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XXVIII Ciclo

BETWEEN RHETORIC AND PERFORMATIVITY
THE VERBAL AND VISUAL ART OF FOUR MODERNIST WOMEN

Tesi di dottorato di:
Francesca Chiappini
R09991

Tutor:
Chiar.ma Prof.ssa Caroline Patey

Coordinatore del Dottorato:
Chiar.ma Prof.ssa Giuliana Garzone

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To my husband

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Chronologies

Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (1874-1927)¹

- 1874 12th July: birth of Else Hildegard Plötz in Swinemünde, Germany, to Adolf Plötz and Ida Marie Kleist.
- 1886 Attends Höhere Töchterschule at Kirchplatz 3.
- 1890 June: graduates at Girl's Highschool, Swinemünde.
- 1891 October 1890-March 1891: attends Königlich-Preussische Kunstschule, Berlin.
- 1893 February: mother dies of uterine cancer.
Diagnosed syphilis.
Summer: father physically attacks her; escapes to Berlin.
- 1894 Models for Henry de Vry's living pictures in Berlin, Halle and Leipzig.
Contracts gonorrhoea.
- 1895 Works as chorus girl at Berlin Zentral Theater.
- 1896 February: hospitalisation and treatment for syphilis.
March: receives small inheritance from mother. Meets artist Melchior Lechter and becomes "the jewel" of his art circle.
- 1898 Summer: elopes with sculptor and photographer Richard Schmitz, to Switzerland and Italy. Affair with Richard's brother Oscar A. H. Schmitz in Sorrento.
Protodada intrusion into pornographic cabinet in museum in Naples.
- 1899 Models, designs and paints in her Rome studio supported by Richard Schmitz.
- 1900 February: briefly lodges with Oscar A. H. Schmitz in Munich.
February-March: meets Munich's avant-garde Kosmiker circle.
Autumn: affair with architect August Endell and training as *Kunstgewerbler*.
- 1901 July-August: returns to Berlin.
August: marries August Endell and settles in the Zehlendorf-Wannsee district.

¹ My essential chronology only includes dates, events and publications that seemed to me functional to the reading of my thesis. I selected data from Gammel's "Chronology" of the Baroness in her biography (2002).

- December: To Italy with Endell until early 1902.
- 1902 February: meets archaeology student Felix Paul Greve at Wolfskehl's in Munich.
- 1903 January: Embarks for Naples with Greve and Endell.
May: Greve called back to Bonn, convicted for fraud and incarcerated for one year. He begins writing *Fanny Essler* based on Elsa's sexually explicit letters.
- 1904 January: divorce from August Endell.
Spring: settles in Rome's Piazza di Spagna.
May: reunites with Greve in Germany.
- 1905 Settles with Greve in Wollerau, Switzerland.
Publication of seven jointly written poems under pseudonym "Fanny Essler".
Winter: Greve completes novel *Fanny Essler*.
- 1907 August: marries Felix Greve in Berlin-Wilmersdorf.
- 1908 January: hospitalisation for nervous breakdown.
- 1909 Summer: Greve stages suicide in Berlin and departs for America. Else continues to reside on Münchnerstrasse and plays role of widow.
- 1910 June: arrives in New York. Changes her name into Elsa. Unites with Greve in Pittsburgh.
- 1912 Models in Cincinnati. Felix Paul Greve/Frederick Philip Grove settles in Manitoba.
- 1913 Settles at 228 West 130th Street, Harlem, New York.
February: Armory Show in New York.
November: marries Leopold Baron von Freytag-Loringhoven at New York City Hall.
- 1915 Models at Art Students League and Ferrer School.
International News Photography records Elsa's first original costumes.
Begins friendship with Marcel Duchamp. Studio in Lincoln Arcade Building.
- 1916 First contacts with Djuna Barnes.
- 1917 Incarcerated on varied occasions.
- 1918 Returns to New York and settles in unheated loft on Fourteen Street.
Intensified artistic activity (*Earring-Object* and *Cathedral* sculptures).

- June: Publication of first English poem, “Love-Chemical Relationship” in *The Little Review*.
- 1920 *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp* and *Limbswish* sculptures.
June-August: International Dada Fair held in Berlin.
October: *The Little Review* charged with publishing obscenities for serialising *Ulysses*.
- 1921 Visits *The Little Review* office with her hair shaved and head shellacked.
Moves to subbasement at 228 West 18th Street.
June: Man Ray’s and Duchamp’s film collaboration: *Elsa, Baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven, Shaving Her Pubic Hair*.
- 1922 January: starts publishing in the *Liberator* (“Dornröschen”)
June: intervenes at Louis Bouché’s exhibition at the Belmaison Gallery in Wanamaker’s Gallery of Modern Decorative Art.
Winter: *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp*.
December: Ezra Pound suggests to Margaret Anderson German publication venues for the Baroness. Moves to Hotel Hudson.
- 1923 January: publishes in *Broom* (“Circle”).
April: leaves for Berlin-Charlottenburg, Germany.
May: Anderson and Heap settle in Paris.
Summer-Autumn: correspondence with Abbott, who visits her in Berlin.
Dada Portrait of Berenice Abbott and *Forgotten-Like This Paraplui(c)e*.
Application for visa to France denied. Suicidal letters.
- 1924 June-October: lives in Berlin-Schöneberg, Neue Winterfeldstrasse 10.
July: visits French consulate in Berlin with a birthday cake on her head.
August: Djuna Barnes visits her in Berlin.
May: Hemingway publishes two of the Baroness’s poems in the *Transatlantic Review*.
September: settles at Victoriastrasse 26 in Potsdam.
- 1925 February-April: resides at the Bodelschwing Home for women in Gottesschutz, Erkner. April: Stays briefly at the *Landesirrenanstalt* psychiatric asylum in Eberswalde.
- 1926 Visa granted.
April: travels to Paris and settles at the Hôtel Danemark at 21 rue Vavin.
June: trip with Djuna Barnes to Le Crotoy on the French Normandy coast.
- 1927 August: opens modelling school at 7 impasse du Rouet in Paris.
Guggenheim types Baroness’s artistic grant letter.
October: closes modelling school. Poem “Café du Dome” appears in *Transition*.
14th December: dies of gas asphyxiation in her apartment at 22 rue Barrault, Paris.

Mina Loy (1882-1966)²

- 1882 27th December: Mina Gertrude Lowy is born in London to Sigmund Felix Lowy, Hungarian Jew, and Julia Bryan, English Evangelical.
- 1892 Enrolled in Progressive School in Hampstead.
- 1897 Enrolled in St. John's Wood School on Elm Tree Road, London.
- 1900 Sent by father to Munich *Künstlerinnenverein*.
- 1902 Returns to London, studies with Augustus John.
- 1903 Moves to Paris, attends Académie Colarossi. Marries Stephen Haweis.
- 1904 Alters her surname from Lowy to Loy in 1904, for her submission to the Salon d'Automne in Paris.
- 1906 Elected member of Salon d'Automne.
Enters Gertrude & Leo Stein's Salon.
Separates from Stephen Haweis
Gives birth to a daughter from her relationship with French doctor Henry Joël le Savoureux.
- 1907 Reconciles with Stephen Haweis and moves with him to Florence.
- 1909 Gives birth to a son to Stephen Haweis.
- 1913 Paintings exhibited in London.
Returns to Paris. Tightens friendship with Mabel Dodge, John Reed, Stein and Toklas. Engages Carl Van Vechten as literary agent. Haweis departs.
- 1914 Works in Futurist environment, with Papini and Marinetti.
Writes *Feminist Manifesto*, unpublished in Loy's lifetime, and "Parturition"
"Aphorisms on Futurism" published in *Camera Work* and *Trend*.
- 1915 "Love Songs" 1-4 published in inaugural issue of *Others: A Magazine of the New Verse* Other poems published in *Rogue*.
- 1916 Moves to New York, meets Arthur Cravan.
- 1917 Begins work in lampshade studio.
April: completes "Love Songs" (1-34), now titled "Songs to Joannes," published in *Others*.
Divorces from Haweis.

² My essential chronology only includes dates, events and publications that seemed to me functional to the reading of my thesis. I selected data from Burke's biography of Minal Loy (1996).

- 1918 Marries Cravan in Mexico. Loses him en route to Buenos Aires; he disappears forever.
- 1919 Gives birth to Cravan's daughter, whom she would not see again. Returns to Florence. Publication of *Auto-Facial-Construction*.
- 1920 Returns to New York. *The Pamperers* appeared in *The Dial's*
- 1921 Returns to Florence. Haweis kidnaps their son.
- 1922 Moves to Berlin.
- 1923 Returns to Paris. Son dies in Haweis's custody. First part of "Anglo-Mongrels" and "the Rose" published in *The Little Review*; *Lunar Baedeker* published by Contact, Paris. Lampshade enterprise grows.
- 1925 Exhibits art (paintings, drawings, design work) in New York and Connecticut.
- 1926 New lampshade shop in Paris.
- 1927 Appears at Natalie Barney's salon and lectures on Gertrude Stein.
- 1930 Sells lampshade shop. In 1930s starts working on *Insel*, published posthumous in 1991.
- 1931 Becomes Paris art agent for son-in-law Julien Levy, New York art dealer.
- 1933 Exhibitions of her paintings in Connecticut and New York.
- 1936 Returns to New York. Lives with her daughters in midtown. Increasingly reclusive and distracted, except for strong friendship with Joseph Cornell.
- 1948 Moves to 2nd St., then Stanton St., near the Bowery, lives in a communal home. Begins working on three-dimensional assemblages and "enlightenment poems."
- 1953 Moves to Aspen, Colorado, to join daughters and grandchildren.
- 1958 Jonathan Williams publishes *Lunar Baedeker & Time-Tables*.
- 1959 Exhibitions of her assemblages in New York.
- 1966 25th September: dies of pneumonia.

Djuna Barnes (1892-1982)³

- 1892 12th June: Djuna Chappel Barnes is born to Wald Barnes, unsuccessful painter, composer and musician, and Elizabeth in Cornwall-on-Hudson, New York. Raised by her paternal grandmother, Zadel Turner Barnes, writer, journalist, and Women's Suffrage activist who had once hosted an influential literary salon.
- 1897 Fanny Faulkner, Wald's mistress, moves in with Djuna's family.
- 1910 Summer: Common-law marriage between Djuna and Percy Faulkner. Move in Bridgeport, Conn.
Later in summer: leaves Faulkner and returns to her family farm in Huntington.
- 1912 July: Elizabeth separates from husband and takes Djuna and her brothers to New York.
September: enters Pratt Institute in Brooklyn.
November: moves with mother and brothers at 1320 Ward Avenue, Morris Park, Bronx.
- 1913 March: leaves Pratt Institute.
June: her illustrated articles begin appearing in the *Brooklyn Eagle*.
- 1914 Submits to force-feeding for article on *New York World* magazine, in support of hunger-striking suffragists.
- 1915 Moves from mother's dwelling to Greenwich Village, at 42 Washington Square South, then 220 West 14th Street.
November: publishes *The Book of Repulsive Women* on *Bruno's Weekly*.
Attends Art Students League of New York.
- 1916 Meets Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven.
November: publishes the first report of the Baroness's costuming.
- 1917 16 May: grandmother Zadel dies of uterine cancer in Huntington.
- 1919 May 1917-June 1919 lives with Courtenay Lemon in Greenwich Village.
- 1921 Sent as correspondent to Paris by *McCall's*.
September: trip to Berlin.
October: meets Thelma Wood in Paris.
- 1923 Story collection *A Book* is published by Boni and Liveright.
September: moves in with Thelma Wood at 173, boulevard Saint-Germain, Paris.

³ My essential chronology only includes dates, events and publications that seemed to me functional to the reading of my thesis. I selected data from Herring's "Chronology" of Djuna Barnes in his biography (1995).

- 1927 August: moves with Wood into recently purchased flat at 9, rue Saint-Romain, Paris.
- 1928 *Ryder* and *Ladies Almanack* are published.
- 1929 Djuna and Wood separate.
A Night Among the Horses, revised version of *A Book*. is published by Boni & Liveright.
- 1930 Returns to New York.
- 1932 August: spends month with Penny Guggenheim and entourage at Hayford Hall, England.
- 1936 February: works for the WPA, compiling a guide to New York City.
Much of the year is spent between London and Paris.
Nightwood is published in London by Faber & Faber, with a forward of T.S. Eliot.
- 1937 July: Paris apartment is sold.
August: moves to London.
The American edition of *Nightwood* is published by Harcourt, Brace and Howe.
- 1939 February: Peggy Guggenheim takes her to nursing home for treatment of alcoholism.
July: moves to Paris, lives at Hôtel Récamier.
October: Returns to New York.
- 1940 March: sent by family to sanatorium on Lake George, New York.
May: travels to Arizona ranch to live with Emily Coleman.
June: returns to New York.
September: moves into 5 Patchin Place, Greenwich Village.
- 1958 *The Antiphon* is published by Faber & Faber.
- 1982 Taken to nursing home in Doylestown, Pennsylvania.
18th June: dies in Patchin Place.
Creatures in an Alphabet published.

Zelda Fitzgerald (1900-1948)⁴

- 1900 24th July: Zelda is born in Montgomery, Alabama, youngest of six children, to Minerva Buckner and Anthony Dickinson Sayre, justice of Supreme Court of Alabama.
- 1914 Enrolled in Sidney Lanier High School.
Starts taking ballet lessons.
- 1918 Graduates from Sidney Lanier High School.
June: Scott is assigned to Camp Sheridan near Montgomery, Alabama.
Zelda and Scott meet at Montgomery Country Club Dance.
- 1920 Scott and Zelda marry at St Patrick's Cathedral in New York.
Honeymoon at Biltmore Hotel.
May: Fitzgeralds rent house at Westport, Connecticut.
- 1921 Zelda gives birth to Frances "Scottie" Fitzgerald.
October 1920-April 1921: Fitzgeralds take apartment at 38 West 59th Street, New York City.
May-July: Fitzgeralds make first trip to Europe; sail to England, then visit France and Italy. Return home and visit Montgomery.
- 1922 November 1921-June 1922: Fitzgeralds rent house at 626 Goodrich Avenue, St. Paul.
April: "Friend Husband's Latest," review of Scott's *The Beautiful and Damned*, appears in *The New York Tribune* as Zelda's first commercial publication.
- 1922 June: writes essay "Eulogy on the Flapper" for *Metropolitan Magazine*.
Summer: Fitzgeralds move to White Bear Yacht Club.
- 1923 Fitzgeralds find themselves in debt.
- 1924 October 1922-April 1924: Fitzgeralds rent house at 6 Gateway Drive in Great Neck, Long Island.
Zelda's essay "Does a Moment of Revolt Come Sometime to Every Married Man?" appears in *McCall's*.
Zelda starts painting as a hobby. Probably starts working at her *Self-Portrait*.
Mid-April: Fitzgeralds sail for France. They visit Paris, then leave for Riviera; stop at Grimm's Park Hotel in Hyères and settle in June at Villa Marie, Valescure, St. Raphaël.
- 1925 February: Fitzgeralds travel to Rome and Capri
April: Fitzgeralds move back to Paris; rent apartment at 14 rue de Tilsitt.

⁴ My essential chronology only includes dates, events and publications that seemed to me functional to the reading of my thesis. I selected data from Milford's biography of Zelda Fitzgerald (1983).

- 1926 January: takes “cure” at Salies-de-Béarn.
December: Fitzgeralds return to America.
- 1927 March 1927-March 1928: Fitzgeralds rent “Ellerslie,” near Wilmington, Delaware.
- 1928 April-August: Fitzgeralds return to Paris; rent apartment at 58 rue de Vaugirard.
Mid-summer: Zelda begins ballet training with Mme. Lubov Egorova.
- 1929 Invited to join San Carlo Opera Ballet Company in Naples, but declines.
June: Fitzgeralds leave Paris for Riviera; rent Villa Fleur des Bois, Cannes.
October: Fitzgeralds return to Paris by way of Provence; take apartment at 10 rue Pergolèse.
- 1930 Five short stories published for *College Humor*.
February: Scott and Zelda travel to North Africa.
March: Zelda is diagnosed as a schizophrenic and admitted to Malmaison Clinic outside Paris; she discharges herself.
May: hospitalised at Val-Mont Clinic in Glion, Switzerland.
June: enters Prangins clinic at Nyon, Switzerland.
- 1931 September: released from Prangins.
Fitzgeralds return to America. Rent house at 819 Felder Avenue in Montgomery.
- 1932 February: second breakdown; enters Phipps Psychiatric Clinic of Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore.
March: completes first draft *Save Me the Waltz*, while at Phipps Clinic.
June: discharged from Phipps.
October: Publication of *Save Me the Waltz*.
- 1934 February: third breakdown; returns to Phipps Clinic.
March: transferred to Craig House, Beacon, New York.
March-April: Zelda’s art exhibition in New York – received unenthusiastically.
May: transferred back to Sheppard-Pratt Hospital outside Baltimore.
- 1936 Enters Highland Hospital in Asheville.
- 1940 April: discharged from Highland Hospital; lives with her mother at 322 Sayre Street in Montgomery.
December: Scott dies.
- 1940s Realises some of her most famous canvases, whose precise dating is not available.
Of those analysed in this thesis, *Central Park* is attributed to the early forties; *Pantheon and Luxembourg Gardens*, *Washington Square*, *Notre*

Dame, Paris were probably painted around 1944. *Puppeufee* was realised between 1946 and 1947. In the late forties, Zelda also realises the *Alice in Wonderland* set, and other fairy-tales-inspired gouaches; she also completes a cycle displaying biblical scenes, as a result from her newly embraced Catholic faith.

- 1947 Returns to Highland Hospital from Montgomery.
- 1948 10th March: Zelda dies in a fire at the Highland Hospital in 1948 and is buried in Rockville, Maryland, alongside Scott.

Part I

Introduction

*You cannot paint it today as you painted yesterday.
You cannot paint tomorrow as you paint today.
[...] But how and as you will – paint it today.*
H.D. (1921)

The early twentieth century witnessed a special intensity in the relationship among different forms of artistic expression. Cases of osmosis multiplied between writing and painting, entailing the negotiation of techniques, giving voice to a myriad of hybrid forms. As argued by Johanna Drucker (1994),⁵ modernism was the movement that more than others promoted a unique tightness between visual and verbal, which often resulted into interesting overlaps. Several artistic partnerships between artists and writers of the twentieth century come to mind to show how fruitful the interaction between these two expressivities was; even when contacts were not direct between artist and writer, contemporary criticism has highlighted fascinating analogies among compositive choices.⁶ On the background of these lively interactions, gender introduces a significant variation that underlies and accompanies many celebrated artistic bonds within women's modernist and 'post-modernist' contexts – like the Left Bank in Paris⁷ and Greenwich Village in New York.⁸

⁵ Johanna Drucker, 1994, *Theorizing Modernism: Visual Art and the Critical Tradition*. (Chichester; New York: Columbia University Press).

⁶ A fascinating example could be the one provided by Crivelli (2003), *Lo sguardo narrato*, which highlights suggestive symmetries between Virginia Woolf's and Wassili Kandinski's formal choices.

⁷ See Shari Benstock, 1987, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900-1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Andrea Weiss, 1995, *Paris was a Woman: Portraits from the Left Bank* (San Francisco: Harper).

⁸ See Christine Stansell, 2000, *American Moderns: Bohemian New York and the Creation of a New Century* (New York: Metropolitan Books).

My contribution to this already rich field of research is to investigate the cases of some female writers who were artists at the same time, as they occupy a position of their own in the already fascinating frame of writing-artistic partnership. Their experience of word and image seems to be much more organic both in their works of art and writing; the texture entangling exchanges of expressive techniques and gender awareness appears to be particularly dense, unmediated and spontaneous, original and more dynamic. It is interesting to observe how these female artists' twin talents of writing and painting clearly influenced verbal and visual choices in terms of genres, forms and patterns. In addition, these women traced their own paths as divergent from that of men's, both of the past and of their time.

My investigation is grounded in the early twentieth century, in the fertile field of European and American modernism(s). The early twentieth century is an intense period for women, who endeavour to define their role in society and to newly legitimise their position in the panorama of the modern city. They also acquire new exposure in the context of art and literature, where, more than in the past centuries, they are in a position to find new identities. Gender awareness certainly contributes to form this new artistic identity, but cannot be simplistically understood as an umbrella term. It contributes substantially but very differently in the works of the women artists considered in this thesis, and usually problematises further the relationship between writing and painting, rather than clarifying it. Fortunately, the level of intentionality and of critical awareness in experimentation demonstrated by these artists, together with the rich critical work on the facets of such artistic dynamism, has provided a sound base for this thesis. Nonetheless, it has triggered further questioning on some aspects still little explored, including possible de-coding of the regularities and patterns which occur in the bonds between art, writing and gender.

In the already extensive criticism of (some of) these artists, there seems to be a still little trodden path of intermediality, upon which my thesis aims to expand. Such intermediality binds texts to visual art, to gender politics and performativity in a way that needs a systematic outlook. The interconnectedness of verbal and visual means of communication urges a methodological proceeding that crosses different critical frameworks into new combinations, so as to account for such complex interactions.

1. The corpus

In this (gendered) conversation between image and word, the women writers and artists I have chosen to explore offer a very fascinating hunting ground. Specifically, Djuna Barnes, Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Mina Loy, and Zelda Fitzgerald appear to share artistic *milieux* and similar biographical experiences, so that they fit comparative settings. On the transnational chessboard of modernism, these four women moved among major centres – including London, Berlin, Munich, Paris, Italy and New York – to weave a complex network of ‘upstream modernism’. Some of them met, like Djuna Barnes and Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, who found themselves working side by side (though not together) in the New York of the 1910s, and in the Paris of the 1920s. Mina Loy too had contacts with Djuna Barnes in Paris, as we learn from some vignettes of Barnes, and from some hints in the writings of Gertrude Stein. Zelda Fitzgerald, also in Paris in the 1920s, seems not to partake in the relationships binding the other three authors; in fact, she only began writing and painting extensively in the 1930s. Yet, she shows several fascinating affinities with the others.

Analysing these four writers together gives an opportunity to study a sort of alternative pantheon of modernism, not only from a gender perspective, but from a comparative perspective too. Their works show how contacts between composite techniques belonging to verbal and visual languages ground on common rhetorical basis.

Therefore, my thesis will be structured in two main sections. The first and relatively brief introductory one will pinpoint some methodological directions, a specifically angled recognition of the studies that have so far dealt with the interactions among gender, words and images; of the different schools of criticism, I will focus on those which provide useful methodologies to the analysis of the selected corpus. The second section will stage comparative close reading and close observation, with the aim to identify formal correspondences between verbal and composing techniques. Such correspondences occur so frequently, in fact, that they trigger reflection on the reasons why and on the ways in which they are implicated in the creative process: the use of colour and the expansion on the surface, the portrait as verbal and visual genre, the use of the frame, the presence of the mask recur extensively in both the verbal and visual works considered, so that they can be identified as potential patterns of two

analogous processes of creation. The third chapter will access an even less stable field of analysis, at the cross-road among literature, performance and performativity. Here, the mask appears as a remediated form of both the self-portrait and the autobiography, which stages processes of self-construction, rather than of self-displaying. As the self-portrait can be referred to as both a visual and verbal trope, its modern application, the mask, proves a fascinating site of interdisciplinary and intermedial analysis.

For my comparative sets, I only chose the works of visual and verbal art that best suit the exploration of the common rhetorical ground, although such choice implicates considerable shifts in geographical and temporal terms. Since I also chose not to include sections dedicated to the biographies of the writers, in order to avoid excessive digression, I included selected chronologies as preliminary reading. Still, I will provide relevant information on the lives and works, as I propose my comparative analysis.

2. Some methodological considerations

Clearly, the women writers under analysis have already been targeted by critical approaches, but in very different measures. For instance, Djuna Barnes immediately attracted the attention of the critics for being the (writing and drawing) pen of New York 1910s journalism, and later for becoming one of the most noteworthy writers of the Left Bank in Paris. Mina Loy too became almost immediately notorious, initially for her visual art, and then for her poetry. Elsa von Freytag Loringhoven, by contrast, endured a long period of critical neglect, only to be addressed by criticism in the early 2000s.⁹

In all cases, the visibility of the artists' works owes much to feminist criticism. It was second-wave feminism, in particular, that was largely responsible for the re-evaluation of Zelda Fitzgerald, whose legacy had been long overshadowed by the name of her husband and by her later schizophrenia-affected years; still, her struggle for assessing her identity as a woman artist is not the only interesting aspect.

⁹ The first collection of the the Baroness's uncensored work is dated only 2011, with Gammel's *Body Sweats*.

Despite having gone through different reception and appreciation, these writers are united by geographical and artistic transitions, and by the peculiarity of being constantly in conversation, and in contrast, with other expressions of men's avant-garde. In the paragraphs that follow, I will try to chart the most relevant aspects of the interactions between their art and writing, and will briefly design the most useful critical means, which I will then employ in the close analysis.

2.1. Visual modernity and urban aesthetics

The study of the interaction between images and literature is a long- and well-established critical tradition, which since the sixteenth century has been exploring the connection between visual art and literature; although it has changed, evolved and adapted to suit various combinations, visual studies remains a hotspot of interest at this time. As a research approach, visual studies has been at the cutting edge throughout centuries thanks to a great versatility: though applied to different cases, it could – and still does – always provide the opportunity to engage in the relations and osmotic processes which take place between words and images, especially in the avant-gardes of the twentieth century.

