

# Back to the Futurism

By Rosalind Fursland



## Introduction

Mina Loy is primarily known as an early modernist poet, although she was also an admired creator in other spheres. One of Loy's most recognisable and insightful remarks in her essay "Modern Poetry" is that "Poetry is prose bewitched, a music made of visual thoughts, the sound of an idea" (Loy 157). This 'sounding of an idea' undoubtedly has Futurist origins and is evident as much of Loy's poetry is experimental representing the testing of a theory or idea. Futurism was introduced to Loy in her early twenties when she migrated to Florence, where, after the publication of his "Futurist Manifesto" in 1909, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's Futurism was emerging. Compared with the numerous renowned modernists Loy counted as contemporaries, friends, muses, and confidants (including Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, William Carlos Williams, Marcel Duchamp, H.D. and Djuna Barnes), Marinetti, contrary to Loy's later desires, had an unequivocally intense and lasting influence on her, both positively and negatively as a woman and poet. His vision for Futurism was concerned with the dissolution of the "old" and welcoming of the "new" in almost every area of its followers' lives and particularly pervaded most aspects of painting, sculpting, architecture, music and literature. Futurism promoted destruction as much as it encouraged creation, and, as Marinetti's Manifesto claims, "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" (Apollonio 22). Marinetti also states that "Art... is a need to destroy and scatter oneself" (Nicholls 92) and espouses the extreme intention to "destroy the museums, libraries, academies of every kind" (Apollonio 22). These Futurist aphorisms exemplify the significant and central notion that Futurism endorsed: destruction in order to open a space for new ideas, new thinking, and ultimately the re-birth of art in multiple new forms.

## Mina Loy and Futurism

Despite a complex, ambiguous, and ultimately fleeting association with Futurism, much of Mina Loy's poetry typifies Marinetti's professions on Futurist literature, because it embodies a dissection and demolition of traditional principles of literature through the "destruction of syntax" (Apollonio 96) in order to allow for parole in libertà or "words in freedom" (Nicholls 92). In this context I refer to Futurism as the

artistic movement which arose in 1909, largely proliferated by Marinetti's tireless self-promotion, which harnessed the energy of newly emerging technology and industry to form a dynamic forward-thinking group of Florentine artists whose perceptions of art would become influential in many countries and to many people. Through this, Marinetti encouraged poets to explore the limitless mind without inhibition or rules. This item of Marinetti's numerous proclamations is particularly visible in Loy's poetry. Another offshoot of Futurism which is influential in some of Loy's poetry is the mechanical, mathematical, and industrial elements of what was seen as a "modern" projection of the future. The Futurist Manifesto also eloquently dictates that Futurism will glorify "the vibrant nightly fervour of arsenals and shipyards blazing with violent electric moons... greedy railway stations that devour smoke-plumed serpents... factories hung on clouds by the crooked lines of their smoke" (Apollonio 22).

Futurism can be seen as a bleaching of the mind, so as to prepare for the future layers of new colour; "HERE are the fallow-lands of mental spatiality that Futurism will clear-" (Loy 142). It is a yearning and attempt to embrace what lies just ahead; a reach into the Future to try to pull its influences into the present, rather than continuing the customs of the past. As Marinetti state, "Futurism is grounded in the complete renewal of human sensibility brought about by the great discoveries of science" (Apollonio 96). Marinetti asserts in his manifesto that "We intend to exalt aggressive action, a feverish insomnia, the racer's stride, the mortal leap, the punch and slap" (Schiach 19). This is also prevalent in some of Loy's poetry, as the existence of underlying mechanisms in the superficially fractured language and structure is irrefutable. Similarly, images of fecundity, re-birth, and renewal are frequently sown arbitrarily among the Futurist language of the machines, thus, emphasising the natural "going to seed" of old ideas and the fertilisation of the mind and delivery of new ideas, this time in the form of factories, technology, and subsequent "new" art.

The persuasive influence of Marinetti and his radical revision of the universe kick-started many artists into action, including Mina Loy. Nevertheless, Loy did not completely or eternally conform to or abide by Futurism as there was an "uglier" side to the movement. In a letter to Mabel Dodge in 1914, Loy wrote that she was "in the throes of conversion to Futurism... [but] I shall never convince myself" (Galvin 64).

