

Introduction

Found a diamond in the gutter
On an early morning freeze
In your mouth it turns to water
Onyx eyes swallow me

I don't care what it takes
All he wants is you to love him
Without shame, without shame
Without shame, without shame
Without shame

Thurston Moore, "Mina Loy"

In June 2011 the German newspaper *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* published a review of *Demolished Thoughts*, a new solo album by Thurston Moore, the lead singer of the grunge band Sonic Youth, describing the record as an experimental enterprise in line with Moore's peculiar stand within the alternative music scene. Comparing Sonic Youth to other similar contemporary bands such as Red Hot Chili Peppers and R.E.M., the journalist remarked that Sonic Youth never developed into a band fit for the stadium and for the large international music business. The reflective, dissonant, deconstructed, and disharmonic aesthetics of their music created a patina of difficulty and distance, and their interest in other art forms, such as installations and performance, and their refusal to submit to the demands of the music business, made them into a hybrid entity that did not fit into predefined patterns, not even within the capacious bounds of alternative music (Xaver Oehmen). The album itself, "an enigmatic masterpiece of cold,

engrossed beauty,” is deemed to be a kind of recapitulation of Moore’s unusual and independent genius. One song in particular captured the attention of the reviewer, as it seemed to epitomize the album’s and Moore’s difficult music—its title: “Mina Loy.”

It is striking how much of the reviewer’s somewhat perplexed tone echoes standard descriptions of modernist obscurity and genius, and, in particular, the critical appraisal of Loy’s own work and of her career as a poet. During her lifetime she was considered an extremely refined, but cold, cerebral poet: experimental, but, unlike other experimental and avant-garde writers, unfit for both the broad audience and for the demands of the cultural industry. She was part of a broad network of important artists, and yet positioned outside the canon, moving between various art forms; she was considered excessive, and judged with suspicion both because she seemed to make use of her own notoriety and simultaneously because she seemed to shun the spotlights.¹

In Thurston Moore’s song a person has found a diamond in the gutter and somehow fuses with it—the beauty of the addressee and that of the precious stone merging. A diamond in the gutter is something out of place, and worth recovering, exactly like Loy; the image echoes the constellation of figurative references in Loy’s works to jewelry and glass—for example, in “Apology of Genius” (1922) and “Lady Laura in Bohemia” (1927?), in which the protagonist is compared to “a diamond on a heap of broken glass” (*LLB*96 100); and in Joseph Cornell’s portrait of Loy, entitled “Imperious Jewellery of the Universe.”² The extremely condensed lyrics manage to create a figure that corresponds to the descriptions of Loy by numerous fellow modernists, confirmed by Carolyn Burke in her monumental biography *Becoming Modern*, as well as by Loy’s own literary executor and editor, Roger Conover (*LLB*82 xv–lxi). The song tells of a desperate love story, lived and experienced outside the bounds of shame, which is also at the center of some of the most important texts by Loy and which recalls her own biography. Thurston Moore’s “Mina Loy” draws on Loy’s life trajectory to create a figure that stands independent, and fiercely determined to achieve its own goals, but the lyrics also rely on a sudden shift from first- to third-person singular, producing an entanglement of personas, which mirrors the playful, shifting, and problematic approach to autobiography and self-performance found in Loy’s own corpus of work—a puzzling literary strategy, which Roger Conover aptly termed “pseudonymania” (*LLB*82 xviii).