Clearly, some names from the twentieth century resonate in the background of my analysis, such as the studies of Panofsky in the field of art criticism, and the achievements of Mitchell for pinpointing some tenets of the naturally dynamic field of the visual studies. Yet, it is impossible to quote all the authors who nurtured such vast critical field. Indeed, the very elusiveness of visual studies provides the epistemological resiliency necessary to confront the unclear and mutable structures and dynamics occurring between verbal and visual languages. The boundaries of the research area of the visual studies is hard to define, since it borders on neighbouring fields such as art history, media studies, visual anthropology, critical theory, cultural studies, and aesthetics.

As James Elkins argued in 2013,¹⁰ thus further developing his 2003¹¹ introductory reflections, the study field of the visual studies is more easily defined *as distinct from* other strains of art criticism, rather than as a clearly identified research area:

In particular, I think it is crucial that visual studies takes images as examples of political, gender, and other issues. When that happens, cultural and philosophic criticism can take center stage, and images that are presented, at first, as enabling moments in the critique can become merely exemplary. A sign that an image is being used as an example is that the author's points about gender, subjectivity, political identity, or other subjects might be made just as well without the image. (Elkins 2013: 27)

Elkins's observations sound particularly relevant for the approach of the works that I have chosen, where formal aspects including line, colour, and shape intertwine on canvas with political, gender, and social issues. The twentieth century offers particularly challenging material for visual studies approaches:

Whatever we decide to make of visual practices, it is best if we do it in full awareness of the fact that the desire to interpret may take us in directions that ruin the very theories and concepts we want to use and even undermine our understanding of the objects that we set out to study. Visual studies is easy because it has already asked and answered the big questions, giving its authors the freedom to take pleasure in all the bizarre and quirky productions of contemporary culture. [...] We need to become irritated at our favourite theories and theorists and tired of our usual list of visual objects. Visual studies should be ferociously difficult, as obdurate and entangled in power as the images themselves. (Elkins 2003: 201)

Particularly, the visual dimension in the corpus I designed is majorly articulated by the artists' urban experiences; this trait invites me, therefore, to mainly turn to the methodologies of the visual studies which better explore the paradigms of verbal and visual representation of the urban panorama. The wide range of such applications certainly resonates of Henri Lefebvre's work, *La Production de l'espace* (1974), where

¹⁰ James Elkins, 2013, *Theorizing Visual Studies: Writing through the Discipline* (London; New York: Routledge).

¹¹ James Elkins, 2003, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (London; New York: Routledge).

he explored the importance of space in the social formation of space and spatial meanings. His work also inevitably grounds on Michel Foucault's studies of the late 1970s on spatial order and the network of power, where the paradigm power-knowledge offers a theoretical perspective to interpret the role of the urban space in the formation of cultural and social dynamics. I tried however to focus my glance on some studies that seemed particularly suitable to the texts and artworks selected, especially those addressing the representation of mainly two cities, Paris¹² and New York, in their specific twentieth-century topographies.

The idea of space changes radically at the beginning of the twentieth century and heavily affects the self-perception of the individual in relation to what surrounds them; the subject is now understood as a metaphorical, psychic space in relation to the geographical and metaphorical spaces surrounding him/her. De Certeau, Laura Marcus, and Karen Jacobs elaborated the concept of a new space, mainly embodied in the modern city, but metaphorically existing at many levels of human perception.

In *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), Michel de Certeau developed the two concepts of space already identified by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of perception; what in Merleau-Ponty were 'geometrical space' and 'anthropological space', become for De Certeau 'place' and 'space'. The concept of space is, in particular, further complicated, and proves relevant as a theoretical ground for the close analysis which I will develop on the case studies:

A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. Thus space is composed of intersections of mobile elements. It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvalent unity of conflictual programs or contractual proximities. On this view, in relations to place, space is like the word when it is spoken, that is, when it is caught in the ambiguity of an actualization, transformed into a term dependant upon many different conventions [...] and modified by the transformations caused by successive contexts. (1984: 117)

¹² Relevant studies, including Benjamin's *Paris: Capital of the Nineteenth Century*, and Prendergast's *Writing the City: Paris and the Nineteenth Century*, address the dynamics of space of the French metropolis in formation.

According to the dynamic understanding of the concept of space, the ‘self’ can be represented as a (not necessarily harmonic) space, framed by boundaries which may or may not be easily crossed. Outside the frame of his/her self-space, the subject meets other individuals, other self-spaces, within the wider frame of society – a collective space. According to this perspective, society is configured as a space inclusive of other spaces, whose boundaries cross, clash, and overlap in a horizontal complex texture. But spaces within society work vertically and hierarchically too. Eventually, thus complicating even further an already intricate picture, all the metaphorical space-entities (‘anthropological spaces’) move and interact on an actual geographical space, defined as ‘place’.

A place (*lieu*) is the order (of whatever kind) in accord with which elements are distributed in relationships of coexistence. It thus excludes the possibility of two things being in the same location (place). The law of the ‘proper’ rules in the place: the elements taken into consideration are beside one another, each situated in its own ‘proper’ and distinct locations, a location it defines. A place is thus an instantaneous configuration of positions. It implies an indication of stability. (De Certeau 1984: 117)

The ontological diversity between ‘place’ and ‘space’ lies in the presence or absence of stability. The complication of what sounds theoretically perfect is embodied in the interaction between ‘place’ and ‘space’ in reality. The ‘place’ is only immutable and stable in the theoretical instant, which in the reality needs to be framed within time. The specific configuration of a place only exists in the time of its experiencing by the subjects, and can therefore maintain that particular configuration for a limited time interval. As De Certeau argues, “a space is a practiced place. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers.” (118) Such a metaphor proves particularly suitable to the texts, as it conveys the dual nature of the city. The city as a theoretical entity is defined as a gathering of places, it has its geographical and geometrical stability, which constitutes its margin of objectivity; the modern city, setting and object of many of the works in question, evolves and changes rapidly, so that it reduces its margin of stability. However, the city exists for, and is experienced by its subjects, or ‘anthropological spaces’, who differently *practice* its

places. A city does not exist until it is actualised in its dynamic space. The most evident consequence of such a process already explains ambiguities of dualism as centre vs. periphery, which will be a nodal point in the analysis of the corpus.

De Certeau's formulation proves useful for the definition of 'space' as a fundamental *topos* of modernity; in the corpus I defined, it is the trope of the geographical space, either objective or experienced by the subject; it is an existential *topos*, the frame of mind of the individual who perceives the self; it is a representational trope, the artist's tool to picture the self as un/related to other subjects and to geographical places and experienced spaces. As an archetype of modern perception and representation, the 'space' is an active frame in all the works considered, either literary or visual..

In the wake of such critical framework, it sounds relevant that Djuna Barnes focused on the representation of the city as a place, on the crystallisation of a specific, instant configuration of the city into sketches, articles and short stories. Conversely, Zelda Fitzgerald was deeply affected by the ephemeral connotation of the modern place and thus committed her work to the representation of the (same) city as an emotional space. In all the artists, though, it is interesting to witness how experience transforms a place into a dynamic 'space', filtered by the frames of the self – among which, of course, gender awareness. The artists often try to establish a centre, a reference point in opposition to which they can define themselves; thus, they attempt to represent their geographical and metaphorical positions within 'practiced places' and in relation to others' 'anthropological spaces'.

2.1.1. Views on modernity

Grounding on Benjamin's formulations (which I will also use in several moments), Deborah Parsons's (2000)¹³ and Laura Marcus's (2013)¹⁴ considerations provide a useful framework. Their studies stress how gender frames a woman's understanding

¹³ Deborah Parsons, 2000, *Streetwalking the Metropolis: Women, the City, and Modernity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

¹⁴ Laura Marcus, 2013 "Modernism and Visual culture," in *A Handbook of Modernism Studies*, ed. by Jean-Michel Rabaté (Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons), pp. 239-255.

of the outside world in a way that is always influenced by her point of view, even when she tries to take an unemotional perspective of a place – this idea will prove helpful to address Djuna Barnes’s New York journalism. As Parson argues, a women’s gaze is never ‘gender neutral,’ yet the role of gender is never fixed and is not always easily traceable in a text.

Laura Marcus arrives to similar conclusions, when, like Deborah Parsons, she investigates modernism as the outcome of the evolution of the point of view in the early twentieth century. Laura Marcus’s essay “Modernism and Visual culture,” published in 2013, explains how modernism is still one of the most appealing and suitable investigation fields of the contemporary age to theorise and speculate on the connection between visual and verbal:

Many modernist writers turned with exceptional frequency and fullness to the visual arts, in their endeavours to define and work through questions of aesthetics and ideology, including issues concerning representation and mimesis, the nature of “the image,” realism and anti-realism, temporality and consciousness, organic form, and artistic and cultural evolution. To this extent, literary modernism is a visual culture. (Marcus 2013: 239)

According to Marcus, who builds on Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility” (1936), modernism saw one main change in the human understanding of the outside world – and consequently of the inner dimension. The introduction of technological forms displaced the value of artistic realism, introduced the idea of mechanical reproducibility, and undermined any artistic claim for originality. Technological devices necessitated a new understanding of the concept of point of view, now mediated by a mechanical frame. For both Parsons and Marcus, the fullest embodiment of such a revolution in the conceptualisation of ‘point of view’ and ‘perspective’ is to be witnessed in cinema, which had a significant resonance on literature.

Originated from technology's impact on art,¹⁵ the 'mind's eye' is defined as the artist's framing of reality, a mediation tool which works similarly to the camera-eye in cinema, and cannot be fully identified with the concept of point of view; such a reflection is essential in the approach of Zelda Fitzgerald's work, that presents a 'double' point of view, at once objective and emotional. The 'mind's eye' preserves a dimension of creativity and originality which combines the artist's point of view and representational strategies. The concept of the 'mind's eye' works aprioristically in different forms of art, as it belongs to the human, experiencing person, before being actualised in visual or verbal texts. The mind's eye, understood as a frame of understanding for the anthropological space, is what allows the modern man and the modernist artist to relate with others within the geographical and experienced places of modernity. As such, it arouses questions on the nature and changes that happened in the experiencing consciousness and, sometimes, pushes to approach concepts such as reflection and mirroring as frames of self/perception. The mind's eye permeates modernist and verbal visual texts, more or less explicitly, to problematise the modern triangle self-other(s)-context. In the texts that I will analyse, the context will mostly be the modern city, the quintessential 'space' of modernity, according to De Certeau.

In addition, Karen Jacobs (2001)¹⁶ expands on the dynamics of the act of viewing in modernist writing and painting, better defining the mind's eye as a process. Such are the words she uses to describe the mechanism of seeing and representing, explained as a "retrospective metanarrative" encapsulating the ways in which "the gaze and its objects collude to produce meaning in many modernists texts" (Jacobs 2001: 1):

¹⁵ As a reproduction of the real world, cinema impacted "literature, philosophy, human perception, the history of dreaming." (Marcus 2013: 240) In doing so, cinema shifted the artistic focus from the subjects and scenes represented – and from the way they were depicted – to the narrating perspective from which they are observed; the point of view becomes, in other words, the only passage in the dynamics of representation which leaves space to the artistic touch. When Laura Marcus, building on Fredric Jameson (1990), claims that human mind and understanding of the world have changed, she explains how they developed on the idea of the 'mind's eye'; a modernist understanding of the 'mind's eye' is an entirely new concept defined as an equivalent of the 'camera-eye', the new form the human point of view. As phrased by Fredric Jameson: "Did human nature change on or about December 28, 1895?" (the date of the first screening of films by the Lumière brothers) "Or was some cinematographic dimension of human reality always there somewhere in prehistoric life, waiting to find its actualization in a certain high-technical civilization? (and thereby now allowing us to reread and rewrite the past now filmically and as the philosophy of the visual)?" Fredric Jameson (1990), *Signatures of the Visible*.

¹⁶ Karen Jacobs, 2001, *The Eye's Mind: Literary Modernism and Visual Culture* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press).

On the one side resides the subject lens, whose cultural transparency and symbolic agency are conjoined in the union of look and word; on the other side lingers the silent object to which it is wedded, the precarious but necessary body destined to disappear. The gaze deployed in this relation may be characterized at once as means of knowing and as a weapon of embodiment, suggesting and anxious recognition of the fundamental dependency and antipathy between the two. (Jacobs 2001 :1)

Jacobs argues how the Western tradition (dating from Descartes) promoted a disembodied observer, predicated on the “disavowal of its own embodiment” to achieve knowledge. Although this position may be further discussed, it is undeniable that the escalating dominance of the image at the turn of the twentieth century questions the fantasy of a transparent subject. (*Ibid.*) The idea of the image as penetrating and mediating any sphere of social life influences the understanding of the self, more and more perceived as an experiencing body, or, as an embodied image – “afterimage,” for Jacobs. The modernist period focuses on the body which stays behind the neutral lens of the observer, and searches for new ways of knowing through the participant-observer. As a consequence of such a process,¹⁷ modernism proclaims and consolidates the need for new visual techniques, understood as distinct kinds of observers and visual relationships.

As the modernist observer’s posture of neutral detachment is continually denaturalized and subjectivized from the beginnings of the twentieth century [...] I ask, how does “the eye in the text” renegotiate its relation to forms of knowledge and power? (Jacobs 2001: 3)

According to Karen Jacobs, the dominance of the image requires the subject to re-think itself as a body and the Other as a knowing embodied self. This radical change in self-perception and in all the knowing relations issued by the subject is the cipher of modernism, and the new mind’s frame which underlies most modernist works. What

¹⁷ The emergence of these new kinds of visual relations is, according to Jacobs, dependent in fact on three related cultural developments contemporary with the rise of modernism: “the impact of newly skeptical philosophical discourses of vision,” which Jacobs identifies with psychoanalysis, Marxism, and existential philosophy, “the accelerating impact of visual technologies, such as photography and film” and the “emergence of anthropology and sociology as academic disciplines.” (Jacobs 2001: 2)

is a paradigm of the ‘being’ becomes a paradigm of ‘representation’, differently textured in each work of modernist writing and visual art.

Jacobs holds the ‘embodiment of the observer’ as the key change in the perceptive mechanism of the modernist individual. A closely related issue follows in Jacobs’s reasoning, which relates the agency of the gaze to gender; Jacobs uses the discussions of the relationship between the observing subject and its embodiment to further investigate how the female observer becomes an experiencing (and performing) body. In her picturing of society, the context is provocatively traditional, conforming to patriarchal frames. Women’s artistic ambition is perceived as a “usurpation” of “cultural prerogatives” (Jacobs 2001: 257), and is transferred into the body metaphor as a violence of women on men.

Instancing Judith Butler’s positions, Jacobs shows how gender is purely performative, legitimised by a social system of convention and how, as such, it does not necessarily correspond to sexuality, a biological fact. Between natural sexuality and performative gender, Jacobs places the subject, the body. The complex process from sexuality to gender through the subject’s body is run by the embodied mind’s eye, which experiences the outside world through internal and external frames. In the case of women, the embodiment of subjectivity into a gendered performative identity experiences the prejudice imposed by a chauvinistic frame, and struggles for legitimacy. As part of the process through which the mind’s eye observes and represents the world, the woman’s body underlies any artistic representation of the city and individuals inside it. Developed by the mind’s eye into gender, the modernist woman’s body is at once subject and object, as well as frame and narrative technique.

2.2. Recent feminist insights

Feminist approaches to literary criticism have proved essential to the re-evaluation of the corpus under analysis, which often went unnoticed upon first publications. As argued by Peter Barry (2002),¹⁸ feminist critical readers treated “literature as a series

¹⁸ Peter Barry, 2002, “Feminism literary criticism,” in *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp.124-138.

of representations of women's lives and experience" and therefore places "considerable emphasis on the use of [...] non-literary material (such as diaries, memoirs, social and medical history) in understanding a literary text" (Barry 2002: 124). Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn's contribution to feminist literary criticism,¹⁹ for instance, were groundbreaking in this sense, and so were Elaine Showalter's critical readings,²⁰ which were oriented to the appreciation of the need for specific spectacles to read women's texts.

Feminist insights from the 1990s and 2000s, which have been gathered under the umbrella term of third-wave feminism,²¹ have widened the range of applications of feminist readings, expanding the focus onto sexuality, challenging categorisations, abolishing expectations and stereotypes, and defending sex-related art, pornography and sex-positivity. In the introduction to this sort of 'third-wave feminism' in *Manifesta*, the authors Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards suggest that feminism can change with every generation and individual; they claim that belonging to feminism as an emancipated system of frameworks in various disciplines should not constrain women's criticism to homologation: "We're not doing feminism the same way that the seventies feminists did it; being liberated doesn't mean copying what came before but finding one's own way – a way that is genuine to one's own generation" (Baumgardner and Amy Richards 2001: 130).²²

Basing on such assumptions, third-wave feminism expanded further to include critical fronts also embraced by gender studies, its neighbouring discipline. Recent feminist criticism has been extremely helpful in the articulation of the body as a central critical notion; such an insight is particularly helpful in approaching the Baroness's corpus, for instance, where body and sexuality need to be appreciated as experiential tools used to gain knowledge of the world. In "Writing the Body,"²³ Ann Rosalind

¹⁹ Gayle Greene and Coppelia Kahn (eds.), 1985, *Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism* (London: Routledge).

²⁰ Elaine Showalter (ed. by), 1985, *The New Feminist Criticism: Essays on Women. Literature and Theory* (London: Virago).

²¹ The term 'third-wave feminism' was coined by Rebecca Walker in the essay "Becoming the Third Wave" dated 1992, which became the manifesto for the third wave's attempt to broaden feminism's scope.

²² Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards, 2001, *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux).

²³ Ann Rosalind Jones, 1986, "Writing the Body. Toward an Understanding of 'l'écriture féminine' Feminist Studies," in *Feminist Literary Theory. A Reader*, ed. by Mary Eagleton (Oxford: Basil Blackwell), pp. 328-331.

Jones suggests how women “gained a greater spontaneity and abundance in body and language” (Jones 1986: 328) once they became aware of the implications of body ownership. The body has been the key to the appropriation of feminine spaces on behalf of women, and has signified an overturn in the semantic use of the term and in the appropriation of language. However, the leap between body and language has not been immediate. Verbal hesitancy, due to a society dominated by men’s aesthetic and rhetoric, needed to be overcome; women’s language was conquered at a mass level, but was far from being a spontaneous outpouring of the body. Often, in Djuna Barnes and Loy, for instance, the process of writing takes the metaphoric shape of the body, twisted and in pain, to signify the difficulties met in the attempt to overcome the obstacles which prevented women from writing. In Barnes’s work, as well as in Loy’s and in the Baroness’s poems, the body is a space, a starting point, the driving force and the processing metaphor of the assessment of twentieth-century women’s writing.

2.3. Gendered spaces, gender practices

While the body is the major experiential tool for the writers under analysis, gender represents the performative process that involves, but is not limited to, the use and fashioning of the body. As a consequence, I need to flank my background of feminist readings with gender studies, before engaging in the analysis of the corpus.

Particularly, I refer to those studies that argue how readings of modernism have often been perceived from a masculine perspective, so that, for a long time, the position and role of women in the avant-gardes has been neglected by criticism. Upon compilation of her anthology of women modernist writers,²⁴ which includes three out of the four writers investigated in this thesis, Bonnie Kime Scott claimed that:

Modernism as we were taught it at mid-century was [...] unconsciously gendered masculine. The inscriptions of mothers and women, and more broadly of sexuality and gender, were not adequately decoded, if detected at all.

²⁴ Bonnie Kime Scott (ed. by), 1990, *The Gender of Modernism. A Critical Anthology* (Bloomington-Indianapolis: Indiana U.P.). Scott’s anthology clearly echoes Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s more comprehensive work of 1985, *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*.

Typically, both the authors of original manifestos and the literary historians of modernism took as their norm a small set of its male participants. (Scott 1990: 2;7)

It is only late in the twentieth century, in fact, that feminine manifestos start gaining a more substantial critical attention. Only with gender-oriented insights in modernism had such manifestoes as Valentine de Saint-Point's 1912 *Il manifesto della donna futurista*, or Mina Loy's 1914 *Aphorisms of Futurism* been acknowledged literary value. As phrased by Lisa Tickner: "a combination of factors made the assertion of a virile and creative masculinity both imperative and problematic." (Tickner 1994: 47)²⁵

The challenge to a masculine canon of modernism has been started, in fact, more than a century ago. It finds roots, for instance, in Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion* (1897)²⁶ and Edward Carpenter's *The Intermediate Sex* (1908),²⁷ which first associated such concepts as "inversion" and "intermediality" to sexuality. Some voices can be considered as thresholds, like Simone de Beauvoir, with her groundbreaking statement "One is not born a woman, one becomes one" (1973: 301),²⁸ or Virginia Woolf herself. But there is no time here to into a history of gendered thinking. Foucault certainly marked a turning point of in the final divorce between sex and sexuality, the latter being a relational process.²⁹ (Foucault 1978: 155) Gender approaches after

²⁵ Tickner, Lisa 1994, "Men's Work? Masculinity and Modernism," in *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations*, eds. N. Bryson, M. A. Holly, K. Moxey (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, pp.42-80).

²⁶ Co-authored with John Addington Symonds, first published in German in 1896.

²⁷ Reader of the German sexologist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, Carpenter identified some people as belonging to both genders: "It is beginning to be recognised that the sexes do not or should not normally form two groups hopelessly isolated in habit and feeling from each other, but that they rather represent the two poles of one group - which is the human race; so that while certainly the extreme specimens at either pole are vastly divergent, there are great numbers in the middle region who (though differing corporeally as men and women) are by emotion and temperament very near to each other." (Carpenter 1908: 117)

Edward Carpenter, 1908, *The Intermediate Sex: A Study of Some Transitional Types of Men and Women* (London: Routledge, 2015).

²⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, 1973, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books).

²⁹ Michel Foucault, 1978, *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: An Introduction*. Trans. by R. Hurley, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990).

Foucault branched out into several insights which examine the fluid nature of gendered identities in relation to its constructive factors within modernity.³⁰

Nearer to us and relevant to my analysis are some insights that connect gender practices to spatial and visual aspects of modernity. For instance, in *Sexuality and Space* (1992), architectural theorist Beatriz Colomina gathered articles on multidisciplinary feminist approaches and debates on gender and sexuality to architectural research. Through the displacement of traditional architecture, the focus of feminist research broadened to include social and relational components between spaces and their users, who are sexual and gendered practitioners. As a result, space (particularly the urban space, addressed by all four the writers under analysis) became a concern of gender studies too, because, as gendering processes, they determine the construction of gender individuals into social beings. As Colomina remarks in her introduction to the collection, the idea of space is intrinsic to the conceptualisation of the body and of its understanding on behalf of the owner and of the others:

The concern of the symposium was not with space as yet another symptom of sexuality, repressed or otherwise. It is not a question of looking at how sexuality acts itself out in space, but rather to ask: How is the question of space already inscribed in the question of sexuality? This formulation required that we abandon the traditional thought of architecture as object, a bounded entity addressed by an independent subject and experienced by a body. Instead, architecture must be thought as a system of representation [...] Likewise, the body has to be understood as a political construct, a product of such system of representation rather than the means by which we encounter them. (Colomina 1992: ii)

³⁰ One of these is Rita Felski's 1995 *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press). There, not only does she challenge conventional male-centred theories of modernity, but also called into question those feminist perspectives that had either demonised modernity as the progeny of patriarchy, or else assumed an unmotivated critical position to men in general. Felski combined cultural history with cultural theory to examine the gendered meanings of such notions as feminine writing, revolution, and perversion. Her approach was comparative and interdisciplinary, covering a wide variety of resources that range from sociological theory, literary and art theory, to politics and sexological discourse. While she exposed many male and female authors of the twentieth century under her relational scrutiny, Felski showed how complex and contradictory the connections between femininity and modernity are. Her multi-perspective approach to femininity aligns with the postulates of gender, which, in denying biological sex, is a fluid continuum which flows through personal experience and socio-cultural dimension.

The contribution of this new approach is not just seeing the body as experiencing the space, but as a space itself constructed by other spaces around it – which becomes the space for the body to perform. Colomina’s project to discuss the mutual relationship between architectural space and femininity had a significant resonance and motivated many others to explore the issue; among several scholars concerned with the task, Clare Hemmings³¹ offers a critique of dominant formations of gender and sexuality, with particular attention to bisexuality, and explores the relationships between sexual and gendered identities, subjects, and communities through a geographical insight. Her study supports my thesis, as at least three of my “itinerant” writers were openly bisexual; while bisexuality is rarely examined as an analytical tool nor as defining position, the intersection between bisexuality and space is even less investigated as a condition influencing poetic and artistic choices.

What is particularly interesting about identifying the feminine body as a gendered space is the attempt to challenge the established patriarchal model of Western civilisation through a spatial metaphor. Throughout history, women had few circumscribed places designed for them within the urban panorama; the family house, as indoor space, yards and gardens as outdoor practicable areas. Crossing such borders questioned a woman’s respectability, unless she was accompanied by a man. This point proves pivotal, for instance, to the analysis of Barnes’s *Nightwood*. Modernity asked women to redesign their – first of all physical – position within society, and therefore in the urban environment. While initially not associated with regular physical sites, women’s spaces began to acquire relevance hand in hand with women’s emancipation; women’s communities, reading societies, political and intellectual circles were increasingly recognised as micro-identities in the multi-faceted reality of modern city life.

In the search for definition of feminine spaces and identity, the body is spontaneously understood as a woman’s prime space, whose property has to be claimed from the unrighteous historical male owners. The theme of violence in occupying spaces – which easily fits into the war-defined twentieth-century scenario – stratifies naturally on the newly formulated concept of body-space, so that women’s

³¹ Clare Hemming, 2002, *Bisexual Spaces: A Geography of Sexuality and Gender* (New York; London: Routledge).

appropriation of urban spaces and of their own bodies is carried out on the same binome ‘occupation-liberation’.

