

THE APOLLONIAN

A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies (Online, Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed)

Vol. 1, Issue 2 (December 2014) || ISSN 2393-9001

Chief Editor: Girindra Narayan Roy

Editors: Subashish Bhattacharjee & Saikat Guha

Focus—Philosophy and Poetry

Research Article:

Refiguring Giorgio Agamben's Potentiality
through Mina Loy's Poetics

Missy Molloy

Find this and other research articles at: <http://theapollonian.in/>

Refiguring Giorgio Agamben's Potentiality through Mina Loy's Poetics

Missy Molloy

University of South Florida, US

Giorgio Agamben's diverse philosophical projects share a common feature—his sustained attention to states of suspension that undermine, without transcending, binary oppositions. The oppositions these states of suspension span shift, yet his attraction to in-between-ness rarely wavers. Two key terms Agamben uses to approach this indeterminate space are “threshold” and “potentiality.” This article explores these terms in relation to Mina Loy's poetic approach to heterosexuality and the reproductive body. Although Agamben rarely focuses on the specificity of female biology, the crucial concepts that cohere his works resonate in striking ways with Loy's writing on female sexuality, labor, and maternity.

Agamben continually emphasizes the latent aspect of potentiality over its possible actualization: “The being that is properly whatever is able to not-be; it is capable of its own impotence” (*The Coming Community* 35). In Loy's poems, *Love Songs to Joannes* and “Parturition,” fertility is a state of suspension in the Agambenian sense; it exists between potentiality and actuality and doesn't have to be realized. These poems express perceptive states that do not transcend, but rather acquire meaning *through* contradictions. Agamben's ideas on potentiality offer an alternative way to interpret Loy's ambivalence toward reproduction. Instead of being read as negative or critical, Loy's poems can be considered attempts to open up new perspectives that are not limited by the injunction that so often confines discourses surrounding female fertility: *to realize* or *not to realize* conception.

Analyzing these poems in tandem with Agamben's theories, I propose that the pregnant body animates a suspended state between *zoe* and *bios*, “biological existence (*zoe*) and the political life of speech and action (*bios*)” (Płonowska Ziarek). And it literally represents bare life on the cusp of being incorporated into biopolitics. Further, I will argue that Loy's poetics on pregnancy provocatively illustrates Agamben's “zone of indistinction,” which he describes in *Homo Sacer* as

follows: "Neither political *bios* nor natural *zoe*, sacred life is the zone of indistinction in which *zoe* and *bios* constitute each other in including and excluding each other" (90). In cultural iconography, the pregnant body often straddles the distinction between sacred and profane. In pregnancy, animal and incipient social life are inscribed in a single mark; therefore, pregnancy affords a unique opportunity to witness biological life in the process of being folded into biopower. Similarly, the experience of labor, which I'll develop through Loy's "Parturition" and Julia Kristeva's *Desire in Language*, cultivates the sensual-intelligence Agamben evokes with the term "form-of-life." Loy's poems demonstrate attention to maternal potentiality, while at the same time stressing that female bodies are "able to not" realize their reproductive potential. Exploring Agamben's concepts through the prism of Loy's poetics concretizes a threshold in which the fundamental oppositions that ground Western philosophy (and politics) coexist.

Mina Loy's *Love Songs to Joannes* imagines heterosexuality as a threshold that exposes lovers to experiences that can shift their perceptions of the physical world. The series of poems is traditionally interpreted as a retrospective account of a failed love affair, but the opacity of Loy's poetics generates diverse interpretations. The *Songs* consistently evoke sexual images, through which Loy argues that the exposure of two to a potential third prompts radical perceptive states; however, Loy mainly presents these potentials in the past conditional tense and withholds their resolutions. In this sense, the reproductive potentials Loy evokes are akin to Agamben's "whatever being" (35); a crucial similarity between Loy's poetics and Agamben's concept of potentiality is that they focus less on whether an event does or does materialize than on the fact that it *could*. Loy's poems often avoid resolving the potentials they evoke, a fact I'll later connect to Agamben's ruminations in *The End of the Poem*.

