

Mothers and Children in Two Poems by Mina Loy¹
Pilar Sánchez Calle, Universidad de Jaén (Spain)

Index

- 1 Introduction
- 2 "Parturition:" Portrait of a parturient woman
- 3 "Ada Gives Birth to Ova:" The distant mother
- 4 Conclusion
- Bibliography

1 Introduction

In recent years, the neglected modernist poet Mina Loy (London, 1882; Aspen, Colorado, 1966) has been rediscovered by a new generation of readers.² Mina Loy grew up in London and in 1900 she went to Berlin and later on to Paris to study art. She left Paris for Florence in 1906, where she lived for ten years with her first husband and two children. Loy travelled to New York in 1916, becoming very active in the city's avant-garde scene. She came back to Europe in 1918, living in London and Italy till she moved to Paris in 1921. In 1936, Loy settled definitively in the United States, first in Manhattan and then in Aspen, Colorado, where she died in 1966.

Her poems were praised by Ezra Pound (he coined the term "logopoeia" to describe them) (Burke 1997: v) and admired and eagerly read by many others, such as William Carlos Williams, Hart Crane and E.E. Cummings. However, printed in little magazines or published by small publishing houses, Loy's work was lost to later reading audiences, perhaps because she did not publish anything between 1931 and 1944. Her poems' technical experimentation and, above all, a subject matter based on female experience and located in the female body (Benstock 1986: 387) are counted among the reasons so much of her work remained unpublished. Mina Loy's poetry was unlike that of any other woman poet of her generation. She used free verse with an audacious spacing of her lines. She also chose to question conventional contexts of meaning through the use of simultaneity and the juxtaposition of disparate elements (Ress 1993: 119). Her poems see art, love, sex, and childbirth from the point of view of a "new woman" (Burke 1997: v-vi). When dealing with the body, Loy exhibits a vocabulary of eroticism which revels in bodily functions, concentrating on skin, tissue and fluids as ways of figuring love. Loy does not idealize the body: her treatment ranges from disgust to delight with the flesh (Kinnahan 1994: 56).

In most of her early poetry, Loy analyzes the female self as she sees its universal situation mirrored in her own life and the life of her contemporaries (Kouidis 1980: 26). The feminist debates of her time seem to have acted as a stimulus for her thinking about the poetic use of the female experience. Few of the other female poets of the era spoke as honestly about the daily life of women. Also, Loy considered that it was her special talent as a poet to find poetry where it had not always been found before, that is, in the mundane and the fleshy, even in the excremental (Tuma 1998: 188).

This essay aims to analyze the representation of mothers and children in two poems by Mina Loy, "Parturition," and the subsection "Ada Gives Birth to Ova" of the long poem "Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose." I have always been fascinated by these two portraits of women giving birth. On the one hand, I am attracted by some of Loy's

¹ This paper has been financed by the Spanish Ministry of Education (Research Project BFF2003-05347

thematic and formal innovations in “Parturition”, such as its subject matter, its visual aspects, the use of simultaneity and juxtaposition as composition principles, and the vocabulary chosen to explore the dynamic creativity of a parturient woman, as well as to recreate the maternal body. “Ada Gives Birth to Ova” starts with a woman giving birth, but it differs completely in tone and vocabulary from “Parturition.” The transgressive element resides in the sarcastic point of view, unorthodox language, and syntax chosen to depict the birth. There is neither tenderness nor complicity with the reader, who cannot help laughing but, at the same time, feels somewhat uneasy. In “Parturition,” the persona of the poem is a woman giving birth and in “Ada Gives Birth to Ova,” the birth of Ova is narrated in a quite unsentimental tone, which suggests a modernist disillusionment with the family and with maternity. Loy resists the idealization of maternity and questions the figure of her own mother.

2 “Parturition:” Portrait of a parturient woman

Published in *Trend* in 1914, “Parturition” was the first poem ever written about the physical experience of giving birth from the parturient woman’s point of view, detailing an area of female experience rarely thought suitable for literature. Virginia Kouidis was the first critic to observe this, emphasizing the significance of this poem in the history of modern poetry as well as in the literature of modern sexuality (1980: 40). Carolyn Burke, biographer of Mina Loy, points out that fifty years before such a subject became acceptable, Loy traced what she called the “spatial contours” of childbirth in this poem (1985: 52). For Linda A. Kinnahan, “Parturition” depicts the intensely physical experience of labor through an unprecedented attention to the woman’s body during childbirth (1994: 56).