The balance between the complementary processes, through which the body defines new spaces, and the modern spaces, defines the body as a space itself, are well described by Kirsi Saarikangas (2007),³² who describes body and urban architecture as parallel ‘processes’ rather than completed structures:

Built space consists of several overlapping, intertwined spaces. The relations between architecture and sexual difference are also multifaceted and linked with the process of planning, use and the architectural space itself and furthermore with construction technologies, as well as representations of and writings about architecture. Consequently, relations between architecture and sexual difference raise questions about architectural spaces and their representations, spatial practices and planning as gendered and gendering processes. (Saarikangas 2007: 55)

The feminist focus on sexual difference, together with the debate on the definition of gender identities were framed within a wider shift from a static understanding to architecture, to dynamic approaches to urban networks. The role of the user, in particular the woman user, becomes crucial in the “spatial turn” (Saarikangas 2007: 59) which for Saarikangas (and de Certeau, in fact) seems to embody the most meaningful aesthetic change from the fin du siècle to modernity.

Modern urban life consisted, for women, in moving at an accelerated pace and across ambiguous spaces, new modes of communication and new visual and symbolic codes. In other words, modernity placed a new stress on the concepts of observing and displaying. As persuasively formulated by Whitney Chadwick and Tirza True Latimer:³³

The figure of the “emancipated” modern woman became to interwar modernity [...] what the figure of the dandy/*flanêur* had been to modernity in Baudelaire’s era, personifying the social, political, intellectual and

³² Kirsi Saarikangas et al. (eds.) 2007, *Imagining Spaces and Places* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013).

³³ Whitney Chadwick and Tirza T. Latimer, 2003, “Becoming Modern. Gender and Sexual Identity after World War I,” in *The Modern Woman Revisited: Paris between the Wars*, ed. by Chadwick (London: Eurospan), pp. 3-19.

technological changes that shaped daily life in bourgeois Western urban centers. The modern woman was, above all, an image, mediated and mediatized by emerging industries such as the illustrated press, pulp fiction, advertising and cinema. *La femme moderne*, as pictured in the mass media [...] was literally “going places.” (Chadwick and Latimer 2003: 3)

Chadwick and Latimer debate on how, interestingly, the media originally meant to display aspects and subjects of modernity, became in fact frames to look at, whose subjects represented role models to emulate. The society which produced visual culture was indeed dependent on the same visuality it created. In the process where representation and observation fed one another mutually, women personified both the icon to follow and the follower. It is no coincidence that fashion as an industry and as a life-style flourishes in the '20s, interpreting the duplicity of the modern woman's image. In those years, gender became a primary concern because of its dominant performative component, consisting in the visible image of the self. In fact, gender remains today unavoidable and of primary importance in the retrospective analysis of profiles of the '20s, because it embodied the visual demand enstaged by modernity.

As poetically phrased by Latimer,³⁴ many of the works produced by “the gallery of amazon geniuses” (Latimer 2003: 129) between the 1920s and the 1940s revolve around the relationship between sexual and artistic identity. All the writers I have chosen created, to different extents, their own *dramatis personae*, who in life and art would perform a gendered and fashioned version of their ‘stage director’. While gender does not coincide with either sexuality or looks, it is strongly influenced by them. Gender is a mask to construct, taking into account the subjects' identities and the society where they would perform their gendered *personae*.

2.4. Performers

On the wave of socio-cultural investigations of gender, scholars have broadened the horizons of inspection of the relations between gender and modernity and formulated

³⁴ Tirza Latimer, 2003, “Looking like a Lesbian. Portraiture and Sexual Identity in 1920s Paris,” in Chadwick (2003), pp. 129-143.

interesting theories. Among those who understood gender as a composite and fluid expression, Judith Butler has deeply investigated the idea that gender can only be grasped for short instants, as every moment adds stratification. In fact, Judith Butler insisted on the performative quality of gender, a construction, a temporary fashioning of the self. Butler argues that gender does not exist as a stable entity and cannot, in any case, be de-contextualised from the social environment where it is enacted. Gendered performances are consequently changeable and contradictory, so it is paradoxical to attempt to classify them according to traditional categorisation:

When one performance of gender is considered real and another false, or when one presentation of gender is considered authentic, and another fake, then we can conclude that a certain ontology of gender is conditioning these judgments, an ontology (an account of what gender is) that is also put into crisis by the performance of gender in such a way that these judgments are undermined or become impossible to make. (Butler 2004: 214)

As Butler suggests in *Undoing Gender* (one of the sources I majorly use in my third chapter), gender can never be real or fake, right or wrong; it is always real in the moment when it is performed, so that it resists any definition. The solution Bulter advances, however, does not fall into agnosticism, it operates only within the boundaries of the negotiable.

As widely discussed by Judith Butler, gender is hardly ever fixed; accordingly, the gender *personae* created by the artists considered are never conclusive, or even long-lasting. As for Barnes, for example, “neither her look nor her sexuality was fixed,” (Allen 2003: 145) nor certainly, I would add, her gender. Her life was marked by sexual and geographical mobility, which resulted in several gender articulations. Barnes’s friend and fellow artist, the Baroness, developed exponentially the idea of instability of gender and plurality of the fashioned *persona*, giving life to a wide spectrum of ‘faces’. In my opinion, the case of the Baroness fits particularly well with the theories elaborated by Judith Butler on the need to ‘undo’ gender categories; although the connection has not yet been made, I found that the Baroness responds to Butler’s formulation so well, that she could successfully serve as testing ground for Butler’s criticism.

As Butler embraces the fluidity of gender, she cleverly acknowledges how the attempt to identify as many gender categories as there are differences among the subjects considered, is simply paradoxical:

One tendency within gender studies has been to assume that the alternative to the binary system of gender is a multiplication of genders. Such an approach invariably provokes the question: how many genders can there be, and what will they be called? (Butler 2004: pp.42-43).

According to Butler, the legitimacy of gender studies originates precisely from the unavoidability of its social dimension, yet categories remain idealisations, and are, therefore, limited to their fixity. Flexible as they might be, categories are limited, because they tend to crystallise reality into approximations. On a feminist note, Butler argues that categories based on sexuality are the legacy of patriarchy aimed to regulate, rather than to acknowledge what exists. Though unavoidable, the compromise between social norm and gender should not be prescriptive. Butler calls categories “instruments of a regulatory regime” (Butler 1991: 13)³⁵ and indefatigably questions them as (partially) unrighteous assumptions; in *Undoing Gender*, she wonders whether there is a gender orientation prior to the social norm which could be analysed as unbound to social frames:

Is there a gender that pre-exists its regulation, or is it the case that, in being subject to regulation, the gendered subject emerges, produced in and through that particular form of subjection? Is subjection not the process by which regulations produce gender? (Butler 2004: 41)

Although she does not provide a clear answer, she remains skeptical about the chance of conceiving gender outside society. Gender belongs to the praxis of being, therefore cannot be understood as an abstract concept; as individuals, we only witness what happens within the boundaries of collectivity.

³⁵ Judith Butler, 1991. ‘Imitation and Gender Insubordination, in *Inside/Out. Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. by Diane Fuss (London and New York: Routledge).

2.5. The relevance of life-writing

In different ways, all four the artists examined can be considered life-writers (and “life-painters”) because of the sensible search of their own selves textured in their verbal and visual works. The strategies, literary and graphic features, genres and forms employed, though, could not be more varied. As I found out, the need to define the writer’s identity interests any reasoning on their writings. Unquestionably, modernity confronted women with the challenge to redefine selfhood and autonomy as opposed/integrated with to collectivity; after having faced problems of exclusion for centuries, women needed to find their *position* and identity in the social, political and artistic fields as never before.

Although women’s recording of their lives in diaries, memoirs and (in fewer cases) fiction and poetry were no news at the beginning of the twentieth century, women’s forms of autobiography were not considered to be as authoritative as men’s autobiographic tradition. As argued by Gilbert and Gubar,³⁶ women’s writing had always been considered as anomalous and exceptional, the ‘writer’s pen’ being a masculine prerogative. Unofficial, parallel, underground, occasional, unrecognised, women’s art had never gained organic consistency, while the identity of women was considered as subordinate to the identity of men. Because of its private nature, women’s writing was classified as second-rate literature, a drawing-room diversion unworthy, in most cases, of critical attention; according to the first feminist scholars, this happened because women were in fact considered to be second-rate human beings, always daughters, sisters, wives, mothers – but never just women.

Throughout the twentieth century, women began to acquire a strong collective identity, engaged in politics, relevant in society and active in the literary field. Feminist readers acted on two fronts, looking retrospectively at women’s texts of the past, and looking for new voices in the present. Through the deliberate choice to reach a reader, women’s life-writing acquired a new meaning and covered a deeper awareness. As suggested by Marlene Kadar,³⁷ life-writing is a dynamic broad term which includes

³⁶ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 1979, *The Madwoman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

³⁷ Marlene Kadar (ed. by), 1992, *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice* (Toronto; London: University of Toronto Press).

the issues of experience and (not just self-) representation, and which most importantly changes according to time, context and milieu.

There are at least three ways to view life-writing, each of which includes an attempt to define or redefine what exactly life-writing is. [...] life-writing is not a fixed term, and that it is in flux as it moves from considerations of genre to considerations of critical practice. [...] There is also the consideration that changes in how we perceive life-writing evolve as political and literary movements evolve. (Kedar 1992: 3)

For this reason, it is extremely important not to limit women's writing to labels; among other scholars, Kedar questions the popular and long practised view of women's life-writing as restricted to a particular literary genre.

Life-writing may be viewed strictly as a limited and limiting genre, as it was in the eighteenth century. At that time it was equivalent to 'biography', and biography used to be considered more generally to *include* autobiography and *perhaps* other kinds of autobiographic writing. (Kedar 1992: 3)

Although all four writers I consider poured parts of their lives in their works, to different extents and with different levels of awareness, it sounds reductive at the very least to privilege autobiographical readings of their works.³⁸

In questioning what she herself calls 'gynocentrism', meaning the almost exclusive autobiographic-oriented reading on behalf of feminist scholars, Kedar formulated a fluid and flexible definition of life-writing:

³⁸ However, patriarchal schemes or criticism were not solely responsible for the identification of women's life-writing with autobiography. If we go back to the early stages of the relationship between feminism and autobiography, we can see how in the 1960s and 1970s autobiography seemed to provide a privileged space for women to discover new forms of subjectivity both through the reading and writing of texts which explored the female subject. Only later, as poststructuralist theory began to transform feminist thinking, women's writing began to be liberated from patriarchal constrictions to specific genres.³⁸ Women's life-writing started to enjoy the freedom to explore other forms, genres and disciplines. Psychoanalytic insights began to interweave more explicitly with the texture of writing in a way that is beautifully phrased by Judith Butler in *Precarious Life*, 2004: "I am not fully known to myself, because part of what I am is the enigmatic traces of others." (Anderson 2006: 123) As women were no longer sure about the integrity of their selves, life-writing became an eclectic wide-ranging field for self-representation and exploration. Linda Anderson, 2006, "Autobiography and the feminist subject," in Ellen Rooney (ed. by), *The Cambridge Companion to Feminist Literary Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 119-135.

At the most extreme end of the spectrum, life-writing is a way of looking at more or less autobiographical literature as long as we understand that ‘autobiographical’ is a loaded word, the ‘real’ accuracy of which cannot be proved and does not equate with either ‘objective’ or ‘subjective’ truth. Instead, it is best viewed as a continuum that spreads unevenly and in combined forms from the so-called least fictive narration to the most fictive. [...] My own working definition of life-writing is: ‘life-writing comprises texts that are written by an author who does not continuously write about someone else and who also does not pretend to be absent from the text. (Kedar 1992: 10)

Kedar’s considerations condense the tension attached to women’s life-writing, taking into account not only the subject but all the ‘enigmatic traces’ which contribute to its identity. As some critics have pointed out, it is challenging to define women’s life-writing of the early twentieth century, as it is hard to define the writing subject. As I anticipated, women were demanded to define their identity and position within modern urban and metaphoric spaces; this process ran together with the attempt of finding new discursive strategies. Through life-writing, women both describe and actualise the process of finding and defining a new identity.

Life-writing is not just a mere *recording* of facts happening to the woman, but a way to *construct* the experiencing self. As phrased by Carla Kaplan (1996),³⁹ there is a “dialectical tension between different forms of talk and the structures of social relation they allegorize” (Kaplan 1996: 145). Kaplan comes to this conclusion after having long discussed the hermeneutic relationship between the attempt to define the self and the process of writing about it, the self being a social entity. As the self acts daily within the social environment, the process of writing about the self through any form of life-writing is a “persuasive or seductive performance” which is always designed to be shared by others – or is aware of this possibility. Kaplan is very firm in asserting how “no act of publication, after all, is finally an act of silence” (Kaplan 1996: 146) and as such publication is planned to be enjoyed by readers or interlocutors.

³⁹ Carla Kaplan, 1996, *The Erotics of Talk: Womens’ Writing and Feminist Paradigms* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press).

2.5.1. From subjectivity to collective consciousness

Assuming that women's life-writing of the early twentieth century is indeed performative – saying emblematically Fitzgerald's performative fiction, or the Baroness's verse – and that the identity of the interlocutor is not necessarily stable, the main issue still lies in defining the identity of the writing subject. In 1997, a study edited by Linda Coleman put together several papers focusing on the matter of women's life-writing in the first half of the century, with the purpose of clarifying the position of women within the social and literary panorama.⁴⁰ In the forward she argues how the process of 'finding a voice' is expressed in 'building a community', and how, therefore, a woman's 'I' in the 1910s and 1920s can be understood as collective. Through life-writing women created connections to a community of sympathetic others, real or imagined. Feminists themselves, in the attempt to gain social visibility for political purposes, spoke frequently of 'women' as a group, sometimes even used or implied the term 'class'. The question arises spontaneously, then, about whether and to what extent the individual subject flanked the collective awareness of women in those decades because women's life-writing of the early twentieth century – very frequently in the texts analysed – often sees a dual nature in the writing subject.

The distance between collectivity and subjectivity needs to be contextualised more than once throughout the century, and takes always different forms in the corpus selected. Such a process of change and evolution ran, historically, through the experimenting of different forms and genres, thus implying complicated relationships between gender and genre. Narrative forms like the short story had become, for instance, widely explored fields of practice and investigation for women writers since the end of the nineteenth century. In this respect, the case of Djuna Barnes appears interesting, while she transited between journalism and literature at the beginning of her career. According to Linda Coleman, reporting and urban short story writing were a fertile practice field for women who wanted to detach themselves from autobiography; as sort of less institutional literary forms, they offered the space to assume impersonal tones, or to play with the narrating voice. Taking Lydia Maria

⁴⁰ Coleman, Linda S. (ed. by), 1997, *Women's Life-Writing: Finding Voice, Building Community* (Bowling Green: Popular Press).

Child's *Letters from New York* (1843) as a pioneering example of how 'women's genres' could pierce the public arena, Anne R. Malone (author of one of the essays in Coleman's 1997 collection) argues that women entered the field of 'urban writing' as both cause and effect of having a new collective and stronger presence in the urban panorama.⁴¹ Elizabeth Goldwin's statement that "female epistolary voices tend to describe confinement more than liberation, isolation more than interaction" (Malone 1997: 239) starts to crumble in front of Lydia Maria Child's public *Letters*, carefully constructed as political epistles. As phrased by Malone, "Child's emergence into the crowded streets of New York City marks the entrance of the female spectator into the public arena" (Malone 1997: 239). The word "spectator" here is consciously and wittingly employed to shake the legacy of the London (male) *Spectator*. This idea of a female "urban spectator" entitled women, according to Malone, "to interiorize the city for herself and for her readers" (Malone 1997: 240). This latter consideration sounds particularly relevant for my upcoming work on Barnes's reporting/literary short stories: a form on the edge between high culture and entertainment, hybrid between literary and informal language, seemed to suit the evolving position of women in literature.

This comment on Barnes's magazine-writing can be inscribed in a wider consideration on the fact that all the writers under analysis wrote, to different extents, on female magazines. As argued by Hanscombe and Smyers in *Writing for their Lives*,⁴² women found a "vital outlet for the writing – both experiment and comment – of the network of women" (Hanscombe and Smyers 1987: 150) in journals and magazines which took life as a composite picture of literary and art circles. According to them, magazines and journals edited by women enabled them to explore new communicative systems: talking about themselves and being listened to by a no-longer-ideal audience (potentially not a judgemental readership), searching for and experimenting with new genres, literary features and techniques free from patriarchal schemes, and trying to define their identity as both communities and individuals. The flourishing of several journals, magazines and papers illustrates the extent to which

⁴¹ Anne R. Malone, 1997, "Sugar Ladles and Strainers: Political Self-Fashioning in the Epistolary Journalism of Lydia Maria Child," in *Women's Life-Writing: Finding Voice, Building Community*, ed. by Linda Coleman (Bowling Green: Popular Press), pp. 239-256.

⁴² Gillian Hanscombe and Virginia L. Smyers, 1987, *Writing for their Lives: The Modernist Women, 1910-1940* (London: Women's Press).

women's life-writing in these years passed through urban writing. Some examples are particularly noteworthy to prove the point of how malleable this kind of writing was, and how well it suited the needs of women life-writers.⁴³ Even semantically, some of the most famous magazines – the *Transatlantic Review* (on which three out of four of the writers under analysis wrote, at different times), *This Quarter*, *Transition* and *Close-Up* – suggest the dynamism and mobility of the writing produced between the centres of London, Paris and the American cities.

That these writers and editors paid close attention to each other's work; that they took each other seriously as writers trying to support themselves by writing; that they took each other seriously as women trying to find consonances between 'art' and 'life'; all these stances are revealed both in their personal correspondence with each other and in their published review's of each other's work. (Hanscombe and Smyers 1987:151)

Hanscombe and Smyers epitomised women's periodical publishing as 'the stand of the individual against immensities' – phrased after Harriet Monroe's review of *Poetry* (founded in 1912). However, the word "against" between 'I' and 'collectivity' does not suggest contrast; instead, it is an attempt at contradistinction, to define the individuality of a woman writer as distinct from plurality. Hanscombe and Smyers's dramatic phrasing encourages further enquiries on the identity of the so-called 'immensities'; the most obvious one is the legacy and proportion of men's writing. Yet others can be identified as more figurative 'immensities' from which the individual needed to distance herself.

Some of the works under examination in my thesis evidence how some literary forms entered the practice field of life-writing, generating interesting hybridities. For instance, Loy's *Auto-facial Construction*, 1919, is a crossing between the public and

⁴³ Dora Marsden's feminist-based paper *The Freewoman*, set up in London in 1911, evolved into *The New Freewoman* in 1913 under the editorship of Harriet Shaw Weaver, and finally into *The Egoist* in 1914. Initially, the paper was meant to be a radical feminist polemic and was animated by a strongly political engagement; after a few years, though, it shifted in spirit to become a place of literary debate and experimentation. Marianne Moore and H.D. published verses in *Poetry*, started by Harriet Monroe in Chicago in 1912 opening doors for poetic experimentation; in the same spirit, Margaret Anderson's *Little Review*, introduced in 1914, also in Chicago, went even further publishing the daring experiments of Mina Loy, Gertrude Stein, Djuna Barnes, Mary Butts and Kay Boyle. The both personal and professional interaction among the woman editors of such journals intensified even more in the 1920s, to construct a more intricate portrait of women's writing activity, carried on simultaneously at an individual and collective level.

private spheres, where with a personal touch she explores the ideal mimetic relation between one's face and one's personality in the form of an advertising pamphlet. Poetry, too, either Barnes's or Freytag-Loringhoven's, is used to create a precarious, fascinating balance between attempts at modern lyric impersonality and the unavoidable concessions to an intrusive self. The tension between personality and impersonality was a burning issue for emerging woman writers of these years and is indeed related to the relationship between personal and collective 'I'. First and foremost, Loy's writings, but also Barnes's and Loringhoven's, show the ambivalence towards a modernist aesthetic of impersonality, as well as their changeable investment in subjectivity and embodiment. To many woman writers of the network, for instance Susan Gilmore, impersonality was a masculinist striving for invisibility through the "transcendence" of the "emotional" and the "personal," (Gilmore 1998: 271) and she uses Loy's "Feminist Manifesto" to categorise Loy's project as a contrary aesthetic that "foregrounds the female poet's visibility" and an "authority borne not of cultural transcendence but of cultural disenfranchisement." (Gilmore 1998: 276)⁴⁴

Particularly in women's life-writing of these years, the ambiguity is given by the intrusion of the subject into the text. Sometimes it is behind the curtain, wittingly orchestrating the text from the back as in Barnes's New York short stories; other times it is the outpouring emotions in the clearly autobiographic memories of Fitzgerald's fiction. Some other times it blinks through the voice of different characters in the novels of the mature, *parisienne* novelist Barnes. As a general comment, it seems that precisely because they were relatively new to these experiences of community, women could not endorse – or however keep negotiating – the masculine efforts of impersonality, which were typical of masculine high modernism.

Once again, the metaphor of space proves useful to better understand modernist women's life-writing. Modernity urged women to find new spaces, both physical places and intellectual frames; public spaces, primarily streets, became the scenes of pieces of their new (life-)writing; private spaces (once place of confinement) evolved into public spheres as meeting points for intellectual circles for women's networks.

⁴⁴ Susan Gilmore, 1998, "Imna, Ova, Mongrel Spy: Anagram and Imposture in the Work of Mina Loy," in Maera Shreiber and Keith Tuma (ed. by), *Mina Loy: Woman and Poet*, Orono, ME: National Poetry Foundation, pp. 271-317.

According to Merry Pawlowski,⁴⁵ the overlap between what was public and private in women's lives and writings in modernity characterises 'herstory' as firmly different from *history*; under this light she reads Virginia Woolf's *Three Guineas*, where "public and private forms" are employed to "displace the boundaries between the public and the private arenas as gendered masculine and feminine" (Pawlowski 1997: 257).

As women explored new spaces and discovered new trajectories, they acquired new voices, met new narratives and therefore needed to find appropriate strategies to express themselves. Such forms of narrative, adequate to tell 'herstory' and to suit new genres in life-writing, had to be capable of challenging the traditional dichotomies between the public and private spheres which were stratified in language. If borders are permeable between public and private spaces so that they melt fluidly into one another, the language similarly oscillates from formal to informal, from witty to emotional, from extensive to cryptic, from impersonal to personal.

2.6. Life-painting

The fact that all the writers considered were visual artists, and often stage performers, relates to the issue of the representation of the self explored for life-writing. In fact, the set of questions and ambiguities regarding the subject behind and within the text applies similarly to visual representation. The pairs debated in life-writing, including 'individual-collective', 'personal-impersonal', 'private-public', also feature in paintings, drawings and collages in similar ways as they underlie verbal texts.

When modernist ideas of visual representation took over, women had already been making an impression in the artistic field for a while. As argued by Kirsten Swift:⁴⁶

Without hesitation, without even a nod to Victorian womanly reserve, Cassatt proclaimed her ambition to be a professional artist. The hunger and

⁴⁵ Merry Pawlowski, 1997. "Public and Private Tyrannies: Virginia Woolf, Life-Writing, and the Feminist Revision of History" in *Women's Life-Writing: Finding Voices, Building Community*, Linda Coleman (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press), pp. 257-278.

⁴⁶ Kirsten Swinth, 2001, *Painting Professionals: Women Artists & the Development of Modern American Art, 1870-1930* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press).

drive compressed in that short command, ‘Now please don’t let your ambition sleep’, ring with a larger impact. The ambition of Cassatt and her peers shook up the art world. It disrupted entrenched beliefs about art, refinement, and high culture. A modern, twentieth-century and avant-garde art world would be profoundly shaped by late-nineteenth-century women's urgent desire to become artists. (Kirsten 2001: 2)

From the mid-nineteenth century, women started to develop careers that transcended the stereotypes of woman painting as a drawing-room recreation. The flower painter and dilettantish amateur quite rapidly became a professional artist both in America and in central Europe, so that in the early twentieth century, woman artists occupied a more solid position in a newly realigned art world. Throughout the century, the amount of female professional artists increased to such an extent to equal the male artists in numbers, competence and creativity, constituting an extensive network.

Questions on the identity of the female painter arise similarly to the identity question of the life-writer. The same need to define the individual as part of a micro-collectivity of women artists, and as profiles of macro-collectivity of modernist artists, underlies and determines choices of setting and characters. With the exception of Zelda Fitzgerald, the three other authors under analysis were part of groups and art circles, and were as well part of wider art movements such as modernism and Dada. Nevertheless, they had to find new poetics of representation, asserting their role as active painters instead of passive depicted subjects. As argued by Griselda Pollock,⁴⁷ gender and power are connected in such a way throughout history, that the men had always been the subject who painted, and women the subject painted. In “Modernity and the Spaces of femininity,” (1988) she provocatively asks whether we could expect to “rediscover paintings by women in which they battled with their sexuality in the representation of male nude.” (Pollock 1988: 76) The reason for this disparity is the always existing “historical asymmetry” between painter and painted one, which embodies the sexist, social and economical difference produced by the Western heteronormativity.

The first issue faced by female professional artists was therefore whom to represent – and in what setting; prerogatives on the representation of female subjects

⁴⁷ Griselda Pollock, 1988, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” in *Vision and Difference: Femininity, Feminism and Histories of Art*, ed. by Griselda Pollock (London: Routledge), pp. 50-90.

were still claimed by modernist male artists in line with the gender-power relationship which had been structuring art history. Indoor spaces were compromised by the same scheme. The actual change plays on a revolution of the point of view, adopted by the painter, conveyed to the subject, and shared with the observers.⁴⁸ Such changes allowed women subjects to shift from passive to active, from being *subjected* to the representation to being willing and participating subjects on the canvas. Through the denial of men's voyeuristic and judgemental prerogatives in the depiction and observation of female subjects, pioneers such as Mary Cassatt and Berthe Morisot emancipated women as artistic subjects.