Particular barriers for Loy included statements such as; "We will glorify war—the world's only hygiene—militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for women" (Apollonio 22). The rise of a politically fascist stance deterred Loy; the negative rhetoric associated with women offended her; and the emphasis on Italian supremacy and racial purity, herself being the product of a traditional English Victorian mother and a Hungarian Jew, distressed her.

As a key female modernist poet in her time, Loy has been relatively understudied and negated by critics until recent years. Despite Samuel French Morse campaigning for a re-awakening to her poetry in his 1961 essay "The Rediscovery of Loy and the Avant-Garde," a further twenty year delay elapsed, with little stirring of interest, during which time, Loy herself died in relative obscurity in 1966. It wasn't until 1980, that the pioneering Virginia Kouidis published the influential *Mina Loy: American Modernist Poet*, which at last began to reignite critical interest in Mina Loy. Thus, in the short tradition of studying Loy, largely superficial and biographical details have been covered numerous times. In addition, particular poems and extracts have been acclaimed and studied. Moreover, Loy's poetry has been subdivided into chronological biographically influenced periods of her life. For example, in Roger Conover's editing of *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*; hence the reason why works from different periods of her life are often treated separately and differently, some parts, for example, her later poetry, are neglected more than others. Loy's body of poetry is infrequently addressed as a whole, therefore, as constraints permit only one theme, the strand of Futurism often only discussed in Loy's early poetry, will be examined throughout each era, beginning with the period 1913 to 1915.

## The Futurist Years 1913- 1915

Aside from the charismatic appeal of Marinetti, Loy was drawn to Futurism because, like many, she was inspired by the sentiments of the 1909 manifesto, as well as the literary-orientated manifesto of 1913 encouraging "Destruction of Syntax," "Imagination without Strings," and "Words in Freedom" (Apollonio 95). Loy was evidently excited by these suggestions for the "Futurist sensibility" of poetry (Apollonio 98), as in much of her early work (and arguably her later work), she conforms to the complete obliteration of syntax

and punctuation, as well as freeing her thoughts from the confines of her mind, no matter how vulgar or unconventional, and writing them down in the form of poetry. This was encouraged by Marinetti who called it “the Imagination without Strings,” to clarify; “the absolute freedom of images or analogies, expressed with unhampered words and with no connecting strings of syntax with no punctuation” (Apollonio 99). Moreover, in the “Words in Freedom” section, Marinetti elaborates further on his wish that the poet “will begin by brutally destroying the syntax of his speech... together distant things with no connecting strings, by means of essential free words” (Apollonio 98). The Futurist sentiments most appealing to Loy are those which fall under the umbrella of Marinetti’s second item of advice for poets, that they should have a “Dread of the old and the known. Love of the new, the unexpected.” (Apollonio 96). This was the notion which really seized Loy’s attention, captured her imagination, and pervaded her life and poetry, well beyond her Florentine days. For Carolyn Burke, Loy’s outstanding biographer, the persistent desire for change and reinvention, altering her name from Lowy to Loy to Lloyd, signifies “her attempts to resolve personal crises” (Burke vi). Loy’s rejection of the “old” and desire for the “new” in the early stages of her career, is embodied by her hasty escape from England and the Victorian tyranny of her traditionalist English mother.

Loy’s 1914 prose poem, “Aphorisms on Futurism” gush with eager enthusiasm, echoing the Futurist rhetoric she so admired. The piece is in the style of one of Marinetti’s manifestos using imperatives, with upper case letters for emphasis; the opening aphorism being; “DIE in the past/ Live in the Future” (Loy 149) thus, precisely illustrating Loy’s major area of identification with Futurist philosophy. The emphasis on “DIE” demonstrates Loy’s Futurist wish for all that is “past” and “old” to wilt away in order to allow the soil to be ploughed for regeneration and life in the future. This bold opening statement is an aggressive commandment designed to procure attention through the medium of instruction. A later aphorism, although still imperative, has a more sympathetic and reassuring tone for those doubting the advantages of Futurist thinking; “BUT the Future is only dark from the outside./ Leap into it—and it EXPLODES with Light” (Loy 149). The loaded meaning of “EXPLODES” urges sceptics to take a leap of faith into the “Light” of the future. The reference to explosion is also significant because it evokes the important bond between Futurism and industry, science, and

