NEGOTIATING BOUNDARIES: THE ECONOMICS OF SPACE AND GENDER IN MINA LOY'S EARLY POEMS

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Since the beginning of her career in the early teens of the twentieth century, the British born poet Mina Loy was concerned with rethinking, redefining, and often rejecting, traditional ideas about gender identity. The poet's concern developed out of her personal and aesthetic dialogue with contemporary artistic and cultural phenomena, such as Italian Futurism, Gertrude Stein's experimental prose, Pound's modernism and Surrealist poetics, with which she came into contact during the years spent in Paris (1900-1907), in Florence (1907-1916), and after she moved to New York in 1916. In Loy's early poetry the reflection on gender is inextricably linked with the exploration of the aesthetic and epistemological possibilities of language as well as with the creation of new poetic forms, which were to influence and inspire numerous American early modernist poets.

Loy's interest for questions of gender identity did not stem just from her involvement with first wave American feminism, as Linda A. Kinnahan suggests[1], but was also the result of her observation and refusal of the restriction of gender roles both in the middle class conservative social environment in which she grew up, as well as in the bohemian and wealthy expatriate circles that she frequented across Europe. Moreover, it was related to her contact with the Futurists and the debate internal to the movement on the role of women in the group and in society. Marriage, sexual freedom, sexuality, gender identity, prostitution and procreation were some of the themes that the swashbuckling Futurist manifestoes and works openly confronted as part of their project of

1. KINNAHAN, Linda A.: *Poetics of the Feminine. Authority and Literary Tradition in Williams Carlos Williams, Mina Loy, Denise Levertov and Kathleen Fraser*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 6. The author points out that Loy came to know of the American debates on feminism before her arrival in the US through her friend, the American expatriate Mabel Dodge, who was living in Florence during Loy's stay in the Tuscan city.

renewal of art and society, from Marinetti's infamous call for «the scorn for woman» and to «fight feminism» in «The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism» of 1909, to his fantasy of male parthenogenesis in the novel *Mafarka le Futuriste* (1909), via Valentine de Saint Point's pledge for masculine women in her *Manifesto of the Futurist Woman* (1912).

Literature was not Loy's first aesthetic vocation. She had trained as a painter in Paris, was a member of the Paris Salon d'Automne for the drawing section, exhibited at numerous art galleries and salons across Europe, including the New English Art Club, the Carfax Gallery and Vanessa Bell's Friday Club in London, the *First Free Futurist International Exhibition* at the Sprovieri Gallery in Rome. However, if her paintings and drawings were mildly successful and were judged to be proper examples of feminine aesthetics[2], it is through her poetry, which she started writing around 1913, that Loy became famous. As with numerous other female avant-garde poets at the beginning of the twentieth century, Loy's fame was initially due to the discrepancies between her life-style and the accepted codes of conduct for women.

Once Loy's poems begun to be published regularly in the US literary magazines *Camera Work*, *The Trend*, *Rogue, Others* in the mid-teens, the combination of experimental metre, free verse and the unconventionally explicit –and therefore considered «not feminine»– subject matter, provoked a wave of interest in the media, which constructed the character «Mina Loy», defined by her eccentric dress-code, her contact with the exotically daring Futurists and her unconventional marital and love relationships. Like Djuna Barnes, Loy first became (in)famous as a «modern woman» rather than as a poet and an artist[3].

The publication of the first four «Love Songs»[4] fuelled the harshest criticism, even amongst the patrons of the avant-garde, such as Amy Lowell, who threatened to withdraw her financial support to the magazine. It was the gender identity of the poet and of the speaking voice, often coalesced by the critics into a single entity, to inform the critical judgment of Loy's texts. On the one hand, Ezra Pound framed his appraisal of Loy's work in terms that specifically refer to stereotypical constructions of femininity: Pound admired Loy's poetry, but also thought it was «whimsical», and that it was emotionless[5]. On the other hand,