Loy (London 1882–Aspen, Colorado 1966), was born Mina Gertrude Lowy, as one of three daughters of a Hungarian-Jewish father and British mother. Painter and poet, she was famous among the New York avant-garde and modernist scene for her experimental verse, as well as for her beauty and radical, free life; she was also known for her tragic love story with the pugilist-poet Arthur Cravan, Oscar Wilde's nephew, who disappeared in 1917 in the Atlantic Ocean after marrying Loy in Mexico, and probably drowned in an attempted escape to Argentina in order to flee conscription. After a period of intense but intermittent involvement with the most important movements and artists in European avant-garde and modernism, living in Paris, Florence, Berlin, and New York, Loy virtually stopped publishing, but never stopped writing, and, like Djuna Barnes (one of her best friends), chose to live relatively isolated and extremely poor in the Bowery, only to start receiving attention by academics and critics in the 1980s. It is with the 1982 publication of the *Last Lunar Baedeker* by Loy's literary executor Roger Conover that Loy's works began to enter, slowly, the newly reconfigured modernist canon—a process rendered difficult by the amount of fragments and unpublished works Loy left behind, gathered in the archives in the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale, and increasingly made available by the work of Sara Crangle, Sarah Hayden, and Antonella Francini, as well as, of course, by Jonathan Williams, Roger Conover, and Elizabeth Arnold.³

Anthologies of modernism have increasingly featured Loy's short prose pieces, manifestos, aphorisms, and poems, initially almost exclusively under the agenda of feminism and the political aesthetics of avant-garde and experimental writing.⁴ In the 1990s scholars writing on Loy were still participating in an operation of rediscovery, and, while numerous critical studies have been paving the way for newer work, the halo of difficulty, relative obscurity, and eccentricity attached to Loy does not seem to have dispelled; this is not so much because of the actual obscurity of her writings, but mainly because of the problems deriving from the great amount of fragmentary archival material, and of the disciplinary issues raised by Loy's transits through countries, movements, and cultures. Indeed, parts of the texts that Conover published in *LLB82* are assemblages, created by Conover by means of collating and editing various fragments held in the Beinecke Library,⁵ and the focus of the work of Sandeep Parmar and Sara Crangle has been the systematization and organization of the archival materials into texts. Recently, Tara Prescott has entitled her book on Loy *Poetic Salvage*, thus confirming the need to

bring Loy out of the marginal position in which she is still partially confined. Most recently, Sarah Hayden's careful study on Loy and avant-garde artist-hood—unfortunately published a few weeks after the completion of this manuscript—has provided important new insights on Loy's aesthetics. Insofar as Loy mostly published her works in small avant-garde magazines, and saw only one of her published collections of poems in her own life (John Williams's *Lunar Baedeker & Time-Tables*, 1958), both *LLB82* and *LLB96* can be said to have been coauthored by Roger Conover, whose mastery over the material has also influenced the way in which we read Loy's texts: one example would be the marked attention to the early writings of Loy in the most recent edition of the *Lunar Baedeker*, whose systematization into sections organized historically and by genre in the sections "Futurism x Feminism: The Circle Squared (Poems 1914–1920)," "Corpses and Geniuses (Poems 1919–1930)" has led to rooting Loy deeply within the historical avant-garde, and deflected the attention away from the later works, listed under "Compensations of Poverty (Poems 1942–1949)."

When T. S. Eliot regretted that Loy "lacked an oeuvre" (Burke, *Becoming Modern* viii) he may have been expressing an anachronistic demand, as Burke notes, but he also had a point. In fact, one may say that part of the work of rediscovering Loy has been that of assembling a corpus, of creating an oeuvre out of a large quantity of unpublished and unedited material. As Conover reports in the "Introduction" to *LLB82*, Loy never wanted to be thought of as "a poet": the "canonical mode was foreign to Mina Loy's way of thinking. She wrote. As for the rest, it didn't concern her" (*LLB82* xv). Loy's rejection of the label of poet, and her refusal to comply with the mechanisms of canonization and professionalisation of art and literature, are not to be thought of as mere poses of a waning celebrity, but are at the very center of Loy's own work and of her version of modernism, which was characterized by attitudes and approaches that could be critical or even adversarial of the main tenets of its own aesthetics.

"Critical," "Eccentric" Modernism?

Indeed, it is the aim of the present volume to present a reading of Loy's unsystematic corpus of works as producing a kind of "critical," "eccentric" modernism: I understand this to be a version of modernism that is deeply involved in the founding categories of its own project, but at the same time