The first stanzas emphasize the woman’s physical pain and her alienation from the natural world. Pain is at the centre of the self. Pain breaks that nucleus of being by expanding in all directions: “I am the centre/Of a circle of pain/Exceeding its boundaries in every direction” (ll. 1-3). The woman’s feeling of isolation (“The business of the bland sun/Has no affair with me,” ll. 4-5) relegates everything but the dynamics of labor to a second level. In the third stanza, Loy tries to simulate the rhythmic contractions and expansions of labor with a compact and compressed free line (Burke 1985: 53):

Locate an irritation without
It is within
 Within

It is without
The sensitized area
Is identical with the extensity
Of intension (ll. 11-16)

The visual aspect of the poem is effective from both a formal and a psychological perspective. The self exists within an indifferent cosmos. The only way to achieve self-realization is through vision. For Loy, women have been denied the vision of their own physical realities (Kouidis 1980: 32). By offering a different view of the maternal body during labor, Loy is striving for an entirely new definition of the female self, confirmed by the fact that the opening declaration “I am” reappears six times in the whole poem. Childbirth provides the means for self-comprehension and emphasizes the difference between male and female experiences. Loy articulates male alienation from this extraordinary moment through simultaneity and juxtaposition. In the sixth stanza, the author contrasts the man’s careless sexual freedom, “A fashionable portrait-painter/ Running up-stairs to a woman’s apartment/ Sings” (ll. 27-29), with the difficult physical and spiritual situation of the parturient woman, depicted in the seventh stanza, whose body and mind are also following an upward movement, that of a contraction:

I am climbing a distorted mountain of agony
Incidentally with the exhaustion of control
I reach the summit
And gradually subside into anticipation of
Repose
Which never comes (ll. 40-45)

The stanza ends with an affirmation of the woman's active role and a suggestion of the special self-knowledge she is acquiring in this particular situation: "For another mountain is growing up/Which goaded by the unavoidable/I must traverse/Traversing myself" (ll. 46-49).

Through its ironic juxtaposition with the laboring voice of the female subject-in-question, the inanity of this painter's voice singing of female charm ("All the girls are tid'ly did'ly/All the girls are nice" (ll. 30-31) shows the inaccuracy of conventional portraits of women, be they verbal or visual. The author expresses a sense of outrage at the prevailing image of women as fragile beings. Her critique of the sexual standards and social customs of her culture of origin are expressed in her satirically objective description of the fashionable artist (Januzzi 1998: 423).

The following stanzas juxtapose thoughts and physical sensations. As Carolyn Burke suggests, the woman is trying to think through the body and write from within its spatial contours (1985: 42). Her consciousness alternates analytical passages with vivid, concrete images. The horizon of pain is interrupted by the presence of a pleasure in childbirth that is suggested by some intensely erotic expressions such as "the foam on the stretched muscles of a mouth" (l. 56), "a climax in sensibility" (l. 58), and a "lascivious revelation" (l. 64). These expressions reveal the importance the woman gives to all the bodily sensations she is experiencing at this unique moment. Loy resists the idealization of the moment of birth and, in a quite innovative way, focuses on what the mother feels through her skin and tissue.

The intense agony is followed by relaxation in the following stanza. The woman connects herself with the natural cosmos which had been alien to her body. She feels that she is a part of "cosmic reproductivity" (l. 103) At the same time, the speaker recognises the animal element in her "infinite Maternity" (l. 99):

For consciousness in crises races
Through the subliminal deposits of evolutionary processes
Have I not
Somewhere
Scrutinized
A dead white feathered moth
Laying eggs? (ll. 70-76)

The baby is felt through its touch. Its movements resemble those of a small animal: "Against my thigh/Touch of infinitesimal motion/Scarcely perceptible/Undulation/Warmth moisture" (ll. 89-93). The aesthetic and philosophic key points of these stanzas lie in the juxtaposition of abstract concepts about maternity and the physical sensations of the process of becoming a mother. The woman experiences a new sense of belonging to the universe which has its roots in the psychological and in the physical. The parturient woman feels that she is part of "evolutionary processes" (l. 71) that lead her "Into the essence/Of unpredicted Maternity" (ll. 87-88) and of a maternal continuum: "I am absorbed/Into/The was-is-ever-shall-be/Of cosmic reproductivity" (ll. 102-105).