2. Burke, Carolyn: *Becoming Modern. The Life of Mina Loy*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996. On this topic, see especially chapters 5 and 6.
3. For further details on the press articles portraying Loy as a quintessentially «modern woman», see Burke, Carolyn: Op. cit., esp. «Prologue»; Conover, Roger: «Introduction», in Mina Loy: *The Lost Lunar Baedecker*, Manchester, Carcanet, 1997, pp. xi-xx; and Galvin, Mary: «The Rhythms of Experience: Mina Loy and the Poetics of 'Love'», in Mary Galvin: *Queer Poetics. Five Modernist Women Writers*, Westport and London, Praeger, 1999, pp. 52-79. For further reflections on the critical appraisal of female avant-garde poets in relation to gender, I refer the reader to the following texts on Djuna Barnes: Broe, Mary Lynn (ed.): *Silence and Power. A Revaluation of Djuna Barnes*, Carbondale, Southern Illinois University Press, 1991 and Caselli, Daniela: «'Elementary, my dear Djuna': Unreadable Simplicity in Djuna Barnes's *Creatures in an Alphabet*», *Critical Survey*, 13:3 (2001), pp. 89-112.
4. In *Others*, 1:1 (1915).
5. Nicholls, Peter: «'Arid Clarity': Ezra Pound, Mina Loy, and Jules Laforgue», *Yearbook of English Studies*, 32 (2002), pp. 52-64.

both «Love Songs» and «Parturition»[6] were judged outrageous and obscene not only because of their explicit sexual content, the unembellished descriptions of the corporeal and fleshly aspects of sexual encounters and of parturition, but also because these were told from the point of view of a female speaking voice.

Indeed, in these and in numerous other poems from the Florentine years, Loy not only explored the possibilities of a poetics of the female self, but also gradually investigated and criticised, through her experiments with language, form and subject matter, the very system on which these possibilities relied. As Linda A. Kinnahan observes, «Loy's strategies of language rupture, montage, and self-reflexiveness work to defamiliarize and question gender ideologies prevalent in her time and retrieving her work serves to repoliticise modernism's potential»[7].

In particular, a group of poems written in Florence between 1913 and 1915 specifically reflect on the construction of gender identity in relation to the socio-economic organization of space. In «Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots»[8] and «The Effectual Marriage»[9] the literary tropes of domesticity, faithful love, and docile femininity are exposed as the product of a ruthless economic system of exchange, which also informs the architectural spaces of daily life. In these poems society as a whole is seen to contribute not only to uphold a restrictive regime of sexual difference on which this system is based, but also to perpetuate the conditions through which gender identity is essentialised and conceived as «natural», while its economic roots may remain unspoken.

1. GENDERED SPACES

«Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots» and «The Effectual Marriage» communicate a sense of claustrophobia. The domestic spaces of these poems are constraining, the characters are literally and metaphorically imprisoned and confined in the spaces of daily life, whose structure and function are experienced as informed by an oppressive project. Boundary areas such as windows and doors are endowed with the possibility of change and transformation, but they also simultaneously function as loci in which the ideological force of spatial structures is at its strongest. The constraining aspect of the domestic spaces in the poems is directly linked with the reflection on the oppressive consequences of the enforcement of sexual segregation. However, Loy's poems are less focused on the representation of separated social spheres on the basis of gender, than on the exploration of the mechanisms which inform the formation and construction of gender identity through the experience of architectural, bodily and social space. And, conversely, Loy's texts also reflect on how the reliance on a dual gender model in turn shapes the experience and

6. First published in *The Trend*, 8:1, (1914).
7. Kinnahan, Linda: Op. cit., p. 10.
8. 1914; first published in *Rogue*, 2:1, (1915).
9. Ca. 1915; first published in *Others*, 1917.

perception of social, bodily and architectural spaces. Indeed, the spaces of these texts are remarkably bare of details; it is as if Loy was interested merely in the quintessential constituents of architectural space, as the determinants of the functioning of human relations in space.