Song 3 illustrates Loy's use of the conditional mood:

We *might* have coupled
In the bed-ridden monopoly of a moment
Or broken flesh with one another
At the profane communion table
Where wine is spill'd on promiscuous lips
We *might* have given birth to a butterfly
With the daily news

Printed in blood on its wings (54; emphasis added)

In Song 3, “might,” which anchors the Song’s temporality, refers to potential sexual encounters and their consequences—conception and reproduction—without divulging their ends, and it concludes with a suspended image: a potential butterfly, “with the daily news/Printed in blood on its wings.” The specificity used to describe an indeterminate image, one left hanging between possibility and actuality, challenges the distinction between latent and manifest images. Loy’s use of the conditional is unusual because possibilities figured in the conditional mood are typically dependent on another clause that logically completes it, as in the statement, “We might have conceived a child, if we had been in love.” By withholding the second part, which we are trained to expect via grammar conventions, Loy resists subjecting her phantasm—a “butterfly / With the daily news / Printed in blood on its wings”—to the conventional insistence that a potential event be firmly linked to its eventual outcome as either realized or unrealized. Further, by withholding an explanation, she resists the logic that would firmly place the event (the butterfly’s birth) in either reality or imagination; she allows it to remain in-between.

Loy disrupts binary logic throughout the *Songs* in order to animate border spaces where oppositions are not reconciled but are inoperative, as are perspectives that depend on strictly distinguishing reality from fantasy. In Agamben’s terminology, she evokes “zones” in which the tension between oppositions is temporarily suspended. Consider the first stanza of Song 28:

The steps go up for ever
 And they are white
 And the first step is the last white
 Forever
 Coloured conclusions
 Smelt to synthetic
 Whiteness
 Of my
 Emergence
 And I am burnt quite white
 In the climacteric
 Withdrawal of your sun

And wills and words all white

Suffuse

Illimitable monotone (64)

Space in which the “first [white] step” is also “the last” does not conform to our understanding of physical space; consequently, this image challenges logical perceptions of movement and progress. Likewise, readers understand that fusing multiple colors would not produce “Whiteness”; regardless of the colors, mixing them would produce something darker. Loy intentionally plays with our expectations by forming images that contradict physical laws. It is “true” that if white steps went “up for ever,” the “first step” would not be “the last”; however, the word “white” is suspended in the third line, which further challenges rational interpretation. “Steps” is the noun that “white” implicitly describes, yet it is left implicit. Therefore, “white” in line three could also be read as a noun, which challenges the initial reading of the image as explicitly undermining spatial logic. Instead, the enjambment of “white” and “Forever,” with the implicit “step” wedged between, invites one reading while simultaneously exposing others. This technique constantly reappears in *Love Songs*, and I propose that Loy challenges logic not to promote irrationality but to stimulate, disrupt, and eventually dodge rational expectations without fully negating them. Loy’s strategy is similar to Agamben’s because both undermine binary logic without reversing it. Proceeding according to the idea that oppositions are mutually constitutive, Agamben’s philosophy and Loy’s poetry engineer an *other* logic that operates independently of traditional binaries.

Song 28 also demonstrates Loy’s frequent use of synesthesia to stimulate this other logic, as in “And wills and words all white / Suffuse / Illimitable monotone” (64). A simple example of synesthesia occurs in Song 8: “A cosmos / Of coloured voices / And laughing honey” (56). However, the synesthesia in Song 28 is more complex because the word “suffuse” already contains synesthetic elements; it means “to overspread as with a fluid, a colour, a gleam of light.” “Wills” refer to impulses, while “words” can be expressed either in written or aural form. “Suffuse” suggests a liquid, visual or luminary spreading that coalesces, in Song 28, in an “Illimitable monotone,” a phrase that carries both spatial and aural connotations. These sensory overlaps are overwhelming. The caesuras that determine the Song’s rhythms—“Coloured conclusions / Smelt to synthetic”—introduce hesitations that further hinder decisive conclusions about the sensual events she describes; the confusion the poem creates resonates with the single-line, third stanza of Song 1: “These are

suspect places" (53). Loy's synesthetics and ambiguous ellipses stimulate readers' efforts to imagine the complex sensory environments *Love Songs* evoke; consequently, an indeterminate zone that includes realistic and fantastic elements materializes.