technological discovery. Furthermore, several aphorisms refer to the future as stimulating the imagination “by inspiring people to expand to their fullest capacity” (Loy 150). This was one of the most cherished aspects of Futurism for Loy, that it sparked the inspiration for her satirically self-declared poetic genius (“Apology of Genius”) and caused a catalytic chain reaction, allowing the explosion of a great poet from the ashes of a mediocre artist. One poem followed another, and although the subject content and perspective altered, there is no doubt that Futurism was the initial stimulus which fuelled the unfulfilled poet in Loy. She postulates that “THE Future is limitless—the past a trail of insidious reactions” (Loy 150) and “THE Futurist can live a thousand years in one poem” (Loy 150). This unflinching and unanimous extolling of and devotion to Futurism with its promotion of the liberation of the mind, documents Loy’s staunch, overflowing enthusiasm for Marinetti’s movement. The aphorisms display no hint of the disfavour Loy would later associate with the Futurists, although interestingly, no mention is made of the more controversial and problematic ideals such as ‘scorn for woman” (Apollonio 22) and war as “the world’s only hygiene” (Apollonio 22). Loy instead focuses on the positive fertile images of regrowth and imagination which inspired her; “MAN is a slave only to his own mental lethargy” (Loy 151) and “YOU cannot restrict the mind’s capacity” (Loy 152). These aphorisms read like biblical commandments and exude a palpable fervour for Futurism.

“Italian Pictures” is one of Loy’s most neglected poems, and although it presents a challenge of comprehension, exhibits a series of fragmented vignettes of Florentine life. The poem juxtaposes the superficial vivacity of the Italian city with images of the city’s undercurrent of depravity, emotional paralysis, and death. It is very much an outsider’s portrayal of Italian life, wishing to partake but unable to integrate fully. Although Loy was committed to the Futurist cause for a time, she could never fully immerse herself due to her expatriate status and already complex ethnic and cultural identity as a British Jew, her “impure” racial blood becoming a further cause for consternation in the light of extreme Futurist ideals. The following passage is from the section of “Italian Pictures” entitled “The Costa San Giorgio”. It demonstrates the nature of the narrator’s self-awareness as the product of English civility in the unkempt but stimulating country of Italy:

We English make a tepid blot  
 On the messiness  
 Of the passionate Italian life-traffic  
 Throbbing the street up steep  
 Up up to the porta  
 Culminating  
 In the stained frescoe of the dragon-slayer  
 (Loy 10)

This demonstrates Loy’s frustration that, although diluted, the influence of Loy’s mother and traditional upbringing in England will always resign her to being “tepid,” tame, and resigned in comparison to the “messiness” and “passion” of the “Italian life traffic” surrounding her. Although it is never asserted that the narrator in this poem is Loy herself, it is clear that she has written it from the perspective of her experience in Florence. Moreover, Loy’s reference alluding to the English as a “tepid blot” resonates as a personal and impossible struggle to cast off her tedious, rigid, and “old” British upbringing in favour of envelopment in the “new” and vigorous Italian experience and the Futurist’s desire for change and progression. Loy states in a recorded interview in 1965 with Paul Blackburn and Robert Vas Dias, that when she was pondering her identity and the idea of English identity as a whole, saying “we English... I was thinking, why do we call ourselves English in England?” (Pozorski 50). This exemplifies Loy’s exhaustive absorption with identity, both racial and cultural; perhaps an innate remnant from her days as the “outsider” in Futurism, as a woman and ethnic anomaly among the Futurists. Loy refers to herself as a “mongrel”, again highlighting this cultural, social, racial, and religious internal conflict. The significance of the passage from “The Costa San Giorgio” is further emphasised by the destination of the weary uphill struggle to the porta. With Futurist influences (such as “Words in Freedom” and “Destruction of Syntax”) typical of Loy, including the lack of punctuation giving a sense of her formal liberation, and the long breaks between words aptly placed to accentuate the arduous uphill struggle, Loy arrives at a fresco. The importance here is that the fresco is of a dragon-slayer, namely St George, hence the Florentine name “The Costa San Giorgio”. Therefore, the passage describes the sight of the “tepid” English juxtaposed with the vibrant Italians as they make their patriotic pilgrimage to the fresco of St George. It is evident here that although it sits uncomfortably, Loy’s reflection on the identity of the English concludes that although having rejected



