of the next verb, 'Rooting'. The following stanza even appears to omit a verb: 'I would an eye in a Bengal light / Eternity in a sky-rocket / Constellations in an ocean' (53). In this case the typographical hypertrophy of the space between words can be seen to indicate a missing word, a moment of suspension (of writing, or reading) in which the verb has disappeared. On the other hand, the phrase 'I would' could be read as an independent clause, a form of undefined conditional acceptance. Loy's rejection of conventional punctuation, then, not only renders the grammatical functioning of the sentence ambiguous, but fundamentally alters the meaning of the stanzas. Later, the line 'These are suspect places' can be taken to refer both to the mock-romantic images to which the speaker has just referred, and to the stanza as a 'place', a self-standing unity of sense. Indeed, after having denounced the suspicious quality of such images, the speaker makes constant use of them throughout the *Songs*, starting in the very next stanza, in which the "I" presents herself as 'Virginal to the bellows / Of Experience' (53), another typical vision of the ideal state of the Victorian angel-woman. In this first fragment, then, the speaker introduces the question of irony and relative distance between the poet's intention and the utterances, which adds another layer of ambiguity to the interpretation of the *Songs* in the search for a recognizable 'thesis'.

The stylistic devices that Loy presents in the first fragment are developed throughout the course of *Songs to Joannes*, and acquire a particularly striking relevance in the presentation of contradictions and oxymoronic clusters. These recur throughout the *Songs*, and appear with the greatest regularity in those fragments in which the traditional poetic line is most distorted. In fragment XIII, for example, the stanzas are irregular in terms of the length and shape of the lines, while the typography of the second and third stanzas complicates conventional strategies of reading by presenting the possibility of reading the lines as two vertical stanzas, running concurrently, side by side:

| | |
|----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| It is ambient | And it is in your eyes |
| Something shiny | Something only for you |
| | Something that I must not see |
| | |
| It is in my ears | Something very resonant |
| Something that you must not hear | |
| | Something only for me (XIII, 57-58) |

This is also emphasized by the use of capital letters after the hypertrophied space, which, on a visual level, implies an anaphorical repetition of the word 'Something' (though this word is not, technically, found at the beginning of the line). While the next to last line finally reunites the two 'halves' of the stanzas, any sense of closure or cohesion remains elusive; the declaration that the speaker makes at the beginning of the fragment is borne out: 'There is something / I have got to tell you and I can't tell' (57).

The fragment that follows presents a series of contradictory terms: 'Everlasting passing apparent imperceptible' (XIV, 58). I would suggest that here, the speaker is not setting each of these elements apart as antonyms, but rather presenting each couple as an oxymoron – the difference being that an oxymoron reconciles the contradiction between its forming terms for the sake of emphasis. In this sense, 'Today' becomes both 'Everlasting' and 'passing', 'apparent' and

'imperceptible'. Through this particular, symmetrical use of the hypertrophied space, then, the speaker juxtaposes subjective impression and ontological truth and refuses to let either prevail, indicating that the poem articulates itself on the limit between Romantic and Realist visions.

The use of the typographical dash also suggests alternately separation, connection and interruption. In fragment VIII, for example, the line of dashes indicates that the discourse has shifted; it is as if the speaker has altered her point of view:

I am the jealous store-house of the candle-ends
That lit your adolescent learning

— — — — —

Behind God's eyes
There might
Be other lights (VIII, 56)

In the first two lines, the speaker gestures towards memory and subjective emotion. Conversely, in the second half of the fragment, after the interruption imposed by the dashes, the subjectivity of the speaker is eclipsed in favour of a more cosmic form of imagination. In a different way, the dashes of fragment XIII unite 'Me you — you — me' to illustrate the significance of the 'terrific Nirvana' mentioned in the previous line (57-58). It has been suggested that this stanza illustrates the speaker's fear of the loss of subjectivity that occurs in the romantic/sexual encounter: DuPlessis, for example, states that '[t]hese metaphors of chaos or annihilation in sexual bliss show the dangerous loss of identity, perhaps reversion to a "femininity" of dissolution or passivity, defined by stereotypical gender ideas which Loy has staked herself upon resisting' (58). On the contrary, the last two stanzas of the fragment are shadowed by sarcasm: 'Let us be very jealous', the speaker comments, 'Very suspicious / Very conservative / Very cruel' (58). The risk would be, otherwise, to 'Disorb inviolate egos', or to awaken the solipsistic, utopian and patriarchal ego to the reality of interrelations. This hinted accusation speeds up the rhythm of the lines, as can be noted by the irruption of the register of spoken communication into the written page: 'Oh that's right'. In this light, the speaker is accusing 'you' of *his fear* of depersonalization, and thus the dashes do not only link 'Me' and 'you' but also emphasize the fragility of the 'you', so easily enclosed into and chained by the 'Me' through a single typographical sign.