In *The End of the Poem*, Agamben claims that "poetry lives only in the tension and difference (and hence also in the virtual interference) between sound and sense, between the semiotic sphere and the semantic sphere" (109). In *Love Songs to Joannes*, Loy creates an analogy between the tension of "sound and sense" in poetry and of separation and union in sexuality. The second stanza of Song 27 illustrates this analogy:

The contents
 Of our ephemeral conjunction
 In aloofness from Much
 Flowed to approachment of — — — —
 NOTHING
 There was a man and a woman
 In the way
 While the Irresolvable
 Rubbed with our daily deaths
 Impossible eyes (64)

Agamben's statement on the difference between poetry and prose suggests a possible explanation for Song 27's enjambments:

The possibility of enjambment constitutes the only criterion for distinguishing poetry from prose. For what is enjambment, if not the opposition of a metrical limit to a syntactical limit, of a prosodic pause to a semantic pause? 'Poetry' will be the name given to the discourse *in which this opposition is, at least virtually, possible*; 'prose' will be the name for the discourse in which this opposition cannot take place. (109; emphasis added)

Loy's poem exemplifies Agamben's claims about poetry, specifically his claims about enjambment; Loy uses enjambment (along with synesthesia) to activate an opposition between rhythm and meaning. The word "enjambment" originates in the French "*enjamber*," which means to "stride over, go beyond." Agamben argues that enjambment can create a threshold through which meaning can "stride over"

syntactic limits. The movements in the following five lines illuminate Loy's syntactic transgressions: "The contents / Of our ephemeral conjunction / In aloofness from Much / Flowed to approachment of — — — — / NOTHING" (64). Through the enjambment of lines four to five, the conclusion is delayed, a fact the four em-dashes accentuate. Something may be left out, something that Loy chooses not to say. The result of their "ephemeral conjunction" is situated in proximity to "Much" and "NOTHING" without being firmly fixed. Therefore, the resolution of the "ephemeral conjunction" is ambiguous.

Agamben's quest to map zones in which oppositions are able to exist without the tension that traditionally defines them leads him to focus on the division between human and animal in *The Open*. Loy's approach to sex corresponds with Agamben's speculations about a way of life "that is neither animal nor human," which Agamben illustrates through heterosexuality:

In their fulfillment the lovers . . . have lost their mystery—and yet have not become any less impenetrable . . . [They have reached] a higher stage beyond both nature and knowledge, beyond concealment and disconcealment. These lovers have initiated each other into their own lack of mystery as their most intimate secret . . . Bare or clothed, they are no longer either concealed or unconcealed—but rather, inapparent. (*The Open*87)

In Song 27, the lovers' "ephemeral conjunction" exposes them to a virtual space that is removed from "Much" and approaches "NOTHING." This space bears traces of the "initiation" Agamben describes, in which sexual fulfillment reveals the lovers' invisibility. Both texts establish paradoxes in order to promote thresholds through which meaning can "go beyond" apparent reality. Whereas Agamben rarely directly addresses sexual difference, Loy includes it in the list of oppositions she consistently interrogates. The pause provoked by the enjambment of the lines, "There was a man and a woman / In the way," suggests a possible source for the spatial ambiguities of "Much" and "NOTHING": the division between "a man and a woman"; however, the pause that divides the line and disrupts semantic meaning conveys indecision. Loy's and Agamben's reconfigurations of fundamental oppositions have an awkward quality because their philosophies reach toward neglected theoretical spaces; their foci are not necessarily on *future* potentials but on myriad, convoluted potentials latent in the present.