The same dynamics between gender, power and genre are reverberated in women's search for new ways to the self-portrait. Exploring the self-portrait, modernist women painters interrogates themselves, their fellow artists and all women, investigating their position in the modern space. It is undoubtedly hard to define the ways in which women artists depict their own selves – and the process of self-making – in paintings, sketches, and many other forms; yet, while it is difficult to trace tendencies and trends, as in the case for life-writing, the investigation of such complicated space helps to better understand the presence of forms of self-telling in their literary works too. Self-portrait became a trope of self-interrogation, rather than just a visual genre, constantly negotiated as a form of self-displaying and self-concealing. The literary texts and figurative works that I am about to explore with a (necessarily) comparative analysis are situated at the crossroads where all forms of self-construction, self-telling and self-portraying fascinatingly intersect.

⁴⁸ Pollock's several comparative examples corroborate her thesis that the appropriation of woman subjects on behalf of women painters happened through subtle, yet meaningful strategies, such as the gaze direction of the depicted woman. When she compares Renoir's and Cassatt's *The Loge* (1874 and 1882 respectively), she highlights how "the mark of difference between the [two] is the refusal in the latter of that complicity in the way the female protagonist is depicted" (Pollock 1988: 76). Unlike Renoir's lady, Cassatt's woman looks unaware of being observed while enjoying the opera: "she does not return the viewer's gaze," and in so doing denies the "convention which confirms the male viewer's right to look and appraise" (Pollock 1988: 76).

Part II

Chapter 1

Form, space and colour

*Phrases came. Visions came.
Beautiful pictures. Beautiful phrases.*
Virginia Woolf, 1927.

Djuna Barnes, Zelda Fitzgerald, Mina Loy and the Baroness all share an interactive practice of writing and drawing. As they chose to tread provocative expressive routes visually and verbally at the same time, they reveal a sort of urgency for a joint analysis of their works. The significance of visual traits in their writings, and the relevance of narrative dimensions in their visual works invited me not to split their visual and verbal corpora artificially, but rather to address them in their compact unity. Such an approach reveals how these artists' verbal and visual texts vivify each other reciprocally. The investigation of common tropes and *topoi* has led me to interrogate some of the processes through which words and images by the same writer are articulated in similar ways, so as to shed light on the reciprocal influence that texts and images have on one another through time and space. Nevertheless, such methodology also allowed me to trace assonances among these writers' works. Temporary alliances between literary and visual genres appear to take shape and to apply in several cases; yet, such loose bonds seem to be easily untied, in some cases, to be newly assembled in endless combinations. It becomes interesting, then, to explore the rhetorical fundamentals of such correspondences, observing how patterns and motifs are reiterated through different media.

1.1. Djuna Barnes's poetic *fait divers*

Among the artists that I have chosen, Djuna Barnes is the one who reflects the most upon the relationship between trait and space, both in writing and in drawing. Barnes's reasoning is neither theoretical nor programmatic, but seems to be consciously textured in her works, and evolves hand in hand with her growth as an artist and writer. Since hers is a progressive reasoning, it touches different phases of connection between verbal and visual narrative strategies. The initial years of her career, in particular, show a tight symmetry in her verbal and visual choices of representation. In the mid 1910s, she was based in New York and was the top-lead voice of the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* and the *New York Morning Telegraph*. In this phase of her career, she engaged in a double task, both writing for the masses in magazines and journals, and putting her avant-garde inspirations into practice among a restricted circle of bohemian intellectuals in Greenwich Village. Such an imprint contributed consistently to the shaping of her first literary endeavour. In 1915, Barnes saw her first collection of illustrated poems, *The Book of Repulsive Women*, published on the avant-garde local magazine *Bruno's Weekly*.⁴⁹ Perhaps, Barnes's transition from crime news to poetry also grounds partly on the fact that verses can condense better than prose-words, and suited better her quest for dryness and incisiveness. In particular, verses seem to suit particularly well the expression of sorrow, whereas prose-words scale it down.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ While experiencing the transition from mass journalism to elite literature, she was undergoing another transition in the practice of visual genres. When she first came to New York she enrolled for six months at the Pratt Institute, where she received academic guidelines to develop her already outstanding graphic and painting talent. Although she had to quit her courses due to economic hardship, she gained awareness of her visual skills, immediately embracing techniques of Dadaistic matrix. The paintings that she produced in these years show how, even within an avant-garde movement such as Dada, she carved out an original and unique style, which did not fully conform to "mainstream" patterns. The more she moved from journalistic prose to verses, the more urgently she felt the need to search into the essentiality of the drawn shape; she took sketches to essential traits – yet never losing the shape – and exacerbated her already fractioning use of colours into an antithetical contrast of black vs. white.

⁵⁰ An interesting study on the expression of suffering through words conducted by Joakim Öhlén, researcher in health and care at the University of Gothenburg, has provided scientific ground to the generally shared idea that the complexity of human suffering is better evoked through the poetic word. In "Evocation of meaning through poetic condensation of narratives in empirical phenomenological inquiry into human suffering" (2003) he explored the process of expressing pain through words, and detected an ontological affinity between suffering and the poetic word: both are composite, fragmenting, ambiguous, vague, stratified, and are therefore naturally associated. In the case of Barnes, however, the process of essentialising the language into verses is not meant to disclose, and rather aims at encoding, encrypting and disguising the underlying meaning.

Certainly, the presence of reporting in Barnes's first verses is self-evident. It can be witnessed in the metropolitan setting which is typical of her articles; in addition, the topics faced belong without exception to crime news. The eight poems of the collection build up crime scenes with female subjects as victims of rape, murder, autopsy. The very structure of the collection presents itself as a metropolitan scene of the crime(s):

- I. From Fifth Avenue Up
 - II. In General
 - III. From Third Avenue On
 - IV. Seen From the "L"
 - V. In Particular
 - VI. Twilight of the Illicit
 - VII. To a Cabaret Dancer
 - VIII. SUICIDE
Corpse A
Corpse B
- (Barnes 1915: 3)

Because of its urban setting and themes, some critics (Doughty 1991: 137) even argue that *The Book of Repulsive Women* is closer to being crime news in verses rather than poetry with full rights; yet, an attentive reading of the language employed and of its tropes supports the classification of the work among the best pieces of avant-garde poetry.

Differently from the crime news, which would punctually record facts, the identity of the woman is not explicit; it is not clear whether it is the same woman suffering different kinds of violence – rape, murder, autopsy – or if several women are caught in the different scenes of violence. The woman appears as a collective subject in this poem, that aims at establishing a connection between (fallen) women and the modern city:

The anonymity of urban life simultaneously provides her nameless female subjects with the freedom of movement and the solitude that lead them to spiritual death. Frequently these depraved females are identified with New York itself [...]. The woman is prostituted by city life and as always in

writing, her illicit sexuality is, in turn, associated with mortality and death.
(Burke 1991: 70)

In the case of Djuna Barnes in the early 1920s, there is a morbid connection between the woman and the city, an unhealthy relationship of attraction and repulsion, of enslaving and being enslaved, of frenzied dynamism and deathly stillness. Disturbing overlaps seem to occur in her poems, where the woman passes from dominating the urban scene – a metaphor for the city as a place of social performance – to being objectified by the city, even to being raped and killed by that same animated chimera.

In the years close to the publication of *The Book of Repulsive Women*, Barnes was also exploring the style and techniques of Aubrey Beardsley, with particular attention to the study of dichromatism.⁵¹ Such studies flow naturally in the composition of the drawings enclosed in *The Book of Repulsive Women*. Perhaps initially attracted by his choices for decadent themes such as artificiality, decay, vampirism, perversity and sensuality, she was mostly attracted to the study on techniques, which suit well the dry verses of the collection: colourlessness, an essential polarity of black and white masses matched with a starkness of lines and shapes which impacts the viewer (Thornton 1983: 183).⁵² Yet, the drawings realised for the 1915 collection added a margin of obscurity to the already grotesque and sometimes disturbing vignettes by Beardsley. Barnes severed ties with Beardsley's decadent style in opting for a form of encoding which goes far beyond the mysterious allure of his drawings.

Such mystery provokes the impression that something is encoded under the surface, where an immense abyss of hollow and despair seem to hide just beneath the unstable surface of words and illustration. Instead of being expressed through words, such a disquieting sensation peers out from the unsaid words, and from the border-line between positive and negative spaces in the drawings. What remains unspoken and undrawn, censored and unutterable in the barrier between words and between traits, is

⁵¹ In 1915 and 1916 her drawing style became so rich in references to Aubrey Beardsley that she was hailed "The American Beardsley" in *Bruno's Weekly*, III, July 22, 1916.

⁵² However, and as Thornton suggests, Beardsley's taste for decorations is not shared by Barnes. What in Beardsley is the balanced, yet disquieting compromise between decadent art and decoration, in Barnes is polarized in the total and more disturbing exploration of perversion and wickedness.

even more interesting than what is stated in Barnes's suffered, viscous words or shown in her distorted and noxious traits.

1.1.2. Patterns of fall

Many of the poems of *The Book of Repulsive Women* rest explicitly on spatial patterns, which are evident at first sight in the graphic layout of the verses. Similar rhetorical organisations of spaces and lines can be traced in the drawings too, which evidence vertical pushes and paradigms of fall. Under this light, poems and drawings are worth a comparative analysis, since they both rest on a system of drives, balances and contradictions between the 'full' and the 'empty', between the black and the white, between the line and the space.

From Fifth Avenue Up

SOMEDAY beneath some hard
Capricious star—
Spreading its light a little
Over far,
We'll know you for the woman
That you are.

For though one took you, hurled you
Out of space,
With your legs half strangled
In your lace,
You'd lip the world to madness
On your face.

We'd see your body in the grass
With cool pale eyes.
We'd strain to touch those lang'rous
Length of thighs,
And hear your short sharp modern
Babylonian cries.⁵³ (Barnes 1915: 6)

⁵³ Referring to Barnes's verse "short sharp modern / Babylonian cries," Carolyn Burke (1991: 70) identifies the metropolis as a modern Babylon; the metaphor could be extended, though, to let Babylon stand for the impossibility to communicate among modern human beings.

In the first three stanzas, the frame of space opens on a vertical directrix. The first few verses are vague (“someday,” “some”) and serve to define a “capricious star,” whose light is feeble and gentle. The atmosphere conveyed by these lines sounds fairy-tale-like; the star, cunning and tricky, does not seem to be harmful, though the light it sheds is not completely positive (“hard”). The sounds are chosen to lead the reader into a half-sleep, a state that precedes dreams and nightmares. The misty view is obtained by the choice of vague words, by repetition (“some-”), by the alternation of long and short verses, and by the use of sibilant and liquid consonants – particularly in the third verse, which is heavy with alliterations. The last two verses of the first stanza, though, break up the dream-like picture by introducing the figure of a woman; the focus zooms in at great speed onto “the” woman, who is immediately presented as a negative character. The impersonality of the first few lines is completely replaced by the focalisation on two parties, “you” and “we.” Thus, the narrator collocates herself and the reader on the accusation bench meant to judge the indicted.

The first line of the second stanza is extremely interesting, because it seems to start clarifying the position of the woman: she has been a victim of violence on the part of “one,” whose identity is not disclosed. It is not clear if the “one” belongs to the “we” introduced a few lines earlier, but this (presumably male) character has committed an act of violence towards the woman: he “hurled” her and had her legs “half strangled” as an act of preventive punishment, an act despite which she would “lip the world to madness.” The violence sounds like a prior event, which has not prevented the woman from corrupting the world she came into, and which condemned her to guilt. This as a reason to judge her, however, does not make full sense; or rather, it does syntactically, but the sense it carries is not sufficient justification to express an indictment on the woman. She has been the *victim* of violence, and yet we are called to judge against her for corrupting “the world.” This passage may perhaps acquire more sense if contextualised within Barnes’s vision of motherhood, perceived as the original sin, because it is the consequence of an act of violence. For Barnes, all human relationships are corrupted in the first place, because human nature is itself corrupted. Therefore, sexual intercourse is, according to her, hardly ever desired by women; and even when it is, it only satisfies the animal impulse of mating. Although the specifics of this version of the original sin are clearer in other works, the seed of this

phenomenology of the anti-word, a communicative system aimed at confusing and taking meaning away, instead of adding sense, lies certainly in the verses of *The Book of Repulsive Women*: “repulsive” because they rejected a chauvinistic cultural indoctrination, because they refused to accept heterosexual attraction as the only one, and because they rebelled against the idea of living the domestic drama.

The landscape of the scene under analysis seems to be similar to that depicted in the poem, with “the Star” dominating the setting. This reading invites us to extend the meanings of “the star” of the poem to build up the metaphor with the biblical Nativity and Fall. The theme of the woman’s Fall as an alternative myth to Lucifer’s Fall is the ground of *Ladies Almanack*, and remains a theme of great concern for Barnes in all her major works;⁵⁴ in *The Book of Repulsive Women*, it proves particularly interesting for its dynamic push in the creation of the phenomenology of form and space.

In the first stanza, the setting is the sky; the third stanza shows the body of the woman on the ground where she lands after a “hurling” fall, caused by the act of violence which ripped her into pieces. The body of the woman appears to have no unity during the fall, as we only see fragments of her body being tossed “out of space.” This

⁵⁴ Such as *Ryder*, where Barnes explains how every physical intercourse between a man and a woman is an act of violence on his part. In *Ryder*, she refers to “original sin” as the act of procreation, and speaks of it in similar terms to those used in “From Fifth Avenue Up.” In the novel, the Genesis of Evil, i.e. the archetypal pregnancy is built up in the first chapter, entitled “Jesus Mundane,” which serves as an introduction: “And when, of times, thou art in no wise concerned with the religion, and art not touched by the Nativity, nor confounded beneath the Star, nor made still by the dust that goes down from God, then go thou to thyself, and pluck thyself against the day when thou wilt need thy past days for a sign and a seasoning [...] that which thou art, that in the end must thou bring as a sign against thy body.” (Barnes 1928: 5) Nativity is intended as both biblical and earthy, and in both cases is a ‘sign against thy body’, where ‘thy’ is the woman. Pregnancy leads to the generation of a corrupted creature, conceived in rape, where the man represented both Adam and the snake. Throughout *Ryder*, the chemical, indissoluble bond between life and death occurs in images of the childbed, where babies kill their mothers, and are therefore cursed and condemned to death. In other passages of *Ryder*, Amelia’s warning to her daughter not to ever get pregnant nor be touched by a man make Barnes’s position on motherhood even more radical: “Once I was safe enough [...] so take warning by my size and don’t let a man touch you, for their touching never ends, and screaming oneself into a mother is no pleasure at all.” (p.95) And, later, after her baby’s birth, “No mother would be mother ever and she could, in mid-fight, throw herself a moment out of scent” (p.97). The sexual intercourse is a “fight,” where the woman is chased and captured and cannot escape because she is victim of both the man and her own sick, self-destructing sexual impulse. As a matter of fact, the *fil-rouge* “from the cradle to the grave” runs through Barnes’s whole work; it starts from *The Book of Repulsive Women*, continues in *Ryder*, and is reiterated in *Nightwood*, her masterpiece of 1936, which opens with a woman dying in childbirth, her sentenced to be guilty of murder from his first breath. This reflection on birth and death persists in Barnes’ writing through to her last work. The last images of *The Antiphon*, the drama in verses of 1958, deal with the question of the death of Augusta and Miranda: “Could I know / which would be brought to childbed or the other?” (Barnes 1958: 126)

Part II

three-word phrase, itself a whole line, comes slightly unexpected, because the most logical gravity-ruled fall motion would have implicated “in space,” or “through space.” Potentially, “out of space” strengthens the idea of abnegation, a crime that goes against the laws of heaven and of earth, and cannot be located in either realm. When the woman reaches the ground in the third stanza – after the swirling motion in the second – her body does not regain its unity.

In the last stanza of the poem, which recalls so heavily the style of the crime new, the star is bound to the grass through the female body, making the metaphor pattern of fall even more tragic:

Plunging grandly out to fall
Upon your face.
Naked—female—baby
In grimace,
With your belly bulging stately
Into space.
(Barnes 1915: 6)

The woman, who has been hurled out of space and onto the grass by the original act of violence, prepares now to get “into space,” the world, through the birth of her child. The association between the woman, who had once been a baby and is now about to generate one, is built and maintained through nakedness. Again, the sinister association of cradle and grave looms hopelessly. The vertical directrix that constituted the line of observation and the main reading direction, now impacts on the grass, which is the first horizontal surface of the scene.

The dynamic vertical push heading downwards is intersected by its perpendicular, which corresponds to the earthly collocation of the woman. In addition, the verb chosen for the woman’s pregnant belly, “bulging,” meaning ‘swelling out’, underlines all its threatening, majestic (and progressive) expansion; it is even amplified by the adverb “stately” and is further strengthened by the alliteration of ‘b’ with “belly.” “Bulge” is in fact a verb of state that preserves a dynamic push; “to bulge into space” at the end of the poem establishes another directrix which is perpendicular to the one outlined in the first part of the poem, and is recalled at the beginning of the last stanza. In geometrical terms, the two directrices carve the genealogy of woman – and

the genealogy of sin – in space; the act of violence hurls the woman from sky to earth through the *non-space*, a dimension of negation. Once on earth, the woman spreads the seed of violence *into space* through the birth of the fruit of violence.⁵⁵

The system of vertical pushes that structures the poem is maintained in the drawings. Among the five illustration accompanying the poems, the second one resonates the content of the text of “From Fifth Avenue Up.”



Djuna Barnes, 1915. Illustrations to *The Book of Repulsive Women*, drawing n° 2.

The subject of this frame displays the same woman of the first vignette – recognisable by the coat, if not by somatic traits – staring at a creature in the sky that looks at her with an indifferent, enigmatic expression. The heavy, indefinite object that dominates the lower part of the scene, and which first captured the attention of the observer, assumes even more weight when its function is revealed; it is the counterweight that pulls the woman down in the opposite direction, back to Earth, while she was trying to elevate herself. But neither heaven nor earth are merciful towards the woman, and

⁵⁵ Although it may sound so from the explanation of Barnes’s position on motherhood, she never blames women of being guilty of motherhood. Men, selfish, wretched creature whose only task is to satisfy their impulses are the cause of women’s pains. Even in the rare cases where the woman is consensual to the violence (because the intercourse is and remains a violence in any circumstance), they are not to be blamed, because in such cases they are responding to a primitive need transmitted to them by the fact of being born by a man.

rather condemn her to be torn apart by two opposite tensions. In the light of the first poem, it could stand for the “bulging belly,” here emblematically set aside from the woman’s body.

In a symbolical interpretation of the drawing, the foetus is represented as detached from the woman’s body, because such a nucleus of corruption has been instilled in her from the outside. The act of violence indicated in the poem took place at an undetermined time when the woman’s place was heaven; such an interpretation finds support in the image of the “capricious star” that tears off the texture of the sky, and opens a crack from which it looks mercilessly at the woman. The woman hangs in a foetal position from the hook, as to suggest her coming to existence. Since she experienced rape and has, therefore, been made impure, not only is she compelled to leave the world of stars, but she has to carry the fruit of sin on Earth; as such, the pregnant belly cannot be positive, and takes the aspect of a rotten fruit whose weight burdens her to the ground. The spatial directrix that dominates the image echoes the vertical stretch that gave structure to “From Fifth Avenue Up.”

The image is extremely dynamic thanks to the empty space under the woman, a white, endless mass that illustrates the “out of space” concept mentioned in the poem. In addition, the suspension of the black shape of the woman onto the empty white space underneath evokes the same feeling as is obtained through the enjambments and dashes in the poem. In the drawing, the feeling of being just about to fall into the abyss is as pressurising as in the poem, and is obtained through the same device: the black trait etching the white space. The black quivering lines, presumably filaments of ground or eradicated roots that hang from the black triangular mass, empower the vertical force-line heading downwards, and evoke an association with the grave. The triad of the poem, “star, out of space, grass,” is perfectly maintained in the drawing, where it is obtained through the alternation of masses of positive (white) and negative (black) spaces.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Wucius Wong, 1993, *Principles of Form and Design*, (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons), p.71. Usually, in black and white drawings, when the artist makes a choice for either the form or the background, they automatically define the other one; on a positive background, the lines defining the forms are meant to be black, while the space inside is as white as the background. The opposite happens when the background is black, in which case images are positive. In either case, one of the two prevails over the other, and usually it is the form, which dominates the space.

Through her study on the invisible border-line between black and white, Barnes could use the line to explore the paradox of 'non-space'. The woman's fate, her eternal place (or better, non-place), is to hang forever from a hook, in the endless circle of birth, delivery and death, and to remain trapped in the eternal loop of enduring and generating pain. The poem shows the exact same cyclical orientation, as its scenarios are presented in the same order; the nothingness of the star leaves its place to violence, which results in the woman being thrown to the ground, where she eventually spreads the same evil through the curse of her pregnancy. Scenarios follow one another with the same merciless inexorability of the black line on the white space; the dry, incisive, rapid words chosen to sketch the three masses occupy privileged positions within the verses: they either constitute a full verse, as "capricious star—" and "out of space," or are placed at the edge of the verse as "in the grass." Here too they work as alternation of whites and blacks, obtained with a single decisive stroke.

In the drawing too, the three spaces of sky, non-space, and earth are connected by a vertical line of force represented by the Fall of the woman. The alternation of black and white, positive and negative spaces, background and foreground, create a conflict that is powerfully marked by the border lines between them, the lines that define the shape of the woman. In both poem and drawing, the pattern of Fall is staged through the action of a vertical line pushing the woman downwards. In both, the grass (or ground) represents the horizontal directrix that symbolises the spreading of the seed of sin, the new life.

1.1.3. Metamorphic spaces: black and white

Both "From Fifth Avenue Up" and the second drawing display a woman torn by antithetic forces, whose consequences are described in the final couple of poems. Death – presumably by suicide, as suggested by the section title – is introduced as the final moment of stillness; whether it also involves the end of pain and suffering, however, is unclear.

Corpse A

THEY brought her in, a shattered small

Cocoon,
With a little bruised body like
A startled moon;
And all the subtle symphonies of her
A twilight rune.

Corpse B

THEY gave her hurried shoves this way
And that.
Her body shock-abbreviated
As a city cat.
She lay out listlessly like some small mug
Of beer gone flat.
(Barnes 1915: 9)

The titles given to each poem (“Corpse A” and “Corpse B,” as if they were morgue tags) underscore the anonymity and objectification of the bodies, and the indifference with which they are treated. The first poem of the pair starts again with “they” (like in the former poem) which is no better explained here, whereas the object “her” is likely to be one of the women already introduced in the preceding poems. The sign of violence against the body is in the foreground, but this time it stigmatises a “body” that seems to be conceived as a whole; it is no longer ripped into scattered limbs, and is even associated with something unitary and heavenly, “the moon.” The best case scenario would be that death has finally reunited the fragments of her body, previously shattered like the cocoon (again a reference to the motherly womb) she was brought in, in order to give her body some rest from the bruises caused by life. However, the image of the “twilight rune” at the closure sounds inauspicious. Twilight is not a reassuring time, and sounds even shadier in association with the rune; predictably, the second poem develops the threatening message encrypted in the twilight “rune.”

In death, the body can still be undignified and degraded. The body of the girl undergoes further humiliation; it is declassified to an animal, the “city cat,” and to an object, “some small mug of beer.” The small poem is played on the alternation of long verses and very short lines, which are meant to make it dense and rapid; but the last four verses are particularly tight. They are strictly connected by a scheme of imperfect rhymes and by an intricate net of consonances and alliterations: “city cat,” “lay out

listlessly,” “some small mug,” which contribute to underline the degradation of the body into something insignificant.

While the sequence of the poems is concluded by the death of the subject(s), there is no sign of death in the illustrations. Although they are presented as illustrations to the collection of poems, they preserve in fact a margin of independence; they rather transfigure the contents of the poems, sometimes even contradicting them. The subjects animating the vignettes are distorted to deformation, and their traits are so reduced to the elementary, that they become unclear. The effect is a disturbing mysteriousness, cryptic and hermetical, as if it were meant to reflect the incisive and elliptical verses.



Djuna Barnes, 1915, Illustrations to *The Book of Repulsive Women*.

Analogies between the poems and the images can however be found not just in the dryness of style and the use “dichromatism.” At least two of the drawings display animal features, a theme which in the poems is only hinted at. Only the last poem

announces the analogy of the woman with an animal, the “city cat.” This latter association, which may as well be metaphoric, introduces the theme of animal-like humans, which is extensively developed in the sequence of images. Zooming out onto Barnes’s whole body of work, the relationship between human beings and beasts is indeed a theme of great interest, since she believed that human nature is intrinsically monstrous.

Metamorphosis is essential in the attempt to build sense from the sequence as a whole, because it is difficult for the individual vignettes to convey a meaning related to the verses. If interpreted as a process of transition from a monstrous nature to its disguise in daily life, the drawings build a sense of their own, which is fairly independent from the poems. In fact, the five drawings gathered after the sequence of poems are not necessarily introduced as functional illustrations to the text. The first edition of *Bruno’s Weekly* carried the title “The Book of Repulsive Women. 8 Poems and 5 Drawings” – they are explicitly *not* ‘illustrations’. It is a indeed legitimate assumption to conclude that they were meant to support the content of the poems, but such a likely option needs to leave space for additional nuances.