Finally, the third function of the dash is one of interruption: fragment XXX is itself split into stanzas of quasi-identical rhythm and length though the use of lines of dashes (66). This generates a regularized rhythmic pattern – more regular, indeed, than of the rest of the *Songs*. In fragment XXX in particular, the lines of dashes not only interrupt the logical and grammatical progressions on the stanzas, but also stand comprise the last line of each stanza. The line break is, indeed, placed after the dashes in every stanza, as if each dash, in a parody of a game of hangman, represented a letter, or even, a word. In this sense, the varying length of the dash lines become even more mysterious. This is demonstrated in fragment XXXII, in which the speaker addresses Joannes by his name for the first and only time. Here, the tone is conversational again, and one gets the impression that, perhaps cut short by the recipient's lack of attention, or tired by the baggage of romanticized connotations that 'The moon' inevitably carries along with it, the speaker might have trailed off: 'The moon is cold / Joannes / Where the Mediterranean — — — —' (67). This

fragment reveals that the dashes might not substitute for a series of words that the speaker consciously withholds from the reader, but rather that they represent the *possibility* for a conclusion that the speaker is either unable, or unwilling, to formulate. The 'body' of the poem, then, is not only disjointed by the clinical and fragmented references to the lovers' bodies, but also by the refusal of grammatical and typographical linearity or coherence, to the extent that the traditional sentence is subverted, and each sign or space on the page is multivalent.

Reading 'vertically': the possible body

I would now like to propose a critical approach to a different aspect of Loy's *Songs to Joannes*. In "'Love is a Lyric / of Bodies": the Negative Aesthetics of Mina Loy's *Love Songs*', Maera Shreiber states that 'unlike Gertrude Stein, Loy does not seem preoccupied with unlocking words from their conventional meaning' (90). Taken in its strictest sense, it is indeed true that Loy does not insist on repeating words and sounds as a means of breaking down the conventional workings of logic and meaning. On the other hand, however, the intense codification of Loy's poems would suggest that readers must be wary of accepting the first meaning of each word on the page; in this respect she does throw an important focus on semantics in the *Songs*. This has been suggested by Thom Gunn in 'Three Hard Women: H. D. Marianne Moore, and Mina Loy':

If [in reading Loy's poems] you are used to the immediate effects of Anne Sexton then of course such writing cannot stay you. But if you take the poem as slowly as one by H.D. or Moore, you see that such language cannot be improved for that kind of compression that is the peculiar property of poetry. (49)

This 'compression' that Gunn identifies is, I would suggest, mostly effective through the semantic depth and multiplicity of nearly every word in the *Songs to Joannes*. Here, after all, the poetic line is not only condensed, but highly codified. Firstly, the use of medical terms slows down the pace of reading: the failure of romance is thus emphasized by the difficulty encountered in reading a love lyric that refers to 'protoplasm' (XXXIII, 67), for example. Secondly, the use of vocabulary from the field of linguistics affects the fluency of the text: for instance, Loy replaces the idea of a 'secret name' with the term 'cryptonym' (XXIX, 65), which the *Oxford English Dictionary* describes as 'rare' (see *OED*). It is also possible that Loy intended for it to be a neologism, as might also have been her intention for 'homophonous' (XXIX, 65), a musical term. The codification of the *Songs to Joannes* is also, more generally, made manifest by the widespread use of multi-syllabic words. In the line 'All the **completion** | of my **infructuous** | **impulses**' (II, 53), for example, each noun is trisyllabic, and the first two are self-standing amphibrachs (trisyllabic feet with a stress in the middle syllable), whereas the last foot is dactylic. Similarly, in reading '**Vaulted** | an **unimaginable** | **family**' (IV, 54) one is forced to slow down at the second very long foot, constituted by an hexasyllabic adjective and an unstressed particle.

Another characteristic of the *Songs to Joannes* is the multiplicity and ambiguity of the language that Loy selects. Indeed, in the first fragment, the ambiguous figure of 'Pig Cupid' is described as 'Rooting' (53). This verb, far from being straightforward, can mean 'to implant roots', to 'uproot' or to 'rummage through'. By rendering the action of 'Pig Cupid' enigmatic, Loy complicates the

meaning of the fragment in general. For instance, the line ‘Pulls a weed white start-topped’, which follows on from the reference to ‘Pig Cupid’, seems to refer back to ‘Rooting’, as an act of ‘uprooting’. If this were the case, however, ‘Pig Cupid’ would be in the act of getting rid of the ‘erotic garbage / “Once upon a time”’, so why would he be insulted as a ‘Pig’? Still, the hypertrophied space of the last line of the stanza (‘Among wild oats sown in mucuous-membrane’) throws emphasis on the past participle ‘sown’, which, besides its conventional meaning, also refers back to the ‘Pig’ through the noun ‘sow’ that is inscribed within it (53). As a result of Loy’s ambiguous semantics, conventional, linear, narrative logic is unavoidably broken down.