Suspensions like the one I highlight within the lines "Flowed to approachment of — — — — / NOTHING" frequently occur as Loy approaches the end of a song, or, in two crucial instances (Song 7 and Song 32), *as* the end of the

song. The use of series of em-dashes as endings correlates with Agamben's statement, "What is essential is that the poets seem conscious of the fact that here [at the end of the strophe or the poem] there lies something like a decisive crisis for the poem" (113). The em-dashes dramatize the crisis that Agamben describes in the following passage:

As if the poem as a formal structure would not and could not end, as if the possibility of the end were radically withdrawn from it, since the end would imply a poetic impossibility: the exact coincidence of sound and sense. At the point in which sound is about to be ruined in the abyss of sense, the poem looks for shelter in suspending its own end in a declaration, so to speak, of the state of poetic emergency. (113)

Loy's dashes suspend the songs' conclusions in held silences that withhold semantic resolutions and express potential realities that cannot be conveyed in language; they can only be alluded to through silence. Consider Song 7:

Into my lungs and my nostrils
 Exhilarated birds
 Prolonged flight into the night
 Never reaching — — — — — (56)

and Song 32:

The moon is cold
 Joannes
 Where the Mediterranean — — — — — (67)

In developing his thesis about the "crisis" of a poem's end, Agamben cites Dante: "The ending of the last verses are most beautiful if they fall into silence together with the rhymes" (113). Song 7 demonstrates this sentiment, albeit in the inconsistent rhyme patterns typical of free verse and with Loy's characteristic spatial experimentation. Instead of conceptualizing an end in which "the mystical marriage of sound and sense could, then, take place," Agamben hypothesizes an end in which "sound and sense [are] now forever separated without any possible contact, each eternally on its own side, like the two sexes in Vigny's poem" and in which "the poem would leave behind it only an empty space" (114). It's striking that Agamben, who usually avoids the topic of sexual difference, evokes it here as a simile for the space maintained between sound and sense in this hypothetical end. The space maintained between men and women expose potentialities that, in the philosophies

of Loy and Agamben, radically differ from romantic or spiritual celebrations of sexual union; instead, these potentialities bring the lovers into contact with "NOTHING," a state "beyond both nature and knowledge, beyond concealment and disconcealment." Palpably "inapparent," these states have temporal dimensions but no explicit semantic meanings.

Loy's exploration of heterosexual potentiality is developed further in her poem on labor, "Parturition." In labor, the speaker experiences the effect of conception without her lover but not alone; she is in contact with pain that has physical dimensions but cannot be located either within or outside her self. She is also in the company of the fetus coming into being, described with Loy's characteristic anti-romanticism as a "crucified wild beast" (*The Lost Lunar Baedeker* 5). Agamben offers "form-of-life" as an alternative to concepts of being that rely upon the division between "zoe" and "bios." "Form-of-life" shares features with the consciousness Loy observes in labor. The spatial and temporal experiments at work in *Love Songs to Joannes* also appear in "Parturition," which reveals additional resonances between Loy's poetics and Agamben's philosophies.

Julia Kristeva's work on the maternal body reinforces the connections I'm forging between Loy and Agamben because Kristeva identifies the maternal body as a place where "natural" life and sociality overlap: "Through a body, destined to insure reproduction of the species, the woman-subject [becomes] a thoroughfare, a threshold where nature confronts 'culture'" (Kristeva, *Desire in Language* 238; emphasis added). I incorporate Kristeva's interpretations of maternity into the conversation in order to elaborate Loy's position on labor, which she describes as "consciousness in cris[i]s" (6). Her poem devoted to the experience of labor is a unique and useful illustration of Agamben's key theories, which consistently scrutinize the relationship between *zoe* and *bios*. And although Agamben rarely refers to female reproduction, it is undoubtedly relevant to discussions of the boundary between biological and social or political life. As Rosalyn Diprose and Ewa Płonowska Ziarek argue in "Time for Beginners: Natality, Biopolitics, and Political Theology," "the maternal body giving birth operates at the border between *zoe* and *bios*, biological and political life, private and public" (4). In the context of the laboring body, Loy refers to "LIFE" as "a leap with nature" that brings the mother's existence into question: "I should have been emptied of life / Giving life" (6). She suggests that it would make sense if "giving life" resulted in a loss of life for the mother; instead, the mother is "absorbed" into "cosmic reproductivity" (7). Therefore, the threshold of the laboring body is one that exposes the otherwise concealed, inexhaustibility of human

reproduction.