In «The Effectual Marriage or the Insipid Narrative of Gina and Miovanni» the two characters live in different rooms, Gina in the kitchen, Miovanni in the library, each looking out of the house through a different window, their communication taking place through the passing of a door between the two rooms. In the very first stanzas of the poem, the relationship between the characters with one another, as well as their perception of themselves and of their identity, are expressed in spatial terms:

> «The door was an absurd thing
> Yet it was passable
> They quotidienly passed through it
> It was this shape
>
> Gina and Miovanni who they were God knows
> They knew it was important to them
> This being who they were
> They were themselves
> Corporeally transcendentally consecutively
> conjuntively and they were quite complete
>
> In the evening they looked out of their two windows
> Miovanni out of his library window
> Gina from the kitchen window
> From among the pots and pans
> Where he so kindly kept her
> Where she so wisely busied herself
> Pots and Pans she cooked in them
> All sorts of sialagogues
> Some say that happy women are immaterial»[10]

The division of the domestic spaces is presented as a parody of the traditional division of roles in the household, but also of the stereotypical perception of the intellectual abilities and skills of male and female individuals. Clearly, spatial division in this poem is related to the question of identity, which is posited initially by the characters' names, obvious distortion of the first names Mina and Giovanni[11]. Elizabeth Arnold reads this distortion as a dramatization of the entrapment of the characters in their constraining and symbiotic relationship[12]. However, since taken as a pair, the names may be read as an anagram, Loy's

10. Loy, Mina: «The Effectual Marriage», in Op. cit., p. 36, lines 1-19.
11. With all probability Giovanni Papini, editor of the Futurist literary magazine *Lacerba*, and one of the most important members of the Futurists in Florence, and with whom Loy had a love affair.
12. Arnold, Elizabeth: «Mina Loy and the Futurists», *Sagetrieb,* 8:1 (1989), p. 113.

pun may be read as a reflection on the relational mechanisms informing the characters' understanding of themselves.

Loy also recurred to anagrams of first and second names in the 1919 poem «Lion's Jaws», a satire of Futurism, but whereas in the latter poem each name is an anagram of itself, in «The Effectual Marriage» the names are interlocked, as if to suggest that both Gina's and Miovanni's identities can be conceived only in relation to one another's. This idea is reiterated in the second stanza, in which the speaking voice, an external observer, both negates and affirms the importance of Gina and Miovanni's stable identities. Identity is indeed crucial in this text, and more important are the mechanisms through which it is perceived and constituted:

Corporeally transcendentally consecutively
conjuntively and they were quite complete

These lines suggest that Gina and Miovanni's identities are defined through their bodies as transcendent and essential, but, most importantly, in term of relation, towards the goal of completeness. As much as constituting a satirical comment on the myth of completeness and self-sufficiency of the loving couple, the ambiguous meaning of the adverb «quite» also suggests that, no matter how strong the pressure for stabilisation of identity, a full stability may never be quite achieved; perhaps because this stability is based on a supposedly transcendental meaning of sexual difference, and its constraining binarism. The poles «female» and «male» define each other, with the male constituting a normative category, to which the female is a complement, a «reaction»:

«Gina being a female
But she was more than that
Being an incipience a correlative
an instigation of the reaction of man
From the palpable to the transcendent
Mollescent irritant of his fantasy[13]
[…]
Gina was a woman
Who wanted everything
To be everything in woman
Everything everyway at once
Diurnally variegate
Miovanni always knew her
She was Gina
Gina who lent monogamy
With her fluctuant aspirations
A changeant consistency
Unexpected intangibilities
Miovanni remained
Monumentally the same

13. Loy, Mina: Op. cit., pp. 36-37, lines 21-26.

The same Miovanni
If he had become anything else
Gina's world would have been at an end
Gina with no axis to revolve on
Must have dwindled to a full stop»[14]

The masculine element is here seen as a normative force, which functions as a means of stabilization and as a source of meaning. Miovanni occupies the position of the phallus, as the guarantor of the symbolic order that holds everything in place against the threats of Gina's lack of stability, expressed by images of fluidity and change. Gina, however, is no passive recipient:

«While Miovanni thought alone in the dark
Gina supposed that peeping she might see
A round light shining where his mind was
She never opened the door
Fearing that this might blind her
Or even
That she should see Nothing at all»[15]