By identifying with a cat, the speaker again evokes the purely physical elements of maternity which render her equal to the rest of living beings:

Rises from the subconscious
Impression of a cat
With blind kittens
Among her legs
Same undulating life-stir
I am that cat (ll. 106-111)

Images from the insect world complete the previous ones and provide the speaker with a special knowledge of the world and of herself:

And through the insects
Waves that same undulation of living
Death
Life
I am knowing
All about
Unfolding (ll. 116-122)

The final stanzas offer an ironic contrast with the rest of the poem. The intense physical and psychological experience of childbirth gives way to a cynical vision of mothers and women. The strong "I am" of the previous stanzas has turned into "Each woman-of-the-people" (l. 124). The image of female solicitude and the sisterhood of suffering suggest human affection among women, but imply the relative unimportance of those efforts (Kouidis 1980: 46): "Each woman-of-the-people/Tip-toeing the red pile of the carpet/Doing hushed service" (ll. 124-126). The "infinite Maternity" (l. 99) and the "cosmic reproductivity" (l. 105) have become "A ludicrous little halo"/Of which she is sublimely unaware" (ll. 129-130). Suddenly, giving birth is not a source of self-knowledge, creativity and connection with the universe, but a conventional condition shared by many women who ignore their own creative potential. The poem ends with three irreverent lines which articulate the author's sarcastic vision of religion and add an unsentimental touch very typical of Loy: "I once heard in a church/-Man and woman God made them-/Thank God." (ll. 131-133). Loy seems to be attacking Christianity's ideology of gender and the image of the master (male) creator. Marisa Januzzi emphasizes the ambiguity of these last lines, particularly the word "them," which may refer to man and woman or, more specifically, to sexual difference which God made. "Them" may also refer to babies, which in churches are said to have been made by God (1998: 426). The irony of the final line "Thank God" derives from the juxtaposition of the typical religious reading of the meaning of birth with the maternal poem written by Loy.

3 "Ada Gives Birth to Ova:" The distant mother

The poem "Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose" was written in Paris between 1923 and 1925. The first two installments of the poem came out in the "Exile" issue (1923) of *The Little Review*, and the third in Robert McAlmon's *Contact Collection of Contemporary Verse* (1925). The poem was not published whole until 1982, in the volume *The Last Lunar Baedeker*, edited by Roger L. Conover. "Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose" is among the oddest of modernist long poems, a strange combination of satire, didactic commentary and lyrical mysticism. Though Loy was forty years old when she wrote the poem, it is an allegorical, parodic pseudo-narrative of the poet's ancestry, birth, and childhood (Perloff 1998: 134). We can say then that this is autobiography or automythology, and rather curious in its selection of autobiographical events. The reader needs some extra-textual biographical information about Mina Loy; otherwise

he/she will have difficulties in understanding those sections which introduce characters who are not especially integrated into this cryptic personal mythology.

The poem has three sections of different length. The first one, "Exodus," focuses on Loy's father, Sigmund Löwy, a Hungarian Jew who emigrated to London at the end of the 19th century. In "English Rose," Loy writes about her mother, Julia Bryan, who is called both Ada and Alice. The third section, "Mongrel Rose," is devoted to Ova, daughter of Exodus and Ada. Ova is a representation of Mina Loy as a child, a kind of ironic and sceptical version of herself. Her coming into this world anticipates her unconventional existence and is recreated in the subsection "Ada Gives Birth to Ova." Ada's pain is not comparable to that felt by the woman in "Parturition", where pain appears as a natural consequence of labor and intensifies the parturient woman's consciousness of herself and the world. In contrast, Loy suggests here that Ada's pain is grotesque because she cannot control it as she has done with her own body all her life. Ada does not seem to cooperate at this crucial moment; on the contrary, Loy emphasizes that the baby is extracted from her:

Her face
screwed to the mimic-salacious
grotesquerie of a pain
larger than her intellect
They pull
A clotty bulk of bifurcate fat
out of her loins
to lie
for a period while performing hands
pour lactoid liquids through
and then mop up beneath it
their golden residue (ll. 576-587)

It is difficult to find a more unsentimental description of the birth of a human being and a stronger sense of alienation between mother and child. The newborn is described not as a beautiful baby, but as "A clotty bulk of bifurcate fat" (l. 581). Instead of being held by her mother, Ova is aseptically manipulated by "performing hands" (l. 584). If in "Parturition" the parturient woman is the protagonist, here the mother is absent and alien. Loy insists on Ova's exceptionality when describing her as "A breathing baby/mystero-chemico Nemesis/of obscure attractions" (ll. 588-590) and mentioning her "isolate consciousness" (l. 595).