Although Loy's poem on labor was considered scandalously graphic at the time of publication (1914), it focuses on the metaphysical connotations of childbirth and is not graphic in the visuals it conjures but in its description of experiences that had rarely been figured in such complex and sophisticated language:

I am the centre [sic]
 Of a circle of pain
 Exceeding its boundaries in every direction
 The business of the bland sun
 Has no affair with me
 In my congested cosmos of agony
 From which there is no escape
 On infinitely prolonged nerve-vibrations
 Or in contraction
 To the pin-point nucleus of being
 Locate an irritation without
 It is within

Within (4)

Her efforts to articulate the experience of labor hinge on layering spatial inconsistencies, as in the 1st stanza, where the image mapped by the first two lines is complicated by the third line, or in the third stanza, where the location of the "irritation" is suspended: "without / within / Within." The awareness Loy struggles to voice is compatible with Kristeva's description of the psychic space inhabited by women in advanced stages of pregnancy:

Enclosed in this 'elsewhere,' an *enceinte* woman loses communital meaning, which suddenly appears to her as worthless, absurd, or at best, comic—a surface agitation severed from its impossible foundations . . . Here, alterity becomes nuance, contradiction becomes a variant, tension becomes passage, and discharge becomes peace . . . the maternal body slips away from the discursive hold and immediately conceals a cipher that must be taken into account biologically and socially. (306)

The speaker's isolation from the larger "community" is conveyed in the second

stanza—"The business of the bland sun / Has no affair with me"—and her perception of society as "absurd" and "comic" is reflected in the seventh stanza, when she hears, as if from faraway, the sound of a "fashionable portrait-painter / Running up-stairs to a woman's apartment": "At the back of the thoughts to which I permit crystallization / The conception
Brute / Why?" (5)

In "Parturition," labor reveals the threshold between biological and human life, and Loy frames labor as an experience that epitomizes the sensual-intelligence Agamben evokes with the term "form-of-life." Loy's poetic approach to reproduction illustrates key aspects of Agamben's concept of potentiality, and her poems offer concrete illustrations of Agamben's threshold; by doing so, Loy positions maternity, and specifically the mother in labor, as receptive to potentials with ambiguous resolutions. Loy's poems emphasize reproductive potential, but without providing a fixed end; she resolutely maintains its potential status by not making it dependent on actualization. Thus, reading Agamben's theories with Loy's poetry creates space to imagine perspectives on sexuality that are not constrained, but expanded by human sexuality and its excessive potentials.

WORKS CITED:

- Agamben, Giorgio. *The Coming Community*. Trans. Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993. Print.
- . *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics*. Trans. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999. Print.
- . *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1998. Print.
- . *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*. Trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2000. Print.
- Diprose, Rosalyn, and Ewa Płonowska Ziarek. "Time for Beginners: Natality, Biopolitics, and Political Theology." *Philosophia* 2 (2013): 107. Web.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Trans. New York: Columbia UP, 1980. Print.
- Loy, Mina. *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996. Print.
- Shreiber, Maera and Keith Tuma, eds. *Mina Loy: Women and Poet*. Orono, Maine: The National Poetry Foundation, 1998. Print.
-

AUTHOR INFORMATION:

Missy Molloy completed advanced graduate study at the University of Florida's Film and Media Studies Center and is currently writing a Dissertation titled, "Evidence of Rupture: Cinematic Maternities, Social Ethics, and Biopolitics." She has taught courses on a wide range of topics, including popular culture, film history, Scandinavian crime fiction, video production, and most recently, contemporary European politics and cinema. She has published on literature, modernist poetics, and film, and her articles have been published in such journals as *PsyArt*, and *World Literary Review*, and some books. Her current areas of interest include Contemporary Global Cinema Psychoanalytic Feminist Theory, Biopolitical Theory, and so on.