Like the ideal home described by the humanist and architect Leon Battista Alberti in the third book of *Della Famiglia* (1432-1434)[16], the house of «The Effectual Marriage» thrives on the separation of tasks and activities on the basis of gender, and it is the woman's task to understand and enforce the rules that define that separation. The structure of the domestic spaces in this sense mirrors the mechanisms of the gendering of identity: much like the two figures, the rooms they respectively occupy are seen as deriving meaning in relation to one another, and as being both the products and producers of the forms of self-representations which the characters adopt[17]. In this sense, «the house appears to make a space for the institution» of marriage, but «marriage is already spatial. It cannot be thought outside the house that is its condition of possibility before its space»[18].

Loy's text prompts us to go beyond the symbolic identification of interior spaces with either gender, and to relinquish the possibility of identifying a definite agency through which one of the two may generate the other. The question Loy poses is not whether certain spaces produce certain types of

14. Ibid., p. 38, lines 83-100.
15. Ibid., lines 66-74.
16. Alberti, Leon Battista: *Della Famiglia. Libro Terzo: Economicus*, Turin, Einaudi, 1969, pp. 185-318, p. 266.
17. Jane Rendell argues that «space is socially produced but also a condition of social production». Rendell, Jane: «Introduction: 'Gender, Space' », in Jane Rendell, Barbara Penner, Iain Borden (eds.): *Gender Space Architecture. An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, London, Routledge, 2000, p. 101. Rendell's argument echoes, amongst others, Henri Lefebvre: *The Production of Space*, Donald Nicholson-Smith (trans.), Oxford, Blackwell, 1991 (1974), still one of the most extensive and influential texts on the topic.
18. Wigley, Mark: «Untitled: The Housing of Gender», in Beatriz Colomina (ed.): *Sexuality and Space*, Princeton, Princeton Architectural Press, 1992, p. 336.

experiences and identities, but rather how architectural spaces are always also social and gendered spaces, how identity is always also a spatial phenomenon, and which forces are at work at their intersection.

Elizabeth Grosz has shown how in Western culture the idea of space is both product and agent of the polarisation of genders. Space has generally been associated with the realm of the feminine, as a passive, static and penetrable entity, in opposition to time, associated with movement, activity and therefore masculinity[19]. However, male subjects have also been conceived as possessing an interiority generally denied to subjects coded as feminine. This polarity subsumes the attribution of corporeality to female bodies – a corporeality that causes anxiety and must be negated, rendering female bodies a locus of desire and one that simultaneously needs protection, paradoxically through the deployment of a containing space. Within this system, which polarises rationality and corporeality, privileging the former,

> «men place women in the position of being «guardians» of their bodies and their spaces, the condition of both body and space without body or space of their own: they become the living representative of corporeality, of domesticity, of the natural order that men have had to expel from their own self-representations in order to construct themselves as above-the-mundane, beyond the merely material»[20].

And indeed, if Gina is responsible for the functioning of the domestic spaces and of the maintenance of gender identity in marriage, Miovanni is «monumentally the same»[21] and sees himself as «outside time and space»[22]: he is made into a figure who defies temporal and spatial boundaries, that needs to be seen as transcendental and essential, beyond the contingencies of daily life.

It is, however, in «Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots» that Loy's approach to this question broadens to explore the intersection of the metaphorical, social, economic and sexual aspects of the spatialization of gender identity.

2. THE ECONOMICS OF MARRIAGE

> «The seeking after the «vicious» is a small ineffectual wriggle which life makes to escape the boredom of the «pure», but «vice» cannot throw off its «pure» character. The two are one – related to each other as the obverse and reverse of a coin: the under and over of the same psychological condition: as the prostitute is the twin-trader of the legally-protected pure woman. Where there are excise officials there are smugglers. Let therefore the womanly women abandon the «privileges» which enable them to make a corner in a commodity the demand for which they sedulously stimulate,

19. Grosz, Elizabeth: *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of the Bodies*, London, Routledge, 1995, p. 112.
20. Ibid., pp. 121-122.
21. Ibid., line 95.
22. Ibid., line 45.