The drawings introduce new atmospheres too, besides new themes. They build an oneiric, delirious, dream-like atmosphere that is hard to trace in the poems, which are closer to crime chronicle. The atmosphere of the poems is that of a sequential history of violence, whose borders are sometimes blurred and undefined, sometimes blade-sharp and precise. On such blurred borders do the drawings expand.

The process of metamorphosis is graphically enhanced by the alternations of black and white forms and spaces, that can be interpreted as the process of sliding in and out of sleep. My interpretation of the sequence – which is not the only one possible, given the crypticity of the images – is based on the explanation of employing blacks and white to represent the abyss of non-space. In the first picture, the positive form of a woman walking her pets animates the negative background space. The harmless chickens, a bizarre choice for a pet, seem to disappear from the scene for now, but only to yield their place to the monstrous creatures of the fourth image, which are hostile to the woman. Once the woman has fallen asleep – symbolised potentially by the star of the second drawing – she is pushed into a metamorphic process which pictures her

half-human and half-beast in the third drawing. This picture suggests that human beings are their own bitter enemies when they give space to their beastly inner nature.

The features of the woman become fluid in the third drawing; the monstrous traits seem to have left her body only to gain concreteness and autonomy in the fourth frame. Here, in the darkest moment of the sequence, all the components, the body and the beasts, meet and try to relate to one another – unsuccessfully. The grotesque creatures originate from the black drape that covers the woman, again in a play of positive and negative spaces and forms. The image is predominantly black, and displays two levels of dichromatism; the woman lying on top of the picture in the foreground is a positive form which turns into a positive space when the focus shifts on the cloak; the cloak, initially a negative form covering the woman, turns into a negative space for the animals, which populate the lower part of the image. If the second drawing appeared to be dynamic, since it staged three layers of contrasts, this one only presents two, strengthening the opposition between human and animal natures; the directrix is again vertical and consists mainly in the cloak, which unrolls downwards. The metaphoric meaning of this force-line is not far from the one of the second picture; the woman, after having reconciled with her primordial, monstrous nature, generates other monsters, which are likely to be the real content of the cocoon in the second vignette.

In the fifth drawing, the mighty black mass standing for the nightmare of the female condition disappears from the background, yet does not completely vanish, and shifts inside the woman, into her dress: black and white masses are exactly inverted in comparison with the first image. All the darkness of the nightmarish sequence has been absorbed inside the woman, rather than being around her. Now conscious of her contradictory nature, she is awake, and has to continue her daily *façade*, since any attempt at investigating her own self would be painfully disastrous. Ironically, the part missing from her sketched body is the belly, as to suggest that the only way to survive decently would be to renounce maternity.

1.1.4. Synecdoche and the poetics of dismemberment

The sketch, either verbal or visual, is defined by swiftness, selection and the enhancement of some features. Barnes certainly made the most of such characterising features in her both her journalistic writing, which I will address in the second chapter, and in her 1915 poems. Selection is indeed inevitable, perception itself being necessarily selective; yet sketches can achieve mimesis sufficiently to recreate a scene experienced by the artist. Barnes's sketches are mimetic enough to allow analogy, and therefore to enable the observation of the analogical connection from the image to the meaning. However, something is faulty in the analogical link. In Barnes's verbal and visual sketches, signifiers are clear, and shapes and words make formal sense. Yet, the encoding process disguises the connection from the signifier to the signified, and the meaning gained from the analogical link is unclear and enigmatic.

According to Richard Sha, the dignity of the sketch as an art form lies in its rhetorical aesthetics; in his opinion, the "lessness"⁵⁷ of the sketch is more artful, more truthful, because it empowers the observer with a wider margin of abstraction. The essentialisation of forms is not detrimental to the dignity of the sketch as a form of art, but is instead its main strength:

Thus far I have argued that the aesthetics of the sketch is rhetorical since absence must be made meaningful and since the verbal sketch is based on the figure of analogy. [...] It is precisely this "aesthetic function" that makes the sketch so ideologically powerful. [...] And given that perception itself is highly, albeit necessarily, selective because we cannot pay attention to every gradation in visual field, the sketch as a process of abstracting details seems merely to reproduce the selectiveness of perception itself. (Sha 1998: 10-11)

The sketch is, according to Sha, calculated to be compensatory. Thanks to a combined process of analogy and abstraction, it works equally well as any other more complete narrative (visual or verbal) genre, which employs a more complex system of signs.

⁵⁷ Because the sketch is based on the principle that "less is more," sketchers must transform the signs of lessness into a systematic rhetoric in order to convince the readers and observes that fewer signs can open access to a wider system of analogical connections.

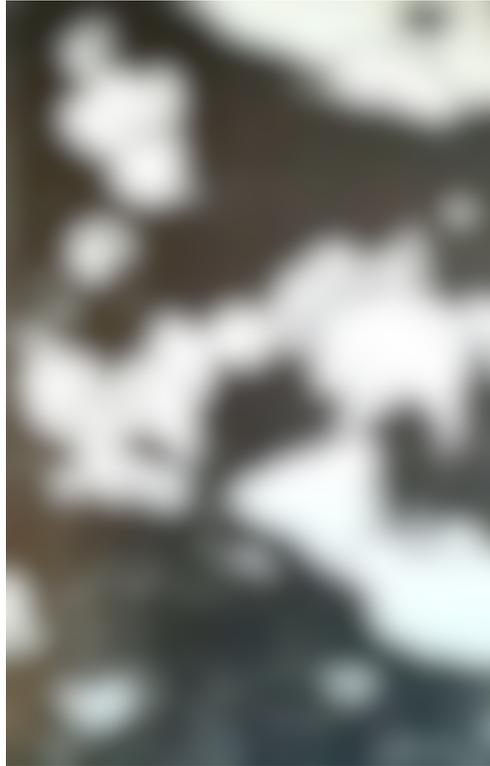
Although Sha's reasoning proceeds with an exploration of the sketch as a meaningful representative choice in Britain during the Romantic period, his premises on the aesthetics of the sketch support the comparison between Barnes's visual and verbal sketch from a rhetorical point of view.⁵⁸

The trope that better serves the compensatory process of the observation of the sketch is the synecdoche. In the poems and drawings of *The Book of Repulsive Women*, which we could define as poetic and dichromatic sketches, she makes widespread use of synecdoche in her exposition of the human body. Women's bodies are never referred to as unitary figures, but are only evoked through fragmented body parts; the reader's spontaneous attempt at reconstructing the body as a whole fails. The final pair of poems assesses quite clearly that the body parts of the woman cannot compose a whole body – like the dissected pieces of a body after the autopsy.

In a 1917 ink drawing, Barnes depicts a scene that seems to echo the dismemberment of the final scenes of the poems of *The Book of Repulsive Women*; as such, it proves a useful term of comparison to illustrate her use of synecdoche, and to clarify why the analogical process of association from the part to the whole cannot succeed.

⁵⁸ Sha stresses how women's sketches ground on different histories. The legacy of the sketch in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries based on the prejudice that visual art could only be a leisure-time activity for women, whereas for men it was an artistic endeavour. "Women's sketches were supposed to be an end in and of themselves, while men's were potentially only part of the artistic process. Sketches by men might embody genius, while those of women were praiseworthy if they were "correctly" drawn" (Sha 1998: 73). Although Barnes's sketches were produced in America, where the chauvinistic imprint on visual art was less rooted than in Europe, they were initially welcomed with suspicion, because they appeared "badly" drawn. The only way to give them authority was to connect them to very well written, and widely read, short stories and articles. In this way, when Barnes published *The Book of Repulsive Women*, the drawings were not disregarded as the unworthy, un-artistic, recreational work of an emancipated woman.

Richard Sha, 1998, *The Visual and Verbal Sketch in British Romanticism* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press).



Djuna Barnes, 1917, “Strange Forms Crying to One Another on the Beach,” in *New York Morning Telegraph Sunday Magazine*, (15 July 1917).

According to Phillip Herring (1995), Barnes’s attitude towards depicting bodies in agony reflects the violence endured as a child. As is claimed by Bonnie K. Scott (1995) – and by other feminist critics too⁵⁹ – themes such as physical violence and rape in Barnes’s work are influenced by, but are not limited to, the reiteration of personal trauma. Whatever the reasons are for Barnes to represent bodies in pain, it is interesting to witness how she does it. In the picture above, the pattern of dismemberment seems to be the same employed in the poems of two years earlier. None of the women is drawn in full shape, but not because of a lack of space.

The same considerations on the use of positive and negative spaces and forms made upon the drawings of *The Book of Repulsive Women* are valid here too; the black space is dominant, being the background for the sea on the top right and for the women’s bodies at the centre. In this drawing, the principles of black and white spaces,

⁵⁹ See the critical essays edited by M. L. Broe (1991) in *Silence and Power*.

on which forms should be depicted by contrast, are transgressed: the woman at the top-right stands out white on both the black shore and white sea; two women in the centre are drawn in mainly black on black background, whereas they should be positive forms. The result of this strange match of black form on black space is uncanny, impacting on the observer with a sense of unease. The body parts left white, though, stand out brighter and clearer: they belong to the black form of the woman, yet their connection cannot be complete, because they are chromatically antithetical (black and white).

Dismembered, disconnected, torn apart from one another, the body parts of *Strange Forms* – a title that evokes a process of dehumanisation – cannot connect to give life to a body, whole and alive. The associative, unifying process (synecdoche) normally activated spontaneously by the observer cannot be initiated, impeded as it is by the incoherent management of black and white – not aligned with subjects and background. Likewise, in the poems of *The Book of Repulsive Women*, body parts appear isolated in space, irretrievably separate. The verses depict a scene of body forms alternating in and “out of space,” torn up by violence; nothing can amend for the prior violence inflicted on the body, and the fruit of rape can only be rotten.

Barnes’s peculiar use of the synecdoche might be inscribed in the profound reflection on the human condition, which, according to her, is corrupted and doomed to suffering. As such, even figures of speech – meant literally to *speak* about such violence and pain – lose their function; they simply cannot represent a deeper sense, embodied in the metaphor of the body as a whole, when such meaning is missing. The union between the parts and the whole is denied because that whole no longer exists. In such a perspective, body scraps (the units of a faulty synecdoche) are not meant to be mended together, but rather witness an eternal condition of disharmony. The unsaid, the undrawn, embodies the missing meaning disguised by the traits, in a sort of exacerbated litotes. Barnes’s synecdoches appear to be purposed to a certain effect on the reader/observer. She counts on the fact that synecdoches is a spontaneous analogical processes, activated when there is a compensatory need. Interrupting the connection between sign and signified, she makes readers and observers try to initiate the association of meaning to the sign, only to leave them trapped and frustrated in the attempt.

1.2. Zelda's waltz

Zelda's approach to prose-writing in the early phase of her career took place at the beginning of the 1920s, with the article "Eulogy of the Flapper" written for the *Metropolitan Magazine* in 1922. Then, she wrote nothing substantial until the beginning of the 1930s. This phase of literary silence is due to the fact that in 1920 she began a decade of riotous living in America and France with her husband, Scott. In her youth, her career and popularity, and her dedication to ballet almost monopolised her time, so much that only in 1930 could she turn back to writing, publishing five stories for *College Humour*. Her first (and only one) novel, *Save Me the Waltz* is dated 1932, when she had to interrupt her dancing practice in order to be interned for psychic diseases. It was written in six weeks, and expresses contradictory feelings, including melancholy, frustration and nostalgia.

While Zelda's activity as a writer was sporadic throughout her life, and ended definitely in 1932 with her novel, her activity as a painter intensified in the 1940s. Although she had taken private painting lessons in the 1920s, and had started drawing paper dolls for her child, she only started to paint intensively after 1936, when she entered the Highland Hospital in Asheville, North Carolina – where she spent the last 12 years of her life. There she began to focus her creative energy exclusively on visual art and started working on monographic collections; the two most relevant ones are *Alice in Wonderland* and a collection which displays scenes from the Bible – Zelda became a dedicated Christian during the last years of her life.

In the double and interactive light of Zelda's writing and painting I will explore forms of excess, which originate from a desire to exhibit all of her thoughts on the page at once. I will compare such narrative techniques with the paintings, in order to highlight analogies and reverberations. The short stories she wrote around 1930, gathered in the collection *Bits of Paradise* portrays a fairy-tale time in the life of the Fitzgeralds, as it is recalled by Scottie, their daughter, in the forward to the 1973 edition:

To be sure, when it came to drawing upon their experiences in Europe, a serious conflict of interest arose between the characters of *Tender Is The Night* and those in my mother's novel, *Save Me The Waltz*. But this is

another story, and the one told in this book is of the brighter side of their personal paradise a mutually complementary sense of humor and zest for living.

(Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald [1973]: xvii)

In spite of the common stylistic features, there is a substantial difference between the two phases of Zelda's literary output. The first phase, which includes the writing of several short stories, is playful and naïve. The second one, during which she wrote her novel, reverberates in the prose the anxieties and darkness of the time she spent in psychiatric hospitals. Similarly, Zelda's early paintings, reminiscent of her Parisian years, show pastel, fairy-tale-like colours. Later canvases display instead darker nuances and psychedelic compositions, as to reflect the context in which they were painted. The comparison of early writings and early paintings, and of the novel and later canvases, designs extremely fertile areas of analysis.

1.2.1. Fairy-tale colours: hyperboles

Scott's agent had earned the couple a conspicuous amount of money for Zelda's prose sketches of popular female types, but only by selling them under Zelda and Scott's joint by-line, or under Scott's name alone. At the time, the stories had been published individually on magazines and tabloids, and it is only subsequently that they have been gathered in the collection *College Humour* as being written by Scott and Zelda; only the latest collection, *Bits of Paradise*, credits eight short stories to Zelda alone, written between 1929 and 1932, with just one written by the two of them together in 1925.

Overall Zelda's prose is polished and sensitive in all the stories, with only a few redundant pieces, excessively weighed down by linguistic frills. I chose to analyse the language of the short stories because they work as the best verbal counterpart for Zelda's early paintings, which are rich and full of colours, dynamic, but not chaotic. The passages chosen show the use of colours in both a semantic and formal way, and support the hypotheses that I have put forward while analysing the paintings: for Zelda, colour was more than a visual device, it was a thought-form – just as much as the trait

was for Barnes – loaded with and meant to express emotions that enframed any verbal, visual or performative articulation.

The considerations that I am going to make on *The Girl the Prince Liked* could be successfully applied to the other short stories of *College Humour* too, because they all suit the same fairy-tale structure, semantic orientation and organisation of contents. Most interestingly, though, they share the same verbal texture, rich in adjectives, long sentences and rhetorical devices – which I figuratively defined as the ‘colours’ of Zelda’s narrative. Hyperbole and overstatement are the two most evident features, forms of textual exuberance. While introducing the main character, always a young female heroine, she usually employs a thick concentration of details and superlatives; Helena, for instance, is introduced as incredibly wealthy, dynamic, driven and popular:

At first it was disconcerting because her vitality did not come and go like most people’s, but simply changed from one sort to another. From a vibrant excitement that she could convey when she wanted to be disturbing, it would quiet down into a smoldering yellow light back of her light eyelashes, back of her yellow-brown eyes crouching there, independent of Helena, watching you, always taking note of everything.
(Fitzgerald 1930: 209)

This passage serves as a good example of Zelda’s use of both ekphrastic colours (which she describes as usually bright, and shining), and of ‘verbal colours’, consisting in the profusion of adverbs, adjectives and qualifying clauses. Colours are light and pastel, like those colouring the atmosphere of a fairy-tale, of which Helena is the fair and blond princess – the analogy with the historical Zelda is self-evident. As to further emphasise the brightness of the picture, the adjective “yellow,” repeated twice, connects to the semantic field already defined by “vibrant, smoldering, light,” so that the scene-colours appear redundant. Alongside the description of bright colours, the system of hyperboles makes the narrative appear colourful and carnivalesque, immediately establishing a connection with Zelda’s rich, colourful, stuffed canvases. Starting with the second sentence, clauses overcrowd syntax: the main clause that opens the passage begins with the anastrophe between the verb-unit “quiet down” and its figurative place complement “from excitement,” and is further complicated by a relative clause, which in its turn encapsulates a temporal clause. The subsequent

clauses are progressively condensed: the main clause continues with the parallelism in “back of her,” the second of which is elliptical of the verb; the aside “independent of Helena” is confusing, because it could refer to both her eyes or to “vitality” which was the subject of the main clause; in either case, it just opens the way to more clauses, two implicit relative clauses in gerunds, which refer to Helena.

The agglomeration of clauses is further burdened by lexical choices that contribute to the stratification of meaning and the addition of details; nouns are accompanied by often unnecessary adjectives that intensify their already explicit meaning; a few lines before the passage quoted, Helena is described as a “small, slight, little girl full of sudden, flashing indications of a firm and constant energy.” (208) The alliteration of ‘s’ and consonance in ‘t’ of the first triplet make the whole adjectives-noun unit more cohesive; similarly, the reiteration of ‘f’ and ‘s’ sounds in “full of sudden, flashing” produces the same result of connecting words on the level of sound too. Adjectives still match nouns in pairs such “vibrant excitement” and “light eyelashes,” which both sound redundant.

The richness of ‘verbal colours’ escalates throughout the story, reaching a climax of superlatives and hyperbolic phrases. The area where Helena moves for the summer is particularly wealthy, “the people there were terribly rich and awfully proud of their fine possessions” (209). In short sentences like this, Zelda’s tendency to never leave a noun un-intensified becomes persistent and harassing; “terribly rich,” a cohesive pair in ‘r’-consonance, precedes the chain of sounds in ‘f’ and ‘p’, which tightens the following pairs of adverb and adjective (“awfully proud”) and of adjective and noun (“fine possessions”). None of such embellishments, neither adverbs nor adjectives are necessary to define the scene; they just work in the same direction as the redundant, abundant colours of Zelda’s gouaches. The description continues with a ridiculous concentration of superlatives and amplifiers: “everybody who counted had everything; their houses were full of [...]” to which a list of luxury goods follows.

Widening the scope to the whole story, it emerges that linguistic and syntactic excess (or colouring) is a *modus operandi*; another interesting example can be witnessed a few paragraphs after the one I have just analysed, where she describes how city-dwellers are used to pouring out of their metropolitan winter residences into the more peripheral glamorous vacation site.

When summer came, all the people who liked summertime moved out to the huge, clear lake not far from town, and lived there in long, flat cottages surrounded with dank shrubbery and pine trees, and so covered by screened verandas that they made you think of small pieces of cheese under large meat-safes. All the people came who liked to play golf or sail on the lake, or who had children to shelter from heat. All the young people came whose parents had given them for wedding presents white bungalows hid in the green – and all the old people who liked the flapping sound of the water at the end of their hollyhock walks.

(Fitzgerald 1930: 211)

The passage goes on with a long list of “all the” kinds of people “who came” to the lake for various reasons, in a chain of anaphoric sentences. It possesses the same features highlighted in the previous one, but also shows some variations. Similarly to the previous passage, the main clause is in second position, anticipated by a temporal clause, and is again interrupted by a relative clause; unlike the other description I quoted, though, the sentence continues with a series of paratactic clauses, which prevent the paragraph from excessive convolution. Even though the meaning of the sentence is easily understood, there is an anacoluthon that slows the reading: “they” in “that they made you think” stands for the cottages, whereas the subject of the main clause and of its coordinate clause was “the people”.

Once again, adjectives (positive or superlative) work like colours in making the image more vivid. “Huge, clear lake,” “long, flat cottages” follow the pattern of never leaving a noun unqualified by at least one or two adjectives; they provoke semantic redundancies, such as in “flapping sound of water” and “hollyhock walks.” Parallelism is another overemployed device, used to create a rhythmic sequence of sentences, and to connect the various components of the picture; the feeling gained by the series of “all the people who came” and similar variables applies well to the picture of the lake, whose water produces regular smooth waves. Similarly to how the water alternates breaking and undertow, the villagers flow into their summer-cottages and then flow back to town when autumn comes.

As it emerges from Zelda’s prose, colours act as the articulation of Zelda’s thoughts, because their use is linguistic and syntactic, other than semantic; ‘narrative colours’ such as unnecessary clauses, and ‘linguistic colours’ such as adjectives and adverbs are wedged into the sentence and verge towards its breaking point, without

actually running into nonsense – at least in the short stories. Ekphrastic colours come as additional, to make the already dense scene appear more concrete; they aim to stratify on the linguistic texture with a visual margin. In the passage that I have just considered, white and green are the main colours and further animate the already glittering picture evoked in the scene. Elsewhere in the text, she describes Helena standing out at social occasions through a syntactically complicated sentence, adding colourful connotations such as “her gray fur coat trailing behind her like a Greek toga, everything gray but her black suede slippers and herself. She was rose-gold.” (211) In this very condensed description of Helena’s looks, dark shades prevail only to form a strong contrast with the colour of her complexion and hair; the combination of grey, rose and gold is unusual and refined, and suits well the context of sophisticated leisure pastimes, such as “sipping the egg-nog in one place, nibbling the cinnamon in another.” (211)

When used to increase the visual potential of already evocative frames, colours are emotionally loaded, employed in similar ways as in the paintings. Once summer is finished, autumnal colours begin to take the place of white and green, as in the scene that prefigures the return to town: “by the time the tiny purple asters baked in the yellow autumn sun, she was so definitely bored that night after night she didn’t go out at all, leaving the dregs of the summer moon to a disbanding crowd.” (211) The association of purple and yellow suits the dusky atmosphere of the finishing summer. Words such as “dregs” and “disbanding” sound melancholic and wistful, carrying the bitterness of a happy season coming to its end. According to Leadbeater,⁶⁰ purple and violet have the highest vibration in the visible spectrum, and trigger spiritual wandering. Moreover, coupling purple and yellow results in a discordant match, whose jarring effects amplify the subsequent image of a crowd, disbanding under the “dregs

⁶⁰ Colour phenomena, such as the theory of emotions related to different tones, ceased being regarded as occasional or random at the beginning of the twentieth century. Two studies on this topic were compiled by Leadbeater in 1901 and 1902, respectively *Thought-Forms* and *Man Visible and Invisible*. Although Leadbeater’s studies were and are not among the best-known of the 1910s, I found them relevant as critical support, since they codified colours in charts and match them with the correspondent emotion: “BEFORE we can intelligently study the details of these various bodies, we must familiarize ourselves with the general meaning of the various shades of color in them [...] I am endeavouring to give, as nearly as possible, the exact shade which expresses the unmixed emotion whose name is attached to it; but human emotions are hardly ever unmixed, and so we have constantly to classify or to analyse indeterminate hue in the formation of which many factors have played their part.” (Leadbeater 1902: 89) Obviously, as Leadbeater appreciates, human emotions are far from being universal, and their association to colours is highly influenced by personal experiences and environment..

of the summer moon.” Every time actual colours appear in the text, they have the role to intensify and stress the scene described with the purpose of making it easier to picture in the reader’s mind.

The gouache painting *The Pantheon and the Luxembourg Gardens*, which Zelda painted in the early thirties, serves as ideal term of comparison for the emotional and yet genuine prose of the *College Humour* stories, since it seems to echo the sense of youth that is found in her short prose.⁶¹ The colours used to depict the Parisian frame are similar to those employed in the short story, particularly the association of greys and gold. In addition, the view on the garden recalls the fairy-tale colours of the scene in the countryside holiday resort. Most interestingly, though, the painting shows the reiteration of narrative techniques and rhetorical features employed in the prose, including parallelisms and hyperbole.



Zelda Fitzgerald, 1944. *Pantheon and Luxembourg Gardens*.

⁶¹ The third time the Fitzgeralds moved to Paris, in 1928, they had an expensive apartment at 58 Rue Vaugirard, on the corner of Luxembourg Gardens.

This picture sums up well Zelda Fitzgerald's fairy-tale-like use of colours; here, pastel tones and nuances are used for the emotional arrangement of Zelda's memories about Paris. The objects represented on the foreground juxtapose all the protagonists of the Parisian streets. Cars speed alongside buses, and carriages and baby prams run on the same force-line; all means of transport on wheels are juxtaposed to convey a predominant curve of speed that crosses layers of the perspectival cone to reach the foreground. However, the origin of the force-line is not in the middle of the surface, and the perspectival cone appears oblique; this peculiar choice gives a sense of instability to the picture, which derives from the decentralisation of the dominant agglomeration of objects in the space. Such a device is applied to the background too, where the Pantheon, meant to be the main form on the last field of perspective, is placed in the top-left of the picture. The speed applied to the force-line and the precarious balance of the whole frame does not prevent the observer from enjoying the view of the gardens behind the gates, thanks to a lift-up of the perspectival side on the right. Such subjective and personal adaptations of perspective and proportion announce Zelda's attitude towards traditional representational devices and *topoi*. She is free to move across tradition and interpretation in the name of the emotions she wants to texture on the canvas.

The simultaneous perception of the forms (means of transports and monuments) and spaces (background and foreground) is above all conveyed by an interesting use of the colours, which we could define hyperbolic. The anti-mimetic palette chosen ranges in the scale from red to yellow, counterbalanced by the scale from white to black. Such nuances pervade the whole canvas, sometimes even appearing redundant. However, the balance seems to be in the middle of each scale, and the general impression of the painting is watery, mild and emotional, as it lingers on oranges and light greys. John Gage, whose comprehensive studies⁶² address use and practice of colour in Western culture, together with the attempts throughout history to endow the colour with symbolical power, reminds us that the artist's choice of palette is never neutral. According to Gage, the evocative and symbolic power of the colour lies in its use within tradition and culture. Zelda's use of colours seems to echo

⁶² John Gage, 1993, *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* (London: Thames and Hudson); John Gage, 1999. *Colour and Meaning: Art, Science and Symbolism* (London: Thames & Hudson).

many suggestions from both traditional and contemporary art: romantic, watery tones merge with the fascination of urban photography in black and white, and sunset colours evoke Impressionistic manners of representing landscapes. The peculiar match of the two colour-scales suggests a knowing contrast between warm and cold colours, used to create a cohesive balance of appeased oppositions; since both reds and greys are kept mild by intermediate tones, they emanate languid thoughtfulness, ironic amusement, and witty extravagance. Dark grey and bright red are reduced to spots and energetic quick strokes, so as to convey a hilarious flap of vitality; thanks to the strong presence of the oranges, the greys do not let the painting slide into melancholy and sadness, but find a compromise in a sense of fairy-tale-like reminiscence.