Ova receives a mixed heritage from her Hungarian Jewish father and her English Protestant mother, but this mongrel condition is not seen as something positive by Ada. From her "ominous pillow" (l. 608), Ova seems to remind her mother that she carries the genes of those who killed Christ:

So is the mystic absolute
the rose
that grows
from the red flowing
from the flank of Christ
thorned with the computations
of the old
Jehova's gender
Where Jesus of Nazareth
becomes one-piece
with Judas Iscariot
in this composite
Anglo-Israelite (ll. 619-631)

Ova is an Anglo-Israelite mixture of Jesus of Nazareth and Judas Iscariot, but blessed with a Jewish intellect. The last two stanzas insist on Ova's singularity and suggest her intelligence and independence, despite a hostile family atmosphere where her mother remains distant. Her mongrel heart and smart eyes cast a determined spirit among clumsy maternal caresses:

Out of a fatted frown
this spirit pokes its eyes
its star tipped handy-pandies
darting on the air

Solemn and unsurprised
and clumsily
lapped by insensitive maternity
it lies
waving its brand new feet
and feeds
its mongrel heart on Bengel's food
for infants (ll. 632-643)

4 Conclusion

In "Parturition," Mina Loy criticizes conventional notions of the individual and of aesthetic representation. A new mode of female consciousness breaks out of the confinement to which convention had relegated it. Loy represents the woman as an active subject at this crucial moment. Childbirth becomes the means for self-comprehension and releases the woman from dependence upon the male. By giving birth to the child, she also gives birth to the poem and to herself in an acknowledgement of female creative potential. Labor is not considered to be a means to an end, but as the unique work of the creative individual. As Virginia Kouidis points out, Loy rediscovers women's limitation and helplessness and also women's strength. She has proved the futurists' accusation of female animality, but has defied animality by using suffering creatively (1980: 46).

The subsection "Ada Gives Birth to Ova", from the long poem "Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose", shows a certain disillusionment with childbirth and maternity. Loy recreates in a sarcastic and sometimes cruel way her mother's attitude towards her own birth. Julia, Loy's mother, is renamed Ada and Mina Loy herself becomes Ova. Loy criticizes Ada's aloofness in the process of giving birth and considers it a consequence of Ada's rejection of everything connected with the body. Whereas the woman in "Parturition" vividly articulates the pain of contractions and experiences an intense physical closeness to her child, Ada's attempt to control her pain becomes grotesque and provokes a separation between mother and child. This poem is far from the tender animality suggested by "Parturition." Ada feels a certain disgust towards her daughter's physical aspect because it reminds her of her Jewish husband. She seems to have interiorized all the stereotypes of her time about Jews, and for her, Ova's mongrel condition is not a happy fact. Loy juxtaposes words from different categories of diction: the biological and psychological, the bestial and romantic, the educated and the vulgar, the scientific and the colloquial. The result is two poems that were transgressive in Loy's time and continue puzzling readers nowadays.

Bibliography

- Benstock, Shari (1988): *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Burke, Carolyn (1985): "The New Poetry and the New Woman: Mina Loy." In Wood Middlebrook, Diane/Yalom, Marilyn (eds): *Coming to Light: American Women Poets in the Twentieth Century*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 37-57.
- Burke, Carolyn (1997): *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Januzzi, Marisa (1998): "Mongrel Rose: The 'Unerring Esperanto' of Loy's Poetry." In Shreiber, Maera/Tuma, Keith (eds): *Mina Loy: Woman and Poet*. Orono: The National Poetry Foundation, 403-441.
- Kinnahan, Linda A. (1994): *Poetics of the Feminine: Authority and Literary Tradition in William Carlos Williams, Mina Loy, Denise Levertov, and Kathleen Fraser*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kouidis, Virginia M. (1980): *Mina Loy: American Modernist Poet*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Loy, Mina (1985): *The Last Lunar Baedeker*. 1982. Manchester: Carcanet.
- Loy, Mina (1996): *The Lost Lunar Baedeker: Poems of Mina Loy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Perloff, Marjorie (1998): "English as a 'Second' Language: Mina Loy's 'Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose.'" In Shreiber, Maera/Tuma, Keith (eds): *Mina Loy: Woman and Poet*. Orono: The National Poetry Foundation, 131-148.
- Ress, Lisa (1993): "From Futurism to Feminism: The Poetry of Mina Loy." In Dotterer, Ronald/Bowers, Susan (eds): *Gender, Culture, and the Arts: Women, the Arts, and Society*. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 115-127.
- Tuma, Keith (1998): "Mina Loy's 'Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose.'" In Shreiber, Maera/Tuma, Keith (eds): *Mina Loy: Woman and Poet*. Orono: The National Poetry Foundation, 181-204.