> and the pirate brigs which ply on the outskirts of the trade will become purposeless».
>
> Dora Marsden, «The Chastity of Women», 1914[23]

In her 1914 review of Christabel Pankhurst's «The Hidden Scourge and How to End It» (1913), Dora Marsden, then editor of «The Egoist», attacks the head of the suffragist movement's pledge for female and male chastity as a way to stop the spreading of venereal diseases, but also as a moral weapon. Women, according to Pankhurst, were superior to men also because of their ability to practice celibacy and chastity. Marsden, who left Pankhurst's «Women's Social and Political Union» (WSPU), not only refused to accept the equation of celibacy and morality, but dismantled in her review Pankhurst's gendered polarization of «purity» and «vice»: Marsden sees them as the product of a deeply flawed ideology that also contributed to creating the mutually exclusive and reductive myths of the pure, respectable woman and the prostitute – an ideology which, as argued in the epigraph above, has its own economy. The author argues that Pankhurst's advocation of purity is nothing but a pledge for «virginity», which Marsden sees simply as a commodity that enhances the value of women before marriage.

The equation of marriage with trade and even with prostitution emerged in the late nineteenth century in the writings of social and political thinkers such as Friedrich Engels, Thorstein Veblen, August Bebel, as well as in the writings of suffragists and proto-feminists; following the proliferation of scientific, literary, and popular texts on marriage, and especially on women's sexuality[24], by the early twentieth century the woman's question became a subject matter of poets and artists of the avant-garde. Perhaps as a reply to the Futurists' provocations and to Valentine de Saint Point's *Manifesto of the Futurist Woman*, Mina Loy joined the numerous voices calling for a radical rethinking of the family structure, of marriage, and of the social stigma on female sexuality. Her unpublished *Feminist Manifesto* of 1914 reacts to the feminist movement[25], judged «inadequate», and argues for free love and sex outside marriage, in order to return women their creative powers, which they can express fully through maternity. As Paul Peppis points out, in this text «Loy relies on arguments crucial to racist and patriarchal defenses of empire, [but] she unconventionally uses them to promote a «race» of free-loving, independent, and avant-garde mothers and children[26]. However, the strength of Loy's arguments is sustained by the exposure and refutation of marriage and procreation as activities of economic exchange, in which virginity is the most sought-after good:

23. Marsden, Dora: «The Chastity of Women», *The Egoist: An Individualist Review*, 3:1 (1914).
24. Michel Foucault gives an account of the nineteenth century proliferation of discourses around sexuality, its confinement in the domestic space and as the prerogative of the married couple, in Foucault, Michel: *The History of Sexuality I. The Will to Knowledge,* Robert Hurley (trans.), London, Penguin, 1998 (1976). See also Mort, Frank: *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-Moral Politics in England since 1830*, New York, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987.

> «Leave off looking to men to find out what you are not – seek within yourselves to find out what you are
>
> As conditions are at present constituted – you have the choice between Parasitism, & Prostitution – Negation
>
> Men & women are enemies, with the enmity of the exploited for the parasite, the parasite for the exploited –at present they are at the mercy of the advantage that each can take of the others sexual dependence–. The only point at which the interests of the sexes merge – is the sexual embrace.
>
> […]
>
> The advantages of marriage are too ridiculously ample – compared to all other trades – for under modern conditions a woman can accept preposterously luxurious support from a man (without return of any sort – even offspring) – as a thank offering for her virginity»[27]

As opposed to Valentine de Saint Point's 1912 *Manifesto of the Futurist Woman*[28], which strives to promote an image of woman resembling the futurist man, Loy's text emphasizes sexual difference and challenges the normative role of masculinity. In this text, women's identity is seen as still grounded in their bodies, especially in their reproductive potential, but Loy simultaneously suggests that women's bodies are attributed a meaning within the «sex-gender system», that is

> «both a socio-cultural construct and a semiotic apparatus, a system of representation which assigns meaning (identity, value, prestige, location in kinship, status in the social hierarchy, etc) to individuals in society»[29].