The original use of perspective also produces an interesting effect. In Zelda's picture, forms and spaces in both background and foreground seem all to have the same weight. Zelda only employs proportion partially, reducing the size of the Pantheon on the farthest level of representation, and of the cars on the second level. Yet, there is no darkening in the tones of either of the sky or the objects, and the Pantheon is just as white as the marble horses on top of the gates of the Luxembourg Gardens. The deriving suggestion is that all levels of her reminiscence are called to the foreground, and overcrowd the observer's gaze simultaneously.

An additional consideration strengthens the hypothesis that colour is employed as a visual narrative strategy to gain simultaneity. Zelda's paintings, including the one under analysis, are often animated by sprayed-masses of colours, most of the times sketched clouds, vegetation or pollution. Such airy and blurred bolls are realised in a softened nuance of the colour which is predominant in the picture, thus creating the sense of reiteration that is usually produced, in prose, by repetitions and parallelisms. This latter technique, which is particularly successful with the use of watercolours, suits Zelda's effort to bind together all the components on the canvas, by blending them in a fairy tale picture. This is an innovative and non-academic use of the colours, because colours should remain *within* the form, and should help the visual separation of the forms from one another and from the background. But Zelda uses colour to exceed the limits of the form. In the painting under analysis, the orange clouds of smoke merge with the trees behind the gates, with the clouds in the yellowish sky, and with the pollution emanated by the cars; it is hard to define which form is the prime,

whether it is the tree, cloud or smog which gives life to the other two. But the result is to bond together all the three potential forms; meanwhile, the watered-down orange spray breaks from one space into the other, crossing all the layers of space. Forms and spaces appear connected so that they coexist in the project of a simultaneous representation, and can be enjoyed at once by the observer.

1.2.1.1. Visual prose

One particular passage that comes towards the end of the short story appears suitable to accompany some conclusive considerations on Zelda's early writing and painting. My reading of Zelda's use of colours in the prose leads to the conclusion that her writing is always directed towards visual picturing. The way she uses colours to strengthen contents and connect forms to spaces is comparable to her use of colours on the canvas; both aim to let the reader and the observer picture her exact thoughts, not through neat details but through the complexity and simultaneity of her emotions.

Picture to yourself Helena, trim, golden, dynamic, getting out of a yellow taxi in front of a place so big and full of spires that you are one of those dots of people in the engraving of Biblical market squares. And picture the most romantic young man of our era, sitting whistling on the top of the second flight of long steps, without a butler or a soldier or a lackey in sight.

(Fitzgerald 1930: 216)

In these few lines, all the colours that I have discussed in the few last pages, the ekphrastic and narrative ones used in the prose, and the watercolour nuances used on canvas, merge together; syntactic rambling, lexical richness, hyperbolic language and bright tonalities all cooperate in the colourfulness of the description, which represents a visual and emotional trope of excess.

This scene encompasses all the colours of the protagonist, disseminated in the story. Her name is followed by a long juxtaposition of adjectives and qualifiers that do not belong to the same semantic area, but recall and bring together any description of the character; her blondness is juxtaposed, through asyndeton, to her vitality, which is

put besides her getting out of a *yellow* taxi – the principal colour in the story – in front of a palace which is unsurprisingly connoted by superlative qualities such as “big and full.” Dynamism, the colour yellow, and a constant sense of excess have been the *leitmotifs* of the whole story, radiating from the main character to the other characters, and onto all the places – symmetrical to the way in which Zelda established resonances between forms and spaces in the paintings. Once the story meets its happy ending, all the colours converge into the final scene that urges the reader to arrange a mind-painting. Zelda’s exhortation is key to our interpretation – “picture to yourself” – as if the whole point of the story was to let the reader gain a vision where everything about the character could coexist.

1.2.2. Nightmarish colours: plethora and *horror vacui*

Moving now to later works, the dimension of excess changes from the colourful overcrowdings that I have addressed so far. Orange nuances evolve into dark reds, fairy-tale-recollections evolve into oneiric and sometimes nightmarish compositions. Zelda’s already hyperbolic prose evolves into plethoric obscurity in *Save Me The Waltz*.⁶³ In the novel, the bright strokes of colours animating the frames of the short

⁶³ The novel did not arouse critical attention when it was first published in 1932, or at least it was considered to pale beside her husband’s masterpieces. The first few reviews were extremely negative, and labelled the book as overwritten, the plot uninteresting and the characters weak. Among the ferocious comments from critics, William McFee’s lines in the *New York Sun* are quite emblematic; he condemned the book for its “crudity of conception,” “ruthless purloining of technical tricks” and “pathetic striving after philosophic profundity.” His positive conclusion that “there is the promise of a new and vigorous personality in fiction” (Milford 1970: 263) does not really suffice to balance the severity of his critique. Besides such merciless criticism, anyway, there lay Scott’s unsupportive attitude. Whilst he had encouraged Zelda to endeavour short story writing – prompted mainly out of financial need – he severely opposed this attempt at long prose. Zelda engaged upon the task without her husband’s knowledge, and completed the novel so quickly that Scott could intervene very little in it before the first publication. Whether he felt that the novel exposed too much of his private life, or he was angry because Zelda in fact drew upon material he had written in the past five years for *Tender is the Night*, he accused her of plagiarism, and discredited the book. In the 1970s, feminist critics swung its reputation to the other extreme: no longer judging the novel solely in comparison with Scott’s fiction or just as a biographical source, they rather celebrated it as indisputable feminist masterpiece: “feminist critics extolled the novel as brilliant, comparing the work to T. S. Eliot’s “The Wasteland” in its ability to portray accurately twentieth-century despair and anonymity and to Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” for its pioneering feministic spirit.” (Nanney 1993: 220) Lisa Nanney, 1993, “Zelda Fitzgerald’s *Save Me The Waltz* as Southern Novel and Künstlerroman,” in *The Female Tradition in Southern Literature*, ed. Carol S. Manning (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press), pp. 220-232.

stories are taken to an extreme; vibrating masses of emotions, which overcrowd the picture, make it hard to even imagine the scene; while in Provence with David, Alabama describes the sunset with a triumph of colours and sounds, assonances and adjectives that burden the reading:

It was as if the sun had absorbed the coloring of the countryside to brew its sunset mixtures, boiling and bubbling the tones blindingly in the skies while the land lay white and devitalized awaiting the lavish mixture that would be spread to cool through the vines and stones in the late afternoon. (Fitzgerald 1932: 87)

The syntax is convoluted in this sentence, which accounts for six clauses; most of them are non-finite-verb clauses and contain a great number of adjectives and adverbs. The presence of colours complicates (rather than enriching) the understanding. Assonances in ‘b’ and ‘l’ are almost obsessive in the central part of the sentence, and, more than just bonding words together, they capture the attention in a way that makes it harder for the reader to focus on the sense. While Zelda’s aim was probably to let the reader gain the exact picture of her thoughts through semantically and formally overcrowded frames, the effect she obtains is in fact striking the reader with an excess of information, colour and emotion. A few pages later, she sorrowfully pictures David in his Left Bank studio in Paris:

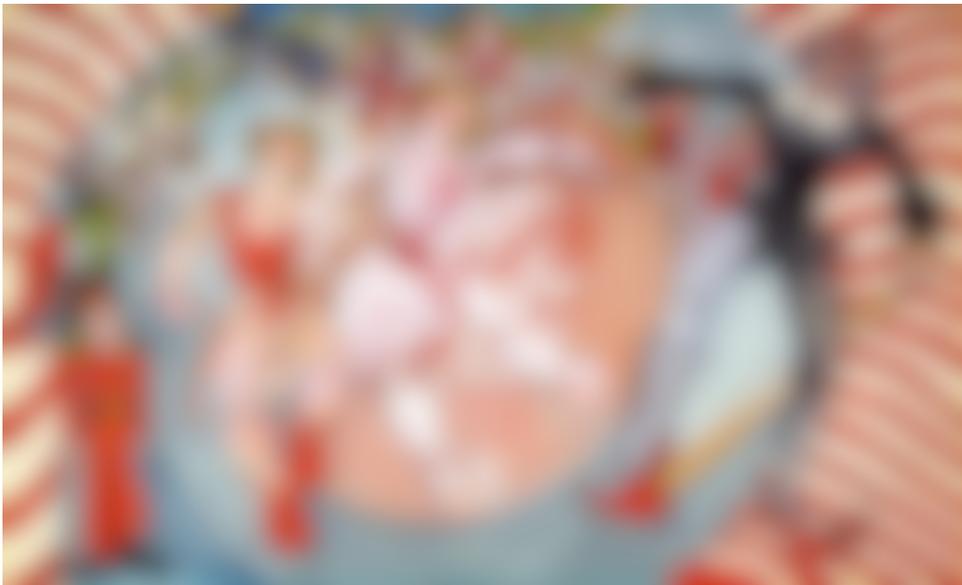
There he lost himself in the retrospect of autumn disembodied from its months, from heat and cold and holidays, and produced his lullabies of recapitulation that drew vast crowds of the advance guard to the Salon des Independents. (Fitzgerald 1932: 102)

The tone of this short piece regarding David is halfway between dream and waking, as wandering in memories. The perception of the Parisian idyll has evidently changed: the words she chooses are far from the exuberant escalations of the stories, where Paris was painted with fresh enjoyment and amusement. “Lost,” “disembodied,” “heat and cold” (a pair of extremes), “recapitulation,” “vast crowd” build up a lexicon of bitterness towards her husband’s distance in favour of his artistic career. Alabama, like Zelda, loved Paris, its aliveness, its artistic push and the popularity she and her husband

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acquired whilst there; but she also absorbed its conflicts, contradictions, paradoxes and shadows, all of which she tried to condense in writing and painting. The visions of *Save Me The Waltz* are more mature, stratified into obscurity and sometimes so full of contradictions that it is hard to create a coherent frame.

As evidenced by this short sample, the enthusiastic hyperboles of the stories appear exacerbated in the novel. Agglomeration has turned into overcrowding, a feverish response to a feeling of *horror vacui*. Such features are even more evident in *Puppeufee*, which, having being painted a decade after the novel was written, stages the most extreme developments of Zelda's plethoric narrative.



Zelda Fitzgerald, 1946-1947, *Puppeufee*.

Zelda painted *Puppeufee (The Circus)* in gouache on paper one (or two) years before her death. At that point she had been treated at Highland Hospital for more than ten years, her cures sometimes consisting in drugs and electroshock. She made this painting for her grandson Tim, potentially drawing inspiration from a French fairy tale about dolls that dance on a carousel. Only, the excesses of red tones are far from the fairy-tale nuances of the canvases she painted ten years earlier, and the characters have nightmarish traits.

Her composition also reveals a deeper level, made of reminiscences from her performances, and a thick stratification of emotions related to her dedication to ballet. It shows spiralling force-lines and fluid shapes, which are similar to those of the urban frame analysed above. But the dynamic pushes appear exacerbated into a vortex of humans and toys, the perspectival cone appears twisted and unstable, and the choice of colour-theme is certainly extreme. Overall, the picture appears too disquieting to be just a gift for her grandson. All of Zelda's interests and passions, her fears and obsessions merge in a grotesque abundance of both colours and form.

As to the plethora of colours, the dominant shade is bright red, which carries the weight of Zelda's passions and anguishes (Leadbeater 1901). Still, there are a few resonances created by local dichromatic alternations, which are worthy of mention. Curiously, the skirt of the girl on the left is patterned with the same red and white stripes of the tent, thus establishing a resonance between the centre and the periphery of the picture. The tutu of the girl on the right is instead significantly lighter than those of the other dancers, and constitutes the highlight of the picture, defining the ballerina as the absolute focus of the composition. The lightness of the tutu of the front-right ballerina also influences the colouring of the master, whose right leg is of a significantly lighter tone than the rest of his body. Such an apparently meaningless detail in fact strengthens the idea that he finds himself in between different realities; he is not part of the performance enacted by the dancers, but as a human being he takes part of the farce of life. His black suit also creates a resonance with the dark buildings in the background, thus connecting him to all the graphic and metaphorical levels of the picture. Symbolically, he is the man who belongs to the city, and who daily wears a mask to act on the life-scene, as if he was a character in a performance.⁶⁴

As to the plethora of forms, the heterogeneous crowd of puppets, circus with nightmarish features, (over)populates the canvas, in response to an evident *horror vacui*. If compared to the other puppets in the frame, which whirl in the circular motion

⁶⁴ The facial expressions of the two ballerinas in the foreground are also worth noting; they look extremely alike, they have the same neck posture, same haircut and colour, and same intense involved close-eyed smile. This feature can be certainly attributed to the traditional physical similarity of ballerinas, and to the fact that they are performing a scene together. This superficial comment, though, invites further observation: first of all, the master of revels who stands on the right has the same facial expression of the dancers – and of all the performers in the background too; secondly, these two ballerinas strongly resemble Zelda herself. Such hint to performance is intended to remain undeveloped here, only to be better expanded in the third section.

of the carousel, the two dancers in the inner circle appear to be relatively stable. The same can be said for the toy soldier on the bottom left, which stands dazed, while sharing the foreground with the two dolls. The fact that he belongs to the external circle of the carousel, and should therefore be spinning like the other puppets on his band, brings a sense of the uncanny to his figure. Even more destabilising is the figure of the master of revels, who literally walks across two concentric bands, although one of the two is spinning and the other is steady. Moreover, he seems to walk from outside the carousel to the inner circle by stepping on the red and white cover-tent. For this reason, he encourages a reflection on the management of space and on the three-dimensional representation.

When Zelda chose to look inside the carousel from the top of it, and to place all her puppets in concentric bands, she should have given up any vertical stratification; yet, thanks to the stretching and overlapping of the forms and the pervasiveness of red shades, the three dimensions of the representation coexist on the surface. Height and depth collapse inwards and are flattened onto the only represented dimension, width. However, height and depth disappear without sacrificing dynamism, conveyed by a definite centrifugal push whose storm-centre is steady. The position of the soldier and of the master of revels challenge the laws of space, perspective and proportion, but for a higher task of simultaneity: their role is to connect all the vertical and horizontal layers of the composition, and to orchestrate them in such a way that heterogeneous spaces, forms and force-lines can act together within the outer frame, without being blurred in a chaotic vortex. In this painting there are no colour-sprayed clouds to connect space-layers, because forms suffice to obtain a similar result, crossing spaces in all directions.

Thanks to such overcrowding of figures (distorted to fit within the frame), overlapping of perspectival layers, and dominance of red shades, the painting appears weary and nightmarish. Narrative and narratological devices used by Zelda in the past seem to have come to an edge of excess, and appear transfigured in the cornucopia of forms and colours.

1.2.2.1. In excess

The rhetorical substrate of the evolution from hyperbole to plethora deserves particular attention. From the rhetorical point of view, hyperbole and plethora share the quality of amplification. However, hyperbole has more to do with conceptual exaggeration. Plethora, by contrast, can be both considered as conceptual exaggeration and linguistic/syntactic overdoing – this latter referring to the excessive use of linguistic ornaments such as adjectives, adverbs, unnecessary clauses or redundancies. The dangers of this trope of the excess are self-evident: where linguistic embroidery weighs the sentence to Zelda's levels, it complicates the reading and goes against understanding goals.

As emerged from the texts analysed, Zelda makes use of an inconsiderate amount of adjectives and adverbs, asides and anacolutha; sometimes she even layers plethora over already hyperbolic sentences. In *Save Me The Waltz*, plethora assumes different and interesting forms, from the overabundance of subjects – “David David Knight Knight Knight” (34) – and abuse of punctuation – “car-at-your-disposal, the mystery-car, the Rajah's-car, the death-car, the first-prize” (89). Elements taken individually constitute units of dense meaning, little pictures of sense, and capsules of colours and emotions; but when agglomerated into the same sentence, spanning several lines, they suggest a sense of unease, as if each of them was too full, too intense to be put together with other similarly overflowing units. Such impression results in a feeling of stifling cohesion, as if each of the linguistic elements was trying to force the borders of its position and claim more privileged space.

This last impression is in fact similar to the one gained from *Puppeufee*, where form, space and colour are interrelated and run over into one another – as the elements of a plethoric visual syntax. Colour binds forms with other forms and spaces with other spaces, and then finally connects forms and spaces. Forms themselves cross space-layers by transgressing three-dimensionality, and spaces seem to overcrowd the foreground sacrificing perspectival hierarchy. Forms, colours and spaces exist all together and all at the same time: with the same level of simultaneity they were perceived or conceived by the artist, and with the same simultaneity they are perceived by the observer. Naturally, the bundle of syntactic elements in and of the forms, spaces

and colour on the canvases, influence the semantic level. While syntactic units claim for space, the related meanings make claims on a priority they simply cannot obtain, because they were equally condensed in the mind that conceived them.

Places and settings are absolutely extraordinary. France, including Provence, Paris, and all the other places visited, is magnificent. America is simply catalysing and scintillating. Even characters seem to be, in a way, excessive. It often sounds like people and places act to embody the most superlative versions of themselves. David is “too handsome to be so well-known,” (32) Alabama’s family is perfect (her mother says in the first few pages how “all my children were sweet children” (5), Alabama herself is stunning, skilful, popular and (over)sensitive. While all the characters live a span over their reach, the tension they endure to always satisfy their own and others’ expectations is clearly sensible. Alabama’s breakdowns are as deep and intense as her euphoric outbursts; she develops somatic disorders, often caused by jealousy. When other women praise her husband’s handsomeness, she often feels “sick at her stomach – too sick to answer” (114). When David actually dances or “walks away” (*Ibid.*) with other women, Alabama falls ill and finds solace in champagne. Obviously, Alabama is the most elaborated character in the novel, whose behaviour is at times paradoxical and oscillates from euphoria to depression. Plethora fits her as the only trope where all her contradictions can coexist in a frozen tension among the parts, aware that, should one prevail, all the others would fall into nonsense and destroy the character.

Ultimately, if we widen the zoom to structural levels, excess is employed as a narratological device, as it organises contents into chapters and sections. The novel is divided into four chapters, each of which has up to three paragraphs. Yet the division is neither geographical, nor temporal, nor is it related to the characters involved in each section. The sections mirror Alabama’s perception of the happenings of her life; when something meaningful (to her) happens, that is the end of a paragraph. The overall impression is strange: a condensation of settings, people and events animates the scene, which does not end where a pause would be necessary to the content. Such structure reverberates quite explicitly the frames of Zelda’s paintings, where characters look as if they wanted to walk outwards, and clouds of colour seem to be about to overflow the space of the canvas.

In conclusion, tropes of excess are pervasive in Zelda's late production. Interestingly, Zelda takes advantages of the potential danger of plethora, in establishing a sympathetic connection with her readers. The whirlwind of emotions experienced by Alabama makes her extremely credible and human, easy to sympathise with. Likewise, the emotional burden carried by the simultaneity of all the forms of plethora on canvases is not easy to handle. All meanings and feelings are on the foreground with no screen.

Through various forms of plethora, Zelda removes any hierarchy among layers and forms and language, giving the same perceptive priority to all components. In such precarious momentum, where formal, semantic and structural plethora coexist on the edge of collision, and head inevitably toward chaos, compensatory pushes of contradictory forces form a beautifully complicated ensemble.

1.2.2.2. "The vertigo of the list"⁶⁵

I want to conclude this chapter on Zelda's excesses by showing the paradoxes deriving from the use of exacerbated plethora. There are relevant passages in *Save Me the Waltz* that show how plethora can evolve into an unsuccessful version of itself, once it crosses the edge, the momentum of balance:

Lustily splashing their dreams in the dark pool of gratification, their fifty thousand dollars bought a cardboard baby-nurse for Bonnie, a second-hand Marmon, a Picasso etching, a white satin dress to house a beaded parrot, a yellow chiffon dress to snare a field of ragged-robins, a dress as green as fresh wet paint, two white knickerbocker suits exactly alike, a broker's suit, an English suit like the burnt fields of August, and two first-class tickets for Europe.

(Fitzgerald 1932: 58)

Once again, the main clause is not in first position, which is instead occupied by a carnival of consonance, adverbs, gerunds, metaphors and colours. Yet, this passage displays a sort of faulty hypotaxis, where not only do clauses omit their semantic

⁶⁵ Umberto Eco, 2009, *La vertigine della lista*.

connections, but appear to be forced into a list. The elements listed are heterogeneous, including a baby-nurse for Bonnie, an etching by Picasso and a second-hand fashionable car, followed by clothing items that are described in the usual pattern 'adjective(s) plus noun'. Each piece of clothing is described with a colourful association or a dynamic picture, as if Zelda wanted the reader to picture their exact trim. The verb chosen for the satin white dress is "host," while that for the yellow chiffon dress is to "snare" the flowers on it; the third dress is "as green as fresh wet paint," an unusual term of comparison; similarly the English suit, is originally described as being "like the burnt fields of August." Such comparisons, synesthetic verbs and associations fit Zelda's tendency to range through the most varied semantic and emotional spheres in order to stratify emotions in the reader's mind. But this sample shows how Zelda's wish to condense *everything* into one sentence cannot always be met. Sometimes, the sentence collapse because its units cannot hold together, being too heterogeneous to find semantic links.

There are some moments where not even punctuation helps coherence; passages where, despite apparently regular sentence organisation, the fragments of her visions make a whole picture hard to reconstruct, and the clauses remain disconnected like the items of a list, rather than as the sense units of a discourse. When Alabama feels scared or unprepared to face a new situation, or when she is annoyed at someone or at the circumstances, her (Zelda's) capacity to weave plethoric textures goes missing, and syntax becomes rather a patchwork of clauses, juxtaposed, listed without immediate coherence. As soon as David shows her picture of them in the tabloid, for instance, she nervously walks from the bed to the window, pensive, and stares at the road outside:

A stone minuteman kept the peace of the indolent fields. A driveway crawled from under the feathery chestnuts. Iron-weed wilted in the heat; a film of purple asters matted over their stalks. Tar melted in the sun along the loping roads. The house had been there for ever chuckling to itself in the goldenrod stubble. (Fitzgerald 1932: 44)

All of the sentences, except the last one, are made up of only a main clause, exemplifying a technique different from the one illustrated so far. In such passages, Zelda employs her own adaptation of the free indirect speech, or even (a hiccupping)

stream of consciousness.

Like hyperbole can evolve into plethora grounding on a rhetorical affinity, plethora too can develop. However, plethora already embodies a form of excess, so that, necessarily, it cannot escalate higher to another extreme form. If the plethora captures a tension on the edge of breaking, its evolution takes place when the conflicting pushes lose their balance. Then, it inevitably collapses, changing drastically its virtual directrix of expansion. When the units fail to connect, the momentum goes lost, and the plethoric tension falls alongside the steep verticality of a list.

1.3. **Mina Loy's essential lines**

Mina Loy's verbal and visual work is centred on her peculiar use of the line, which, in her avant-garde art, is essential, radical, and aphoristic. However, this particular correspondence between poetic and drawn lines only took place between the 1914 and 1916, the years in which visual art and writing seemed to have the same weight. Until 1913 (before she moved to Italy), Mina Loy could have been described as a minor post-Impressionist painter, known, according to Caroline Burke, "for the elegance of her draughtsmanship and the delicacy of her water-colors."⁶⁶ She was not famous as a writer, by that time. Then, after she moved to New York in 1916, her genius seemed to canalise mainly into writing, which eventually became her privileged, if not exclusive, form of artistic expression.

Loy's shift from visual art to literature, of which I will here explore the short phase of balanced coexistence, appears to be based on an aesthetic reflection on the potential of the graphic line. Looking at Loy's production as a whole, her artistic evolution from academic painter to avant-garde writer hinges on a process of essentialisation of the drawn line, which gradually appears geometrised in her visual works, to eventually become textured in graphic poetry. Particularly, the years between 1913 and 1920 shaped her poetics starting from the study of the line, which became

⁶⁶ Carolyn Burke, 1985, "Mina Loy: Reimagining the Poetic Line," in *HOW(ever)* 2(4), (November 1985), n.p.

progressively sharper. Such a process, carried on within the space of both drawing and writing, lies on comparable rhetoric structures and is therefore worth being analysed:

The pencil line that she had learned to control with such delicate strength could be reimagined in the poetic line, carving its way sinuously through the formal arrangements of the poem. Similarly, the white spaces around and between words could join in the play of speech and silence, of shape and its shadow. Poetry provided her with a way to explore what she called (in “Aphorisms”) “the fallow-lands of mental spatiality.” And it made possible the enactment of a female inwardness that she had hitherto depicted from without, in numerous portraits of female subjects limited by the requirements of figuration and perspective. (Burke 1985: 7)

As suggested by Burke, influences from Futurism, Stein and other post-modernist voices, encouraged Loy to reconsider her previous visual art, and through the study of the line, to transfer her artistic skills into poetry.