Questions of language and meaning are again foregrounded in fragment XXVIII, in which the connotations of the adjective ‘white’ are variously worked through. This fragment proceeds from a purely visual remark (‘The steps go up for ever / And they are white’) to an association of ‘whiteness’ with ‘synthetic’ aloofness (64). Next, ‘white’ is used to describe the imagined state of the speaker after the ‘burn(ing)’ effect of sexual gratification, and to represent the synaesthetic collapse of the mental and the visual in ‘wills and words all white’. In the second stanza, the ‘white towel’ recalls the clumsy, pseudo-medical implications of fragment XVII, which are echoed by the sickly sound of ‘your / Etiolate body’. This is followed by a passage in which white is again romanticized as the colour of ‘dawn/of your New Day’ (65). The last, short sentence, is, finally, more ambiguous: ‘Unthinkable that white over there/— — — Is smoke from your house’ (65). These lines either evoke some kind of pastoral reverie, or they function as a euphemism for the sexual climax. In the particularly revealing fragments just analysed, it becomes clear that rather than progressing logically and linearly, the *Songs to Joannes* is organized around a complex, sprawling web of meanings and associations that spring forth from individual words. Fred Wah uses the term ‘para-syntactic’ to refer to poetry that ‘slow(s) the reading down to intense observation’ (qtd. in Quartermain 76). This term is useful here because it stresses the particular demands that such poetry places on the reader.

The ambiguous character of *Songs* is articulated both in the text itself and in its metatextual elements. In the Conover edition of *Songs* (and in Carl Van Vechten’s manuscript of the poem), for example, the second line reads ‘Silting the appraisable / Pig Cupid’ (meaning choking up, or filling). Other editions of the poem, and the recording of Mina Loy reading the fragment in a 1965 interview, however, read ‘Sifting the appraisable / Pig Cupid’, (meaning straining and examining).² Peter Quartermain, alternatively, has argued the case for ‘Sitting the appraisable / Pig Cupid. . .’ (76). Although this word – whatever it is – has the capacity to alter the entire meaning of the first stanza, Loy was reluctant to furnish her readers with a definitive version of the line.

Similarly, as Quartermain notices, and as can be observed in Van Vechten’s manuscript, it is impossible to determine whether Loy wrote ‘These are suspect places’ or ‘There are suspect places’ (the latter of which can be read both as a demonstrative adverb referring back to the previous stanza, or as a disconnected grammatical particle with no semantic relevance). Again, then, the ‘meaning’ of the

² A transcript of the interview with Paul Blackburn and Robert Vas Dias is printed in *Mina Loy: Woman and Poet*, Ed. Maera Shrieber and Keith Tuma. Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation, 1998. 205-59. Mina Loy, although hesitant in her reading, chooses to read ‘sifting’ (see 219). Further, Thom Gunn also prints ‘sifting’, perhaps in the light of this transcript, or of other manuscripts, which are, unfortunately, unavailable for this essay.

poem is not 'horizontal' but 'vertical', suggesting 'the possibility that meaning appears everywhere and inheres nowhere' (Gilmore: 277).

Metonymy and the possible body

The aforementioned series of hypertrophies and reductions recall those of fragment XVII, in which imagination and reality dramatically collide.

two tassels clinging together
Let the square room fall away
From a round vacuum
Dilating with my breath (XVII, 60)

This passage usefully illustrates an important dimension of Loy's Futurist poetics. Indeed, in 'Aphorisms on Futurism' Loy argued that in 'pressing the material to derive its essence, matter becomes deformed' (149). In trying to uncover the 'essence' of her material, Loy rejects conventional, 'singular' narrative logic, and instead embraces the polysemous nature of language. While Loy's 'polysemous' writing often distorts the material that she represents, it forces her to reconfigure the body of the traditional poetic text, and thus functions as a potential corrective to conventional 'patriarchal' modes of expression.