In the *Feminist Manifesto* women's bodies enter this system through the economic value attributed to virginity, which Loy wants to see destroyed:

> «the first self-enforced law for the female sex, as a protection against the man made bogey of virtue – which is the principal instrument of her subjection, would be the unconditional surgical destruction of virginity through-out the female population at puberty –».[30]

The «surgical destruction of virginity» is not advocated as a physical intervention on the female body, but rather as a metaphorical appeal to refute that bodies and «sex» may be naturally given. Loy continued this reflection in

25. It is not clear here whether Loy refers to Valentine de Saint Point's feminism, to Anglo-American feminism, or the suffrage movement.
26. Peppis, Paul: «Rewriting Sex: Mina Loy, Marie Stopes, and Sexology», *MODERNISM / modernity*, 9:4 (2002), p. 570.
27. Loy, Mina: «Feminist Manifesto», in Mina Loy: Op. cit., p. 154.
28. De Saint Point, Valentine: «Manifesto of the Futurist Woman» (1912), in Mirella Bentivoglio and Franca Zuccoli (eds.): *The Women Artists of Italian Futurism*, New York, Midmarch Art Press, 1997, pp. 163-166.
29. De Lauretis, Teresa: *Technologies of Gender. Essays on Theory, Film and Fiction*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1987, p. 4.
30. Loy, Mina: «Feminist Manifesto», op. cit., pp. 154-155.

«The Black Virginity» (1915), a poem about young boys training to become priests in a Catholic seminary. In this text, virginity is the result of training, education and spatial segregation:

> «Fluted black silk cloaks
> Hung square from shoulders
> Truncated juvenility
> Uniform segregation
> Union in severity
> Modulation
> Intimidation
> Pride of misapprehended preparation
> Ebony statues training for immobility»[31]

In this poem and in «Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots», virginity is a cultural fabrication which simultaneously endows people with a form of identity, and erases their individuality. The boys and the virgins are each a collective group defined by the «intensification»[32] of their bodies and sexual potential, to the point that the virgins have neither names nor sex: they are just embodiments of virginity, which here is a mainly an economic construct[33]. Virgins are such because they have no dots[34] to buy their future husbands, but the economic nature of virginity and marriage is hidden by a romantic narrative[35]:

> «We have been taught
> Love is a god
> White with soft wings
> Nobody shouts
> Virgins for sale
> Yet where are our coins
> For buying a purchaser
> Love is a god
> Marriage expensive
> A secret well kept»[36]

Money is abstract and impersonal; it circulates constantly, and can be attached to neither object nor agent, nor does its circulation allow for the possibility of retracing direct relationships of causality and agency[37]. Similarly,

31. Loy, Mina: «The Black Virginity», in op. cit., p. 42, lines 8-16.
32. See Foucault, Michel: Op. cit., p. 123.
33. An indication given already in the subtitle of the poem, «Latin Borghese», suggesting that the texts refers to the middle classes of a Latin country, presumably Italy.
34. Loy, Mina: «The Black Virginity», in op. cit., p. 42, line 5.
35. Mary Galvin also makes this point in Galvin, Mary: Op. cit., p. 66.
36. Loy, Mina: «Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots», in Mina Loy, op. cit., p. 22, lines 33-38.
37. Simmel, Georg: «Die Großstädte und das Geistesleben» (1903), in Georg Simmel: *Aufsätze und Abhandlungen 1901-1908. Band I*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1995, pp. 116-131.
38. «Houses hold virgins / The door's on the chain», lines 1-2; «nobody shouts», line 32; «Somebody who was never / a virgin», lines 43-44; «So much flesh in the world / Wonders at will», lines 51-52.

the poem is characterised by impersonality[38] and constant shifts in points of views. This strategy allows Loy to reflect here on the functioning of a system, a «set of arrangements by which society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied»[39] or, more precisely, a system through which «the body is figured as mere instrument or medium for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related», and in «the body is in itself a construction, as are the myriad 'bodies' that constitute the domain of gendered subjects»[40].