1.3.1. Geometrical fascinations

Once Loy moved to Paris, her career as an avant-garde painter can finally take wing.⁶⁷ She caught the attention of critics in the 1906 Salon d’Automne, where she exhibited six watercolours, which clearly show how the fascination of geometry enters Loy’s so far academic canvases.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ In London, she had attended several art-schools for women, since her self-respecting bourgeois father had been persuaded that his daughter’s artistic accomplishment would increase her marriageability. The first private art school in which Mina was enrolled by her father was the St. John’s Wood School on Elm Tree Road, London, which combined proximity with respectability, and with solid connections to the Royal Academy schools. Then, her father sent her to Munich, to the house of a baronial couple whom he had heard of via the British Consulate. Mina stayed in Munich for one year, absorbing the suggestions of the Munich *Jugendstil*. Then, after a brief return to London, she finally moved to Paris. In Paris, her painting style started to gain self-awareness and a personal touch, influenced by Impressionist models. (Burke 1985)

⁶⁸ These watercolours gained Loy membership to the drawing section of the Salon d’Automne, a privilege that entitled her to exhibit her drawings without them needing to be approved by the committee.



Mina Loy, 1906, *L'Amour dorloté par les belles dames*.

Mina Loy, 1906, *La Maison en papier*.

A brief analysis of these watercolours shows how, in the early 1900s, the fascinations of the geometrical line start invading Loy's fluid compositions. These watercolours mesmerised the critics for their mixture of styles and subjects; they drew themes from the decadence of the nineties, complicated with caricature, irony and irreverent nudity. These watercolours represent a phase of passage between the use of colours on paper and oil on canvas at the art schools in England and Munich, and the almost exclusive use of pen and pencil in France and Italy. As such, they offer a chance to identify Loy's moments of theoretical and practical reasoning on the representational strengths of either form of art. They show interesting polarities, alternating meticulous details to blurred forms, and alternating thick geometrical lines to watery strokes.

In *L'Amour dorloté*, the geometric grid in the background shows Loy's eagerness to experimenting with the combination of geometry and loose lines, ink traits and watery shapes within the same space. In this watercolour, thick geometrical

lines are only present in the background with decorative purposes.⁶⁹ The Greek fret seems to be a picket fence that encloses the space for the women and for the rose vase behind them. Even as a background detail, though, the geometrical grim inspires a reflection on its function in the separation of levels within the composition. If it were not for the vase with roses, the geometrical band could have resembled a fret on the wall behind the woman; but since it stands behind the plant, it is more likely to be the fence of a domestic garden where a group of women is spending some leisure time. There is nothing beyond the fence, a merely grey neutral background surface.⁷⁰

Graphically, the position of the geometrical motif is more interesting, because it invites a reflection on the management of positive and negative spaces. Looking at the picture as a whole, the left side is significantly lighter than the right; darkness seems to proceed rightwards, starting from the all-white figure of the woman on the extreme left, to the greyness of the woman on the extreme right. Coherently, the dress of the woman who turns away from the scene with her arms folded appears lighter on the left side and darker on the right side of her skirt. The woman on the left is completely white, there are no volumes or shadings on her figure and the art-nouveau-style decorations on her dress appear meticulous but fading amidst her general lightness. By contrast, the decorations on the dress of the woman on the right are nonexistent, flattened and absorbed by the greyness of her costume, which blurs with the floor, also grey. The opposition between light and darkness on the left and on the right of the frame is condensed at the centre, where the all-white angel of Love in the front leans backwards into the arms of the all-grey woman. The same opposition of

⁶⁹ *L'Amour dorloté* shows well Loy's artistic eclecticism: *art nouveau* is particularly evident, interestingly flanked by echoes of Pre-Raphaelite postures. Love is an effete Pre-Raphaelite who swoons in the lap of a fashionable woman, who leans over him in a parody of the mother-with-child pose, which is ironic, because Love, usually a child-angel, is here equipped for adult male sexuality. But the naked body depicted in the centre also recalls the androgynous figures of Burne-Jones. The ensemble could also be a parody of the Passion, where the Christ leans on the Virgin. Either way, the ironic composition satirises the conventions of Loy's artistic training in an obvious reversal of sexual dynamics. It is the man's body, defenceless and uncovered, which is displayed for the contemplation of the ladies within the frame and outside. The women who surround the central group show Beardsleyesque profiles, while their costumes blur into one another and with the background. This reference to Beardsley suggests Loy's awareness of the artistic vanguard around her, but the women also illustrate Loy's own personal style.

⁷⁰ Perhaps, and grounding on Loy's previous academic art studies, the completely grey space outside the garden could signify that there was nothing for respectable women beyond the borders of their household. Nothing metaphorically, because an upper-class woman had to be inscribed within her family; nothing literally, because women were not allowed to leave the gates of their house or protected yards if they were not chaperoned by someone of the family or trusted and respectable.

light and dark is proposed again on the right, although inverted, since the white woman stands behind the woman in grey.

This game of contrasts certainly creates interesting resonances within the frame, as Loy agitates somehow the relationships between space and form, whose distance is usually marked by a contrast between colours. Negative space fills in the forms in the foreground, whereas white space makes the woman on the farthest layer stand out in the background. Such contrasts between blacks and whites are essentialised and condensed in the geometrical fret, which, under this light, appears to be the arrival point of all the other spatial reasoning of the foreground.

While the formal focus of *L'Amour dorloté* mainly concerns the study of form and space and the hierarchy between them, *La Maison en papier* shows a deeper attention to the potential of the geometrical line.⁷¹ In this watercolour, a genre where traditionally there would be no space for geometry, Loy employs a geometrical device with a structural role, thus depriving the watercolour genre of its traditional smoothness and softness. In *La Maison en papier* the geometrical line is thicker and monumental, and has a structural role. While it constitutes the net of the *shoji* paper wall, it also separates the two spatial layers of the composition. All the figures on the foreground seem involved in serenades to the girl at the window, who clearly prefers the attention of the women rather than that of the men. The girl at the centre of the geometrical net, who finds herself in in-between the two spatial layers, is particularly interesting from a graphic point of view.

Looking at the continual black thick line, there does not seem to be a window in the paper wall. Yet, ninety per cent of the leaning girl is grey, suggesting her body is behind the *shoji* wall; her right arm stretched to reach the flowers is white suggests that she is leaning through the open window. While initially the paper wall created by the geometrical net appeared to be a flat background, it is, through the girl, turned into a *separé* between background and foreground.

⁷¹ This watercolour too shows Loy's eclecticism: the presence of the Vienna Secession, echoing Hoffmann's essentialism, combines with Pre-Raphaelite 'egoless purity', just as well as with Japonism. Other exotic touches characterise the subjects' facial traits; the naked girls leaning out the window recalls Gauguin's Tahitians, while the man bent over in the foreground and the man on his back have Asian traits. The woman on the left has a Beardsleyesque profile and the woman next to her seems to mimic Burne-Jones's style. *Art nouveau* is also evident, in the indoor decoration with peacocks visible through the paper wall, and in the orientalism conveyed by the *shoji* wall.

Loy's choice to locate her exploration of the potential of the geometrical line *within* the space of a genre that had traditionally very little to do with geometry demonstrates the progression of her thoughts on the modernist push of blurring genres. Taking colours *away* from the watercolour-technique, only to replace them with shades of grey obtained by watering ink, shows the stage she had reached in her shift towards the pencil sketch and ink drawing. The geometrical line and absence of colour produce a denaturalisation of the watercolour-genre itself, emptied of its foundations to become the study-ground for new representational paradigms.

1.3.2. Access-*line* to avant-garde

The cartoon below illustrates the consequences, implications and radicalisation of Loy's experiments with geometries applied to the visual art. Essential and dichromatic, radicalised in the masses of black and white of ink drawing, exhibits the evolution of Loy's reasoning on the management of spaces and lines.



Mina Loy, 1916, *Consider Your Grandmother's Stays*.

Consider Your Grandmother's Stays is an ink drawing Mina made shortly after going to America.⁷² It appeared on *Rogue*, a U.S. based magazine, in November 1916, accompanying an ironic pro-suffragist article by Dame Rogue. In the article, old corsets represent oppression (compression), and try to stop the activism of corsetless-corsets, the Suffragists. The pun on “stay”⁷³ – the name of the underbodice stiffened by tight and rigid strips – obviously conveys the equation between the bodily and political forced immobility of women. Loy’s eclecticism appears here brought to the service of reportage – thus triggering connections to Barnes’s illustrated journalism of those years, which I will discuss in the next chapter.⁷⁴ The oriental taste – which influences significantly all the forms of *art nouveau* in this decade – is conveyed by the woman’s Geisha-style makeup. The lines of *art nouveau* are still evident in the composition, but are essentialised, condensed into the pattern of the woman’s skirt and in the flowers she holds in her left hand. The grey, watery colours of the Parisian gouaches have been completely dried off by black masses organised geometrically in the skirt, and the difference between the foreground and background has been turned into one of direct opposition with the contrast of black vs. white.

This vignette exemplifies how the process of geometrisation and essentialisation of the drawing line is complete by 1916, and offers an excellent term of comparison for the study of Loy’s use of essential lines in the writings of the same years. Many motifs of Loy’s earlier visual art persist in this image, signifying that Loy’s theoretical and artistic developments involved the form, rather than the contents.

⁷² 1916 was an extremely productive year for poetry, and therefore the perfect time for it to be revolutionised: “it was the time of the manifestos, movements, overnight schools, sudden departures,” recalled Louis Untermeyer. “The Cubists, Futurists, Imagists, Impressionists, Vorticists had all taken a hand at rejuvenating the staid and perplexed Muse.” (Untermeyer 1919: 320).

Louis Untermeyer, 1919, *The New Era in American Poetry* (New York: Henry Holt and Company).

⁷³ Jessica Burstein, 2012, *Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press).

⁷⁴ By 1916, Loy had gained the attention of Djuna Barnes too, who was impressed and attracted by the artistic and sexual license of Loy’s first “Love Song” – better known as “Pig Cupid.” Barnes wrote about Loy on the New York *Morning Telegraph* while accounting for the décor typical of Greenwich Village: “A touch of purple here, a gold screen there, a black carpet, a curtain of silver, a tapestry thrown carelessly down, a copy of *Rogue* on a low table open at Mina Loy’s poem.” Quoted in Jo-Ann Wallace and B. J. Elliott, 2014, *Women Writers and Artists: Modernist (Im)Positionings*, London: Routledge. Barnes’s article, illustrated with a caricature of Mina Loy, highlights two main aspects: first of all, it shows the activity of the ‘net’, which I discussed in the premises of my work; the trans-Atlantic community of women intellectuals, writers and artists was a tight net of acquaintances, acknowledgment and appreciation of one another’s work. Secondly, it shows how Loy entered the world of avant-garde art thanks to her poetic work, although she had already been well-known for a few years as a post-Impressionist painter.

It is what happened just before 1916, that helps explaining the dramatic essentiality of the 1916 cartoon. After the Parisian years, Loy moved to Italy, where she came in touch with the Futurist movement. She quite spontaneously espoused ideas and principles of the Futurist aesthetics, which showed assonances with her Parisian reflections of the management of line and space. In 1914, Loy was travelling in Italy, from Florence to Rome, to attend the First Free Futurist International Exposition with Marinetti. In June of the same year, Stieglitz's *Camera Work* came out with an edition featuring *Aphorism on Futurism* as central literary text; the same edition also included a poem by Stein and a review by Dodge, thus putting Loy's work into perspective. In the assertive, telegraphic and definitive form of the aphorism – which perfectly suits the studies on the neat and essential line – Loy marks her choice to embrace the fascinations of geometry in verbal expression too.⁷⁵

Loy's *Aphorisms* are particularly meaningful as a term of comparison to the ink drawing because they condense her theoretical and practical reflections on the importance of geometry in either visual or verbal texts, "the fallow-line of mental spatiality." (Loy 1914: 427) more broadly they contain her views on local and transatlantic avant-gardes; formally, they are imbued with Loy's personal reading of the 'manifesto'-means to spread new aesthetics.

Aphorisms on Futurism

[...]

THE velocity of velocities arrives in starting.

IN pressing the material to derive its essence, matter becomes deformed.

AND form hurtling against itself is thrown beyond the synopsis of vision.

THE straight line and the circle are the parents of design, form the basis of art; there is no limit to their coherent variability.

[...]

OPEN your arms to the dilapidated; rehabilitate them.

⁷⁵ A good aphorism has a mathematical, axiomatic aura, and can stand the test of time and criticism; as phrased by Friedrich Schlegel in one aphorism about aphorisms itself, "an aphorism ought to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world like a little work of art, and complete in itself like a hedgehog." In the original German: "Ein Fragment muß gleich einem kleinen Kunstwerke von der umgebenden Welt ganz abgesondert und in sich selbst vollendet sein wie ein Igel" Schlegel on *Athenaeum*, Fragment 206.

BUT the Future is only dark from outside. *Leap* into it—and it
EXPLODES with *Light*.

(Loy 1914: 427-428)

The layout is what strikes at first sight. Lines appear concise and prescriptive, a quality reiterated by their graphic distribution. Loy's aphorisms are highly visual, thus embodying the common rhetorical ground of Loy's visual and poetic art. Her *Aphorisms* actually *illustrate* the principles of new poetry: they describe the "capacity" of the human mind, analogically connected to the "mental spatiality" of poetry. The "velocity" and compression of the future are conveyed by both semantics and graphics, which appear cohesive in their purpose to be quick, straightforward and unquestionable. Such are the terms of the reformation of poetry, that needs to become both visual and verbal, so as to increase its communicative strength: promptness and simultaneity from the geometrical line, and stratification from the verbal organisation.

In order for this reformation to take place, poetry needs to overcome any aesthetic of constriction and enclosure – that, for Loy, also has gender implications. It needs to "hurtle against itself," and to be "thrown," violently, beyond the "synopsis of vision." In order to do so, form (both the poetic and the visual one) needs to be essentialised to its graphic prototype, the line.

The aphorism "THE *straight line and the circle* are the parents of design, form the basis of art" (emphasis is mine) represents a declaration of intent and the starting point of Loy's process of destruction and re-birth of her own art and poetry, because both originate from the 'line'. Such an assertion is apodictic and supports many of the considerations I have made while decoding Loy's process of essentialisation in her visual art. It also supports the structure of this whole first section of this thesis, which rests on the assumption that the trait is archetypal to both writing and drawing, and that any trope that can be applied to the line forms a rhetorical foundation for both literature and visual art. Loy says "the straight line and the circle" as if to differentiate between straight and curved lines, but they are only variations of the same archetype, which can be straight, curved, or arranged into sequences of signs to constitute words. The "line" acquires great semantic power because it applies both to the drawn and to the poetic line; combined together on one blank space, they can cover every meaning,

concrete or abstract, and every nuance of knowledge. Instead of encapsulating meaning, Loy's trait multiplies meanings into endless possible connections. Spatial and visual words empower verbal language with all the potential of visuality.

In the subsequent verses, Loy continues explaining the power of visual language, and therefore of visual poetry, when lines are arranged into the "new form."
(428)

CONSCIOUSNESS cannot spontaneously accept or reject new forms, as offered by creative genius; it is the new form, for however great a period of time it may remain a mere irritant—that molds consciousness to the necessary amplitude for holding it.

[...]

LET the Universe flow into your consciousness, there is no limit to its capacity, nothing that it shall not re-create.

UNSCREW your capability of absorption and grasp the elements of Life—*Whole.*

[...]

HERE are the fallow-lands of mental spatiality that Futurism will clear—

MAKING place for whatever you are brave enough, beautiful enough to draw out of the realized self.

[...]

(Loy 1914: 427-428)

The "new form," the Futurist visual line, "can compress every aesthetic principle in one line." (428) By transferring the power of the geometrical line into poetry (which might as well be interpreted as the reason why after moving to New York Loy turned to writing almost exclusively) the verse becomes signifier for endless signified meanings. In order to empower the line with this freedom, poets need to abandon the illusion of control that was traditionally implicit in the management of poetic language; once the freedom of visual words has been accepted, the human mind ("mental spatiality") is a *tabula rasa*, as blank as the space that will host lines and forms. By giving up the illusion of being masters of sense, poets and artists need to "dissolve back to their innate senselessness," becoming rather masters of sound, of evocation,

enabling endless connections traced in space.

The sequence of aphorisms triumphs with the final statement, which is alliterate and incisive, “ACCEPT the tremendous truth of Futurism.” (428) With these words, not only does Loy gain visibility within the Italian Futurist circle, which she would soon leave, but enters an international community of female vanguard intellectuals by writing her own manifesto. In fact, Loy’s declamatory tone conform only partially to the oratorical pattern typical of the vanguard manifestoes. The way in which human mind and the blank page are put into connection is highly physical, since the blank page and human body are connected through the analogical term of space. This analogy is reinforced by the performative language employed: not only does the poet have to simply write verses and draw lines, (s)he needs to *perform* them, to “OPEN your arms” and to “Leap into” the future, in order to experience its “light.” Similarly, the reader needs to sensorially “experience” the text, rather than just read it. Such dynamics show a sort of sensualisation of the manifesto oratorical style, a (physical) appropriation. This peculiarity of Loy’s narrative, which contributes to explain her divorce from Italian male-centred Futurism, also prepares to the reading of Loy’s poetry, where geometries and lines appear as gendered suggestions, in the fusion of graphics, words, and body.

1.3.3. Gendered geometries

The application of a gendered aesthetics of space and line to poetry is best exemplified by “Parturition,” a poem that connects baby-delivery and ‘poem-delivery’ basing on the same spatial analogy of page and body proposed in the *Aphorisms*.

Published in *Trend* in 1914, “Parturition” versifies the physical experience of giving birth from the 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, emphasising the significance of this poem in the history of modern poetry as well as in the literature of modern sexuality (1980: 40).⁷⁶ Other scholars also praised “Parturition” for having addressed the issue of labour “fifty years before such a subject

⁷⁶ Virginia Kouidis, 1980, *Mina Loy: American Modernist Poet* (Baton Rouge; London: Louisiana State University Press).

became acceptable” (Burke 1985: 95) and for having depicted the intensely physical experience through an unprecedented attention to the woman’s body (Kinnahan 1994: 56). My contribution aims to extrapolate the intrinsic reflection on the concept of line and space, to eviscerate how the “synopsis of vision” of the “straight line and the circle” has been textualised into the 1914 poem, published in the same year as the *Aphorisms*.

Parturition

I am the centre
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 pinpoint nucleus of being
Locate an irritation without
It is within
Within
It is without.
The sensitized area
Is identical with the extensity
Of intension
[...]
(Loy 1923: 4)

At first glance, the poem appears ‘regular’ in its overall layout, far from some excesses of Futuristic visual poetry. The declamatory effect of the *Aphorisms* is maintained by the vertical layout of the lines, some of which are long, and some of which are instead one-word-lines. Punctuation is scarce, but rhythm is conveyed by the blank space surrounding each verse – miming, in fact, breathing, in the alternation of long breaths to hiccupping short breaths.

In the first verse, the woman makes claims on the reader’s attention, clarifying that the focus is on her and on her agony. The duplicity of the agony is supported by the fact that the woman is identified with Loy herself, so that the effort is both to

deliver a child, and to write a poem on it. The lexicon of the first few verses is highly spatial, and seems to apply the programmatic intentions expressed in the aphorisms. There, she had identified the line and the circle as the parents of design and the basis of art; here she defines her position at the “centre / of a circle,” a concept that she pictures in the space of poetic lines. The way in which Loy opposes design and poetry, in these verses, is typical of Futurism. Yet, here geometry is re-inscribed into gendered semantics. First, she sets words free from referential links by picturing a clear geometrical setting with “I am the centre / of a circle;” the lack of a preposition of space such as “I am *at* the centre” eliminates the analogical step where the reader’s mind would have to position the subject within a geometrical space. The woman *is* the geometrical sign – thus reiterating the spatial analogy between page and body expressed in the *Aphorisms*. But this process of abstraction is immediately re-inscribed in a physical dimension, from which geometry exits as gendered, the circle “of pain.” This gendered geometry of the Futurist line/verse, and consequently of the poetical space, marks Loy’s distancing from Futurism as a masculine movement.

The poem continues on this phenomenology of the gendered space and embodied line, illustrating the dynamic nature of the “circle.” The third verse explains how the circle is “exceeding its boundaries in every direction,” and offers, again, a multiplex reading. Certainly, the most literal understanding refers to an increasing agony, and therefore to a growth in size of the geometrical figure that represents the pain. But this verse also echoes one of the *Aphorisms*, the one where the “Future” (the chronological future and the future of poetry, Futurism) “EXPLODES with *light*.” Certainly the semantic field of ‘excess’ and ‘explosion’ is typical of Futurist poetics, but, in Loy’s poetry, it is further stratified. It is in fact re-semanticised into a gendered geometry, and therefore re-contextualised into gendered embodied verses. The process leading to “explosion” is here identified as an oxymoron, “congested cosmos,” which reiterates the conflicting pushes that animate the belly (and the creative mind) in labour. The alternation of such opposite pushes, centrifugal (pushing outwards) and centripetal (converging to the centre), continues metaphorically, with a clever game of “within” and “without” arranged in an alternate rhyme scheme. The “pinpoint nucleus” is located within and without the circle, thus perpetuating the centrifugal push expressed in the third verse. Now, though, the centre is actually exceeding the borders,

reaching the space outside and around it. The act of childbirth here is pluri-semantic; it is both to be taken literally, as the delivery of a baby, and metaphorically, as the birth of 'new form' of poetry; moreover, it can be read as the birth of a new woman, who breaks the *enclosure* that constrained her in an act of painful liberation.

Through the 'centre-circle paradigm', Loy advocates a different perception of motherhood from past icons; the modern mother can be single, not necessarily inscribed within patriarchal *schemes* such as marriage – the logics of enclosure. Having a child outside marriage – “a fashionable portrait painter / running upstairs to a woman's apartment” – must not cause the woman's fall, but her re-birth instead. Loy re-designs motherhood by centring it on the woman's body, and places the new perspective into her gendered space and gendered poetry. If the woman is the centre of the circle, by which the woman-centred view of history is intended, the centrifugal push signifies the woman who forces the barriers of her historical confinement.

The premises that enable such a process of re-writing and re-inscription of women's history into a woman-centred geometry lie in the overlapping of the linguistic and graphic systems: the poetic space is empowered with structural and geometric value thanks to the intersection and cooperation of drawn and poetic lines, blurred into one, a Loy describes in the poem: “blurring spatial contours.” An entire vision, based on a new advocated role (and position) of the woman and on a new way of writing poetry, becomes an aesthetic system.

Reading “Parturition” through the aesthetics of space defined in the *Aphorisms* provides a clue for quantifying Loy's contribution to modernity on the level of form. But another, perhaps neglected, aspect of its modernity lies in the theoretical, programmatic embodiment of verses in a system of gendered space and lines that put Loy ahead of the Futurist vanguard.

Loy's poetry subsequent to 1914 – year of both the *Aphorism* and “Parturition” – shows the irreversibility of her gendering processes of geometry and rhetoric. *Love Songs* is a collection of poems that also faces topics concerning women's issues (including sexual taboos) from the point of view of a woman; such a gendered point of view appears to the reader as witty and ironic, and as reliable and authoritative, precisely because aphorism is employed as the general and main rhetorical structure in these poems.

Spawn of Fantasies
Silted the appraisable
Pig Cupid his rosy snout
Rooting erotic garbage
“Once upon a time”
Pulls a weed white star-topped
Among wild oats sown in mucous-membrane
(Burke 1996: 156)

The opening of the first poem of *Love Songs* immediately designs the geometric structure of the poem. The initial (aphoristic) picture presents no lyric voice, in order to suggest that what is being said is apodictic, and needs no supplementary explanation. As if the words were being spoken by an Oracle, they are fragmented syntactically, their truth enclosed in partial statements. Words float on the page as a collage of lines, a geometrical but free composition. Allegory, irony, paradox, bathos and other tropes add complexity to the aphoristic fragments, and so erotic fantasies replace and demystify romantic icons. Carnality replaces love, and the embodiment of the poetic line passes through the body that is sexually aroused. The poem (like the whole collection), whose juxtapositions create a kaleidoscope of ironic associations, is in fact a collage of the syllogistic deductions which are derived from the apodictic premise that the woman's body is inherently erotic. It is not relevant that the sentences are not complete, as in a traditional aphorism, because Loy's poetic aphorisms acquire truthfulness in their own embodiment – if anything, they gain credibility *because* they are fragments, crystallised pearls of truth that resemble the essential and elliptical prototype of the line – now gendered and sensualised.

1.3.4. The rhetoric of a gendered line

Loy's great versatility as a poet, playwright, actress, model, designer and artist makes it interesting to follow the steps of her rhetorical patterns. Her nomadism across different countries, and across different avant-garde experiences, make of Loy's artistic identity a conundrum: despite in conversation with all of them, she cannot be contained by any label.

Only her 1914 *Aphorisms* help to find some orientation, as they identify the paradigm of deconstruction and re-construction necessary to forge new forms of representation. Colours must disappear first, then shapes, to arrive “beyond the synopsis of vision” (427) where the line and the circle exist as absolute and true, primordial and archetypical. These lines sound like a declaration of her own poetics, since geometry and logics of space would permeate, since 1914 onwards, every poetic writing.

Perhaps, and as suggested by Loy herself, the aphorism can be identified as the rhetorical foundation of her verbal and visual expression of these decades. Loy’s fundamental assumption, her *aphorism*, is the line, necessarily gendered as it appears in “Parturition.” Following deductively from the gendered line, the whole system of representation stands as unified and compact.⁷⁷ Loy’s *Aphorisms* appear in fact as system, a sequence of aphorisms related to one another, which explain different aspects of what Loy calls “the tremendous truth of Futurism.” (428) In Loy’s Futurism, poetry and art must be denuded of all their embellishments; left naked, poetry and art find their common origin in the line, which they embrace as a common parent. The prototypical line is a pure, geometrical concept, and therefore needs to be true. Once poetry and art have acknowledged the absoluteness and truth of the line, of its infinite referential power and of its potential connections, they can be framed in the praxis of gender, since they enter the page through the body of the artist, can start building up new systems of signs. In such gendered geometry, art and poetry (re)discover their ontological closeness, they are able to build up a new poetic that is necessarily shared by both of them.