this “mongrel” nature was “The Effectual Marriage or The In-sipid Narrative of Gina and Miovanni” published in 1915. “Gina” and “Miovanni” are clearly aliases for Mina and Giovanni, although this is just a technique of satire, rather than being an accurate account on the relationship between Loy and Papini. The poem is a feminist commentary on an “effectual” marriage with the male and female assigned and confined to their respective gendered domains; the woman in the kitchen and the man in the library. This piece, in particular, was greatly admired by T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, the latter of whom coined the term logopoeia in 1917, defined as “the dance of the intellect among words” (Burke v) and was specifically designed to describe Loy’s poetry. The most tragic aspect of the poem is that Gina (it is never clarified whether she is the narrator or not) believes herself to be content in the female social ideal, until finally in parentheses it transpires “this narrative halted when I learned that the house which inspired it was the home of a mad woman” (Loy 39). The following passage demonstrates the disparity of the pair, “annexed” in their separate spheres:

Of what their peace consisted  
 We cannot say  
 Only that he was magnificently man  
 She insignificantly a woman who understood  
 Understanding what is that  
 To Each his entity to others  
 Their idiosyncrasies to the free expansion  
 To the annexed their liberty  
 To man his work  
 To woman her love  
 Succulent meals and an occasional caress  
 So be it  
 It so seldom is  
 (Loy 38)

“The Effectual Marriage” is a prime example of Loy’s development of an individual poetic fusion of Futurism, feminism and her own interpretations from 1915, which Carolyn Burke refers to as “a kind of dialogue with Futurism” (Burke 142). Typographically and formally, the Futurist influence remains prevalent, with “white spaces” (Gillespie 125) again appearing frequently, evoking a tension between the two juxtaposed eponymous subjects. This allowed Loy to intervene in the masculine discourses at work in the literary world, including Futurism, while also distancing herself by allowing greater satirical objectivity.

A further poem which lightly ridicules Futurism is “Giovan-ni Franchi” which contains interactions between the naïve eponymous character “the minor Giovanni” (Loy 29) and an older man of wisdom, experience and philosophy, “the major Giovanni” (Loy 29) aptly named “Giovanni Bapini.” “Lions” Jaws” is by far the most overt mockery of Futurism as it contains “Raminetti”, “Bapini” and “Nima Lyo”, “Anim Yol” and “Imna Oly” and documents the rise of a movement called “flabbergastism.” Loy also references the role of women in the movement, probably reflecting on what by 1920 was a much firmer belief that Futurism was fundamentally flawed:

These amusing men  
 discover in their mail  
 duplicate petitions  
 to be the lurid mother of “their” flabbergast child  
 from Nima Lyo, alias Anim Yol, alias  
 Imna Oly  
 (secret service buffoon to the Women’s Cause)  
 (Loy 49)

These amusing men of “lewd precocity” (Loy 50), Raminetti and Bapini are presented as erudite but manipulative. Raminetti is likened to a “circus-master” and a street salesman selling his imported “novelties” as ‘souvenirs for his disciples to flaunt at his dynamic carnival” (Loy 48). The criticism in this poem is far less lighthearted mockery than in previous pieces, as it comments on the superficial façade of “flabbergastism” and the slippery “used car salesman” character of its leader. As demonstrated in the extract, Loy also displays an incarnation of herself, Nima Lyo as being so absorbed by the showmanship that she desires to be the bearer of a “flabbergast” child. Alex Goody reports an article written by Cram Cook of the Chicago Evening Post in 1914 stating that Loy wished to bear Marinetti’s Futurist child and ““preserve the seed” of valued men” (Goody 96). Whether there is any truth in this tenuous assertion is another matter, although, there is certainly a clear allusion to this as Nima Lyo’s wish. With this character, Loy is clearly implying that reflecting on her position as one of the few token women in Marinetti’s movement gives rise to the realisation of herself as a “buffoon to the Women’s Cause.” In terms of form, the “white spaces” technique is here, for the first time, transformed into regular ellipsis which, although similar in effect,

clarifies a pause, thus, going against the Futurist call for the eradication of punctuation. “Lions” Jaws” spans humorous satire and serious vendetta, and leads the way for Loy’s complete conscious attempt at remodelling herself and her poetry from the 1920s onwards.