In «Virgins» the domestic spaces participate in this system as agents and products. The walls of the house protect the economic value of the virgins, but also function as boundaries endowing the virgins with a specific form of self-representation, which makes them «present to themselves»:

> «A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greek recognised, the boundary is that form at which something *begins its presencing*. That is why the concept is that of *horismos*, that is, the horizon, the boundary. Space is in essence that for which room has been made, that which is let into its bounds»[41].

According to Carolyn Burke, in Loy's early poems the house functions both as a sort of container for the self, and a metaphor for female destiny, whereby the spaces of domesticity and corporeality overlap[42]. Virginia Kouidis reads the house in the poem as a «symbol of the human body and the feminine principal» and as signifying virginity[43]. However, I agree with Mary Galvin, who suggests that Loy's text «was striving for even more than an emblematization of the female plight»[44]. Through the spatialization of gender identity, Loy offers in this text a way of thinking beyond gender categories.

Certainly, the walls of the house confine and protect the virgins in spite of themselves; walls and windows separate spaces into an inside, the home, and an outside to which the virgins have only limited access; they are part of a system of surveillance and a scopic regime which contribute to shaping the virgins' perception of themselves, of the men, and the non-virgins. The virgins are delivered to a penetrative gaze from the outside of the house, whereas theirs is restricted to «looking out» or at the mirror[45], thus doubling up as surveyed and surveyors[46]. In this sense, the spaces of the poem may be seen as

39. Rubin, Gayle: «The Traffic in Women», in Rayna R. Reiter (ed.): *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1975, p. 159.
40. Butler, Judith: «Subjects of Sex/Gender/Desire», in Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires (eds.): *Feminisms*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997, p. 280.
41. Heidegger, Martin: «Building Dwelling Thinking», in Martin Heidegger: *Poetry, Language, Thought*, Albert Hofstadter (trans.), New York, Harper Colphon Press, 1971 (1954), p. 154.
42. Burke, Carolyn: Op. cit., p. 199.
43. Kouidis, Virginia: *Mina Loy. American Modernist Poet*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana University Press, 1980, p. 32.
44. Galvin, Mary: Op. cit., p. 68.
45. Lines 13 and 15.
46. Berger, John: *Ways of Seeing*, London, Penguin, 1972, p. 46.

agents that «operate to transform individuals» by carrying «the effects of power over them […], to alter them»[47].

However, in «Virgins» the spaces and the visual regime of the text are in turn shaped by the duality which informs the virgins' world-view: men and non-virgins are described as being by definition the opposite of how the virgins characterise themselves:

> «See the men pass
> Their hats are not ours
> We take a walk
> They are going somewhere
> And they may look everywhere
> Men's eyes look into things
> Our eyes look out»

The dichotomies informing the virgins' perception of themselves and the world are themselves perceived as restrictive. The virgins are only able to see the world, including the spaces they occupy, as series of opposites. As in «Marriage» though, Loy refrains from just associating specific spaces with a power to transform individuals, and suggests, rather, that spaces are themselves invested with a meaning that precedes them. Simultaneously, the poem opens up the possibility of bypassing these dichotomies: Mary Galvin has convincingly analyzed the shifts in the position of the speaking voice, showing how the distant third-person narrator looking *at* the virgins at the beginning of the poem gradually gives way to a duplicity of language granting the virgins more agency, until in the sixth and seventh stanzas the speakers' voices begin to blend and to finally mingle[48]. By the end of the poem the paradigmatic and related series «us/them» and «inside/outside» have given way to the introduction of a new position –«you»[49]– and to a blurring of spatial and personal boundaries.

As a result, it is no longer possible to establish as definite position for the speaking voice, and we are also forced to reconsider the triad «virgins», «men», «non-virgins»: the terms resist being assigned to specific gendered positions, and any attempt to do so would inevitably imply deploying the categories that Loy's text tries to disrupt. If the spatial images of «The Effectual Marriage» point to the way in which men and women are literally and metaphorically «confined in difference»[50], «Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots» prompts us to think beyond the «prison-house» of gender.

47. Foucault, Michel: *Discipline and Punish*, Robert Hurley (trans.), London, Penguin, 2000 (1975), p. 172.
48. Galvin, Mary: Op. cit., p. 69.
49. Line 57.
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