In 'Two Aspects of Language', Roman Jakobson argues that similarity and contiguity are the two possible forms of relation between terms in a language. In this sense, Jakobson follows the linguistic theory articulated by Ferdinand de Saussure. However, the former adds that these two elements pertain, respectively, to the work of metaphor and metonymy. The metaphor is most prevalent, according to Jakobson, in Romanticism and Symbolism, whereas Realism, through 'metonymical . . . digress[ions] from the plot to the atmosphere and from the character to the setting in space and time', chooses the second rhetorical figure as its most prominent device (92). Jakobson goes on to argue that 'the principle of similarity underlies poetry' while 'prose . . . is forwarded essentially by contiguity' (94). In the *Songs to Joannes* the activity of displacement is most prominent. As I noted earlier in my analysis of the use of the adjective 'white' in fragment XXVIII, the progression of the poem is not narrative nor symbolic, but is, rather, articulated through a process of association, which is the characteristic of metonymy. Indeed, 'white' does not, in itself, stand to represent any self-standing concept; rather, this 'white' gives ways to a series of synecdoches – the synecdoche being a prevalent species of metonymy. Elsewhere, descriptions of the experience of sexuality either focus on the physical (the 'skin-sack') or extend out into more cosmic contemplations:

Till the sun
Subsides in shining
Melts some of us
Into abysmal pigeon-holes
Passion has bored
In warmth (XVI, 59)

I would argue that this second form of displacement is not metaphorical but rather metonymical, for it is not articulated around a point of comparison between the missing source (the sexual act) and the written utterance, but rather, around the shift

that has occurred. In the same way, the experience of pain and disappointment is displaced metonymically.

In fragment XVI, the revelation that the idyllic scene, which takes place ‘In the lights of the Arno’, is only hypothetical is conveyed through Loy’s use of the modal form ‘We might’, and by the very faint irony that veils the excessive, utopian bliss of the second stanza (which culminates in ‘And never have known any better’) (59). There is a tension here between the fictionality of the scene – in the sense that it is not part of the lovers’ ‘real’ lived past – and its actuality in the speaker’s imagination. The last stanza of fragment III, in which the speaker states that ‘We might have given birth to a butterfly / With the daily news / Printed in blood on its wings’ (54), also works by association; the setting and the images switch, following the transformation of blood into ink, and the metamorphosis of the memory of the abortion into a stale scene of indifference. Through this series of displacements, Loy not only problematizes the linear narrative, but also questions the capacity of language to convey any stable or singular meaning.

Loy’s interest in the ‘openness’ of language is evident in a project she undertook for the Schwartz toy company in 1940, in which she developed a game entitled ‘BUILD YOUR OWN ALPHABET’. In her designs for the game, Loy playfully ‘dismembers’ letters into their smallest components, and places ‘magnetic attachers’ or ‘peg and hole’ mechanisms onto these components so that they can be attached to one another to create complete letters. The same components can be used to form various letters (so a component of ‘X’ could also be used to make ‘Y’, for example). While in *Songs* words often mutate in accordance with the logic of sound, Loy’s game plays on the visual similarities of various letters. For Loy, it seems, sensitive or physical stimuli are necessarily integral to the production of sense and the generation of meaning.

Interestingly, Susan Gilmore notes that in the letter attached to her designs, Loy informs the Schwartz toy company that ‘All letters are made of I and O and pieces of I and O’. IO, in Italian – and Loy’s extensive contact with Italy makes it impossible for her not to have been aware of this – means ‘I’. In the context of *Songs*, self-reference is evident in the poem’s metonymical manoeuvres. As Eric Murphy Selinger suggests, romantic disappointment ‘throws the “I” into a narcissistic crisis’ (38). Loy’s is not so much a self-centred exercise, however, as part of an attempt to develop new understandings of the body – understandings which might function as feminist or modernist correctives to the patriarchal models proposed by Victorian discourses. Loy’s use of metonymy thus reveals her anticipatory engagement with issues that were fundamental to the work of French feminist scholars some sixty years later. Certainly, Loy’s writing can be usefully rethought alongside the theories of feminists such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, who have attempted to identify alternatives to traditional ‘patriarchal’ modes of expression. Kristeva, for example, has proposed the existence of a ‘pre-Oedipal’ language that originates in the ‘chora’, ‘a non-expressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated’ (93). This language – available to men and women alike – refuses the traditional symbolic workings of the sign. In a similar vein, Cixous has famously described *écriture féminine*, a ‘feminine’ form of writing that is associated with creativity and birth-giving: as Cixous emphatically declares in ‘Coming to Writing’, ‘She gives birth. With the force of a lioness. Of a plant. Of a cosmogony. Of a woman.... A longing for text! ... Milk, Ink’ (31). Loy seems to have anticipated these strands of feminist thought in the fragmentary *Songs to Joannes* – a text that results from the failure of romance and

pregnancy – and, also, in another poem, ‘Parturition’, where the stanzas mimic the alternation of contraction and release.

Loy’s valorization of metonymy over metaphor in *Songs to Joannes* works to revolutionize poetic expression by bringing about the disjunction of the ‘linear’ experience of poetry and the hypertrophy of its ‘vertical’ experience. In this respect, Loy joins Joyce, Stein and Proust in her personal interpretation of the ‘avant-garde’, and anticipates subsequent feminist theories of sexual and linguistic identity.

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