### 1920s Onwards

Loy’s absolute turn against Futurism was marked by a new attitude in her poetry which still reflected some of the original Futurist impetus for writing but with a new approach free of the burden of explicit agendas. Some ghostly inflections of Futurism unconsciously and fleetingly appear throughout much of Loy’s later body of poetry. However, when addressed directly, the influence of Futurism is implied as positive in terms of its spark but as a negative overall message. Thus, her connection with the Futurists was merely the springboard for the rest of Loy’s poetry, rather than defining her writings. Loy and her poetry are often thought to have been defined by her Futurism, although, in reality this is just one of the multifaceted components of which it is comprised.

This rejection of Futurism in Loy’s later life is further emphasised by the observation in Laura Scuriatti’s PhD thesis that one of the manuscripts of “Aphorisms on Futurism” which was published later, had been altered by the author. “Future” and “Futurism” had been replaced by “Modern” and “Modernism” demonstrating her determination to eradicate all blatant traces of the movement from her work (Scuriatti 116). Loy searched elsewhere amongst her contemporaries and found many other writers, mediums, and subjects which inspired her, although still retaining some faint suggestions of Futurism. Loy’s tribute to Gertrude Stein for example still retains the fragmented juxtapositions, the sporadic typography, and allusion to science and technology typical of Futurism. The following poem “Gertrude Stein” displays this:

Curie  
 of the laboratory  
 of vocabulary  
 she crushed  
 the tonnage  
 of consciousness  
 congealed to phrases  
 to extract  
 a radium of the word  
 (Loy 94)

The likening of Stein to a scientist or doctor of words is emblematic of the Futurist worship of science and technology and the desire for it to pervade all spheres of society. However, it must also be counter-conjectured that these aspects were additionally partial components of Modernism and, to some extent, markers of their time as much as a lingering spectre of Futurism.

Loy's late poetry, for example, "On Third Avenue" focuses on city life, again which could be construed as Futurist, echoing Marinetti's cry of "Passion for the city" (Apollonio 97). Conversely, Loy focuses on the underworld of city life (she was by then an American citizen) and the "bums" she had befriended in times of adversity. Loy writes observations of desolation, disillusionment, and poverty in cities, in many ways comparable to T.S. Eliot's *Prufrock and Other Observations*. She writes of urban poverty and the paradoxical anonymity and loneliness in cities overflowing with people. For example in "On Third Avenue" she writes:

"You should have disappeared years ago" —

so disappear  
on Third Avenue  
to share the heedless incognito

of shuffling shadow-bodies  
animate with frustration

...

Here and there  
saturnine  
neon-signs  
set afire  
a feature  
on their hueless overcast  
of down-cast countenances.

(Loy 109)

Still retaining the "white spaces" characteristic of Loy's hybrid of influences as well as maintaining the stark juxtapositions and fervour for striking language, Loy's poetry by 1942 is reminiscent of a patchwork quilt of the stages of her life.

## Conclusion

For a poet who was once a member of a movement with

"a loathing of curved lines" (Apollonio 97) Loy's poetry has come full circle in several senses. Although Loy once declared "I was never a poet" (Conover xii), this was the artistic medium she was most renowned and acclaimed for during her time, as well as the aspect of her work which has been most studied in recent years. Moreover, by tracing the accepted and rejected elements of Futurism in Loy's poetry it is clear that she moved from embracing Futurism, to satirising its extremism, then being repulsed by the sordidness of modern urban life. Throughout these stages, Loy developed her own unique style, which, without the initial glimmer of Futurist inspiration, followed by her resolved rejection of it, would not have been so intrinsically individual or eclectic. Loy was an innovator and a non-conformist, and despite her dabbling in movements, occupations, and cultures, her time never fully belonged to anything, anywhere, or anyone, thus her poems deserve not to be studied as a body in a generalised sweep, but treated as independent visions or incandescent sparks of inspiration; "the sound of an idea."

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