1.4. The Baroness’s erotic *corpus*

In the Baroness’s work, the feminine body, erotic and sexual, occupies a central position. Narrative suggestions, evocations and continuous provocations of and to the feminine body make the Baroness’s corpus lively and passionate, vivid and sensual.

⁷⁷ Bice M. Garavelli, 2010, *Il parlar figurato. Manualetto di figure retoriche* (Roma; Bari: Laterza), p. 96.

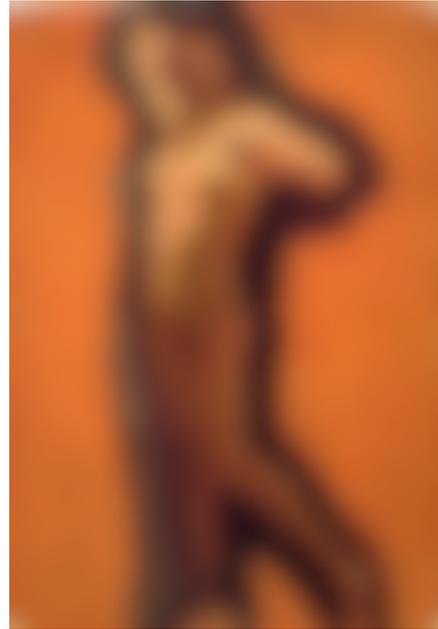
The reason for the significant presence of the body and its processes in her poems is the fact that, for her, life and art were indivisible. Her poetry had to record her life, and her life was majorly occupied by sex – in the form of intercourse, claim for women’s right, and fight against sexual discrimination.

The poems written in her adolescence deal with early sexual (dramatic) experiences. At twenty years old she was in Munich and Berlin, absorbing Expressionist ideals and earning her own money as a model for erotic sculptures and for painters – things that we learn indeed from the youth poems. Her German poems describe the sexual impotence of her first husband, and the sexual quest of her affair with Felix Paul Greve, whom she subsequently married. She and Greve moved to Italy, where she was close to Futurism and where she recorded in verses her first orgasm, experienced at the age of almost thirty. Back to Germany, a series of her poetic portraits were published under the name “Fanny Essler,” a joint pseudonym for Felix and Else. When she arrived in New York for the first time in 1910, she poured her frustration and anger at the failure of her second marriage into her verses, verses where the body gives expression to all her contradictory feelings. From 1918 her poems were regularly printed (although not without effort) in *The Little Review* by Margaret Anderson. In such publications, the Baroness led the fight against censorship and puritanical prejudice through her display of the body in all its forms, needs and depictions. Even when she returned to a post-war Berlin to live in abject poverty, even when she checked into a mental institution, she never ceased to write about (and through) her body. Until the end, before (probably) committing suicide in Paris, she wrote visual poems for Ford’s *Transatlantic Review*, in which the body was the main topic.

In these years, the Baroness’s body, performing and parading, naked and haunting, was at the centre of not just her art, but at the centre of New York bohemia too. As is recorded by the Baroness’s friend and fellow painter Theresa Bernstein, the Baroness’s body was raw wax for her to mould art on, and her art was a carousel of bodies.



Theresa Bernstein, 1917ca, *The Baroness*.



Theresa Bernstein, 1917ca, *Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven*.

Elsa's nudity, captured in Theresa Bernstein's canvases, is equally provocatively exhibited in her poems, which narrate the body in different ways, and, more interestingly, in different media.

The centrality of the body influenced the choice of representative forms; to the Baroness, any choice of genre, language, code, support, was and had to be justified if purposed to achieve vivid images, physically concrete art-pieces. On her page, the ink of the words merges with the tones of the watercolour, or chemical painting, and other materials, including glass, tinfoil and feathers.

1.4.1. Illuminated manuscripts

Very often, as in the the two examples below, the Baroness's hand-written and decorated poems invite a spontaneous – and provocative – association with the medieval technique of the miniature. However, her intentions in animating the written page with drawings is more than decorative, since drawings and verses establish a comprehensive narrative. While in medieval miniature the illumination was often an

ornament to the text, the Baroness's verses would prove lacking of relevant portions of contents, should the drawings be taken away.



EvFL, 1922ca, *Lullaby*.



EvFL, 1924ca, *Wing of Lucifer*.



EvFL, 1924ca, the reverse of *Wing of Lucifer*.

As it clearly emerges from the reading/observation of these two manuscripts (both postcards to Djuna Barnes),⁷⁸ the sketches would make little sense if taken individually; in *Lullaby*, for instance, the three objects represented would look like little more than doodles if they were extracted from the page. The totem of *Lucifer* would make little sense if not paired with the tantric verses of the poem; the association of the content (a feminine body reacting to sexual arousal) gives an ironic slant to the demoniac title.

Lullaby is very explicit, naming its sexual topic in the second verse. In an original way, this poem about the feminine orgasm starts from what should already be the acme of a poetic climax, only to escalate further, leading us to “glory.”⁷⁹ In addition to growing in size, they grow in abstractness, suggesting the mind-blowing bodily feeling they imitate. The first doodle illustrates a penis demystified in size and role, reduced to a sexual tool aimed at the task which is expressed in the first three verses. The second drawing is similar to the first, but is more dynamic, ambiguous, since it alludes to three different forms: a penis, a pen, and a snake. Obviously, the association of this drawing to the alliterate verses “death / devout” builds on common associations, including the association between the snake and death. Worth a mention is the association of pen and penis, certainly no news, but rarely put into such a context; in a poem (*hand-*)written by a woman and concerning the feminine orgasm, the pen stands for the pleasure a woman gains from writing – no longer men’s prerogative. For Elsa, this kind of pleasure is not merely intellectual – as it was according to the Gilbert-Gubar’s understanding – but strongly physical; the act of holding a pen(is) empowers

⁷⁸ Both of the poems address body-related themes that caused the Baroness defamation and censorship in her own time. The only possibility of the Baroness’s poems being published – although not as integral collections – laid in the hands of Djuna Barnes, to whom most of the Baroness’s poems were dedicated, including *Wing of Lucifer*. Barnes was the Baroness’s most consistent patron and friend after they first met in New York; she was also Elsa’s editor, but, despite concerted effort during the mid-1920s, Barnes’s project to see Elsa’s poems published as a collection never came to fruition. Censorship was prohibitive, and Elsa was too eccentric to gain critical credit; in fact, Elsa quite quickly lost the approval of mainstream society, by wearing ice-cream-soda spoons as earrings and tomato cans strung over her breasts, which she intended to symbolise the commodification of exaggerated femininity.

⁷⁹ In *Lullaby*, the ironic tone of the whole poem is obvious from the title. By labelling this description of the female orgasm as a ‘lullaby’, the Baroness stands against a whole tradition where it was a woman’s established duty to satisfy her husband sexually before she could lie down to sleep. Woman’s craving for sexual pleasure had been considered a hysterical deviation for centuries – just as much as any literary and artistic endeavour that exceeded a mere recreation of the drawing-room. The orgasm, intense and unconcealed, is the new woman’s lullaby; the pleasure of openly writing about everything is the modern woman’s crusade.

the woman with physical control over the man's centuries-old pleasure tool, putting women in a privileged position.

The third drawing is also ambiguous, resembling the sun, a spiral and a vortex; again, the connection between the drawing and the verse is tight: "earthflight" is a compound created to condense the force-line between earth and air, in order to make it faster and more compact. Two opposite dimensions meet in one word that condenses their horizontal (earth's) and multi-directional (air's) pushes in a spiral of light that also invades the space of the verses.

All the drawings are enriched by ink shading and cross-hatching which blend the lines to create volumes. What could appear to be a graphic ornament is instead immediately made extreme by vertical smudging. As the drawings are realised with ink, fast-drying and permanent (the same ink of the words, thus tightening the connection between image and word), it is likely that the Baroness smudged each drawing as soon as she had finished it, before even proceeding to write the following lines. The space set aside for words is therefore already invaded by the drawings before it can be occupied by verses; the drawing space is equally contaminated by words, because there is no explicit or implicit frame to circumscribe their area. The fourth stanza begins with "by" put on the same line as the spiralling sun, which is mentioned again in the subsequent verse. The vortex illustrating the "earthflight" in the third stanza also illustrates the fourth stanza, where the sun is more explicitly referred to; thus, it connects the two stanzas on both the semantic (vortex, sun) and graphic (smudging ink) levels. More than the other drawings, the spinning sun erodes the distance between words and the drawn shape, between ink-words and ink-lines. Such a process embraces the Futurist and Dadaist impulse to remove the distance between verbal and visual genres, but also responds to the Baroness's personal artistic idiosyncrasies. The fourth drawing only confirms and reiterates what I have suggested so far; the "sun's / passion shape" is completely abstract, recalls the shape of the clouds, thus connecting it to the previous stanzas and preparing us for the abstractness of the last concept of the poem - "glory." None of the drawings, especially the last two, possess a single straight line. Lines are curvy, fluid, sinuous and sexual; their borders are smudged to create shadows and volumes; their vibrations propagate in the space of the verses and connect the drawings to one another. Rhetorical ornaments, figure of

sounds and of speech function as connectors and intensify the cohesive nature of the drawings. Consonances are noticeable in each stanza – ‘m’ in the first one, ‘d’ in alliteration in the second one, ‘th’ and ‘h’ in the third and ‘s’ in the fourth one. The general sound of the poem, when it is read aloud, is sensual and evocative, rhytmed by pauses which echo a panting breath.

The intersection of words and images is perhaps ever more articulated in *Wing of Lucifer*. Interestingly, Zelazo and Gammel placed *Wing of Lucifer* under the section entitled “Poems of Embodiment.” The poems belonging to this section are from different dates, but share a semantic quality: they do not address sex or the feminine orgasm as explicitly as *Lullaby* (which belongs to the “Visual Poems” section), but the act is embodied in words through semantic, sound and graphic evocation. Every verse is constituted by one word, even when the word is just a preposition. The whole poem is played on the alternation of short words, either monosyllables or prepositions, to long words, either gerunds or compound coinages.

Verbal language is essentialised, drained to its basis. Punctuation is reduced to a minimum presence, here dashes and full stops. There are no capital letters (all the manuscripts are in block capitals) to signal the beginning of a new sentence; in fact, there are no sentences at all. All kinds of words, verbs, adverbs, adjectives and prepositions, are entitled to occupy one line on their own, because each of them contributes to the rhythm of the poem.

These strategies, half-way between the verbal and the visual, are noticeable at first glance, and prepare a dynamic structure for the content, which describes a process *in fieri*. The totemic sketched figure is shaped alongside the verses, curving and bending in parallel with them, and thus emphasises the graphic layout of the poem. One verse, “overturn,” very nearly collides with the waist of the totem, who could easily be a representation of a demon, or of a demoniac woman. The verse “surrendering” yields to its proximity with the drawing and invades it, in a sort of post-modern run-on line. If read together, verses and sketch do not create mere resonances, but a truly intertwined structure that sees verbal and visual genres intersect graphically and semantically. The interesting invasion of words into the drawing space and vice-versa is based on a programmatic blurring of the borders between media, which fluidly merge on the common ground of the page. Words bulge into space, running into the

drawing, before meeting the forthcoming line. Such a tight, dialogic use of the written and drawn line goes beyond Barnes's resonances between words and sketches. The use of verses and drawing together, not merely juxtaposed, is one of the Baroness's most fascinating idiosyncrasies through which she represented dynamic processes on the page.

Not only did she alter how poetry is written, but also how poetry is read; her poems were written on postcards (in the case of the two poems analysed), plastic dishes, fabrics-offcuts and even fireworks, they were dynamic and vibrant but also devastatingly precise and revelatory. None of the Baroness's paintings, including *Facing*, exceed 30x30cm in size. By doing so, she demystified visual art by bringing it into an intimate sphere, realising masterpieces on postcards and low-quality paper sheets. She combined the performative exaggeration of the body being fashioned into a work of art with the minimisation of traditional art-forms such as watercolour and portraiture, in order to protest against the idea of art as a commodity and against the objectification of the feminine body.

1.4.2. **Colouring the verse**

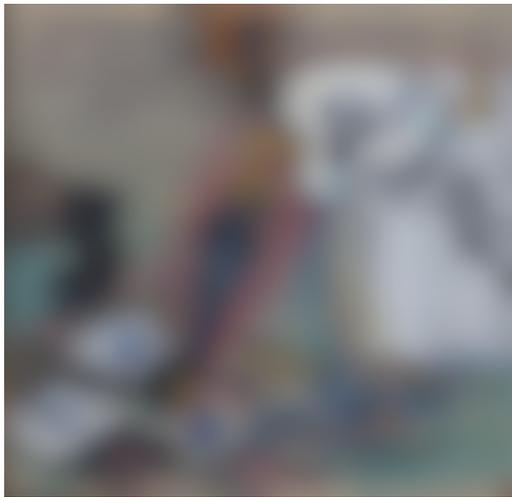
As inseparable as drawn lines and verse are when they appear on the same page, so are colours and verses when they stratify on their reciprocal sense. The Baroness wrote intentionally verses on pages which had been previously coloured, even if she risked making words unreadable. The Baroness's coloured poems occupy a hybrid position between art and literature; they are drenched with colours arranged in abstract compositions, thus requiring an art-critical approach; yet, being on paper rather than canvas, colours appear to be functional to the verse, rather than vice versa.

Although evidently anti-academic, the Baroness's colours are hardly ascribable to any specific avant-garde movement. They are vibrant, dramatic, plastic, sculptural, thick and three-dimensional. Their feverish, obsessive presence takes hold of the observer at first glance, because her approach to the palette is more visceral, *physical*, and her colours on the page look like modelling clay, concrete and invasive. The pages appear to be burdened with colour, almost to the point that paper struggles to support

Part II

words as well.

In some paintings, forms are recognisable, and their connection to the content of the text is clear. Sometimes, instead, the association of colours and words is sensorial, based on the emotional weight of colours. The written paintings below are almost contemporary, yet they are incredibly different, thus showing the versatility of the Baroness's hybrid pages.



EvFL, 1923-24ca, *Forgotten – like this Parapluice*.



EvFL, 1924ca, *Facing*.

Forgotten – like this parapluice pays homage (ironically) to Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), thus triggering a consideration on the difference between masculine and feminine Dada. Neither Duchamp, nor Breton among the Dadaists, seemed in fact to be interested in the use of colours, rather exploring the fascinations of the form. By contrast, colours are pervasive in the Baroness's paintings on paper and in her collages. Perhaps, there is a connection between colours and gender, or at least between colour and emotion. Sensuality extends to the line, which appears fluid, curve, creating an

impression of ‘roundness’.⁸⁰

In the Baroness’s painting, the background comes forward thanks to the lavatory hanging on the wall, which in turn spills water onto the objects on the foreground. In this way the three-dimensional structure is compressed, and all the objects in the painting are given the same priority in the observer’s attention. However, the space does not seem to be as important as the forms; its colours are neutral, sandy and greyish, and the objects do not seem to use it very much. Objects etch the space with thick and seductive border-lines, but they seem to float in space rather than to stand out from dimensional walls. In the Baroness’s *Parapluie* the background space is actually quite irrelevant. The umbrella, whose black and thick lines stand out amid an aura of red colour, grabs the observer’s attention. The strong vibration produced by the contrast of black and red and the slightly mis-centred position of the umbrella both convey a sense of unease to the picture; the umbrella does not lean against a wall, as the title ‘forgotten parapluie’ would invite to expect – it is not possible, simply because there is not a wall for it to lean against. The background loses its spatial role, because it does not fulfil its task of sustaining the objects. The umbrella leans instead on the lavatory, a prosaic replacement that takes any melancholic romance away from the scene.

The thick black net structure of the umbrella guides the observer’s gaze to the written text, which, like the other elements, stands out against the neutral background. While in *Lullaby* and *Wing of Lucifer* the drawings were realised with writing-ink, here the writing is made with the black painting of the umbrella and the fountain. This illustrates the (provocative) nonchalance with which the Baroness inter-bred representational media, thus producing fascinating cross-fertilisations. As suggested by the few lines, the card is addressed to Berenice Abbott, one of the Baroness’s friends and patrons. The *Parapluie* (pun with ‘Berenice’) must have been motivated by a feeling of nostalgia at a time when the two artists were not as close as they had once been. All the visual corollary made of the forgotten umbrella, suspended fountain, and walking-away-foot, acquires sense with the semantic field created by “forgotten” and

⁸⁰ The association comes spontaneous with Zelda’s canvas, also exploding with colours; there too, forms are convex and curvy, lines are fluid and sensual, and the composition appears emotional, seductive and feminine. Like in Zelda’s paintings, in the Baroness’s painting too is there little attention to traditional perspectival cones or diagonals, as everything is just put forward simultaneously for the attention of the observer.

“faithless.” The words are not just a title for the painting; they are a short, but effective verse to which the painting serves as background. Meaningfully, the support used for this work is not the canvas, which would suit the considerable amount of colour, but a sheet of paper instead, as to underscore that the colour is functional to the verse.

The poem *Facing* shows how tightly colours and verse interact on the Baroness’s page; the whole palette is spread on the paper sheet, so saturated with colours that it does not even seem able to support for hand-writing – with the result that the words melt into the abstract, pastel masses of colour. At the price of making words almost unreadable, the Baroness wants words and images to be inseparable in this poem. Expressionist echoes vibrate in the colour-strokes, which look so tangible that they are almost sculptural, an effect conveyed by the choice of pastel. Geometrical lines cut the surface of the painting, which sees no distinction between background and foreground. Yet, seductive spiralling and curve lines are also present, animating portions of space around and beneath the text.

The coexistence of such abstract lines and colourful arrangements is once again functional to the text. The opening image of the poem is the ‘sphinx’, a mythological, inscrutable embodiment of knowledge, who speaks by riddles and is of no help to most humans. In this poem, the Baroness interrogates the sphinx about the past, the future, the essence of God, but is disappointed in receiving the same “riddle eternal” as an answer. Such a mystery can only be represented through complexity – that is to say, in the complete intersection of verses, lines, shapes and colours. The minimalistic stanzas contain essential units of sense, which are spatially disconnected from one another, in order to mimic the fragmentary nature of human knowledge. The human *Streben* to answer existential questions is represented by extremely elliptical one- or two-lines stanzas made of prepositions of place and motion like “Way – – – away!,” “To / Into” and “where – to.” The idea behind this essentialisation of the language is that semantic words failed to carry meaning, both when asking for it and when encapsulating it; they are only good to build riddles that torture the human mind. For this reason, semantic words, including nouns and verbs, are removed from language in favour of prepositions and dashes, which better embody the upwards and onwards drives of the human intellect. “Towards / *whom*” continues the poem, as if the upwards push should lead to God; but then the author asks, “Who – / Is – / He.”

Verbal meaning is also replaced by the emotional evocations of colours.⁸¹ The purple diagonal line accompanies this question and the following “Where – / To” question, highlighting the upward motion involved in looking for these answers. The purple spiral is placed under the verb “whirl” to intensify how much the human intellect fumbles around in chaos. Her questions about the identity of God, of the direction to follow and the way to take, are left unanswered, because the sphinx does not reveal anything: “Not / Tells / Riddle / Eternal.” At the beginning and at the end of the poem the sphinx stands unperturbed and indifferent to human sorrow.⁸²

More interestingly, the purple line that accompanies the modern individual’s fragmentary *Streben* also serves to separate off a corner for other verses. The space cut by the diagonal line in the bottom-right is coloured with the same nuances of red, purple and green (the combination of which conveys a sense of great anxiety) as the poem *Facing*, but the direction of the strokes is perpendicular to those that serve as a coloured background for the verses. The colours establish a connection between the two poems, but the direction of the strokes strengthens a formal difference. The verses in the bottom-right corner are a quotation in German from Goethe’s *Wandrer’s Nachtlied*: “Ach – Ich bin des / Treibens müde – / Was soll all der / Schmerz und Lust? / Süßer Friede – / komm – ach komm / in meine Brust!”⁸³ Goethe’s poem on the weariness caused by the *Wanderung* was obviously well-known in Germany and Europe at the time the Baroness quoted it – it had also been set to music by Franz Schubert in 1815. But it is interesting to witness how the Baroness reinterprets the quotation to let it suit to her own *Wanderung*. First of all, the poem is in a subordinate position in the bottom corner, yet still steals space from the Baroness’s widely spread verses. Secondly, the partition of the verses is different from that originally employed by Goethe in his poem. While Goethe wrote “Ach Ich bin des Treibens müde!” in a whole line, the Baroness breaks the original verse into two parts, connected by an enjambment “Ach – Ich bin des / Treibens müde.” Likewise, she splits article from

⁸¹ Carol P. Biggam, 2012, *The Semantics of Colour: A Historical Approach* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press).

⁸² The poem is not the only type of verbal text to find space on the coloured surface. In the top-right corner the inscription “To Djuna” makes it clear that the poem contained in the card is not meant to be a private existential wandering of the mind on the essence and meaning of human existence.

⁸³ “I am weary with contending! Why this pain and desire? Peace descending, come ah, come into my breast!” translation by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

subject (“der / Schmerz”) and later verb from complement (“komm / in meine Brust!”) between two lines, whereas Goethe’s poem had no enjambments. The degraded, marginal positioning of Goethe’s poem, in addition to the disarticulation of the original verses, produces a debasement of mainstream high poetry; but even more meaningfully, it suggests that it is necessary to demystify the traditional *Wanderung*, which was yet impossible in the Baroness’s time.

Goethe’s search for knowledge, truth and meaning embodied a Romantic positive push, a unitary push of the human soul that aimed at a superior level of conscience. As such, so unitary and complete, it was spoken by full sentences, emphatic and driven, but organised in the orderly lines of a song (*Nachtlied*). The Baroness’s Dada *Wanderung*, by contrast, is not a unitary impulse; it is a collage of disembodied questions, fragments of language and punctuation (“Where – To”) which are juxtaposed in space in no recognisable poetic scheme. Goethe’s exclamation marks and commas are flattened into dashes, thus suggesting the absence of the Romantic enthusiasm; dashes stand for torment, for the hiccupping, delirious wandering of the modern mind. The final exclamation mark in the Baroness’s quotation therefore acquires the tones of a desperate call, more than the involved invocation it was in Goethe’s poem. Even “Friede” gains a different connotation; while it meant ‘peace’, ‘fulfilling’ and the achievement of the wanderer’s tasks in Goethe’s poem, it acquires more extreme nuances in the Baroness’s quotation. It could represent ‘peace’ from her restless inner search, or equally ‘listlessness’ or ‘apathy’, similar to the indifference of the sphinx. The Baroness’s tension cannot be expressed by words only, because verbal language collapses under the weight of the enigma; it needs to be expressed by graphics and colour too, by sensual lines loaded with the emotions of cold and dark colours.

On this small foil of paper of 11x19cm, the Baroness condensed most antithetic pairs: English vs. German language; literature vs. visual art; classic literature vs. Dada anti-art; rich, articulated, complete syntactical structures vs. fragmented, elliptical, mutilated language; organic, recognisable poetic genre vs. collages of poetic units scattered in space. The list could obviously continue with many other pairs, such as male vs. female writing, or genre vs gender, each of which could be widely discussed. But my intention in addressing this hybrid card – at once definable as poem, painting

and collage – was to highlight the Baroness’ idiosyncratic use of colours and words, thus illustrating their reciprocal functionality in her work. Colours and words are intersecting, intertextual, and intersemiotic, orchestrated in only apparent chaotic arrangements.

1.4.3. From idiosyncrasies to hypotyposis

Like for Loy, for the Baroness too it is hard to extrapolate a trope that could ground her idiosyncratic simultaneous use of colours, verses and drawings on the same page. Looking at the Baroness’s entire corpus, which includes the most diverse genres and art-forms, I found a common denominator, whose presence is, in a way, rhetoric. The feminine body is a constant presence in all of the Baroness’s works: *her own* body, posing unadorned and naked in the early photographs; her parading body, dressed in Dada couture of her own making; her sexualised body, caught in the sexual act in most of her poems. (Her) feminine body represents the constant embodiment of her verses, performances, pictures and sculpture. Therefore, I would argue that there is a rhetorical foundation for the Baroness’ work, namely hypotyposis of the body, which is omnipresent and unavoidable: “Her dancing body, ever present in these verbal collages, also take us beyond the page” (Gammel 2011: 7).

The hypotyposis is an extremely powerful rhetorical device, thanks to its striking visual component. Its basic definition as “lifelike description” of something that is not present involves an important visual margin, which in the case of the Baroness is strengthened by the addition of actual visual elements alongside the words. The Baroness’s double language suits this rhetorical device particularly well, because the visual intersects with and vivifies the verbal, and vice versa. In this way, language becomes dynamic, involving a continuous addition of sense, and avoiding its sedimentation. Furthermore, the reader adds another level of sense-stratification through the interpretation of verbal and visual signs and of their combination. Thus, the Baroness’s text is activated as a complex process where the double nature of the language amplifies the contents, and the necessarily double-reading on behalf of the reader/observer amplifies the range of possible interpretations.

From my readings, I have highlighted at least four levels at which the hypotyposis of the sexualised body structures the narrative of the Baroness. The first level of presence of the body in the poems sees it as the object of discourse. The first section of Gammel and Zelazo's edition of the Baroness's work, *Body Sweats*, is named "Coitus is Paramount. Poems of Love and Longing," and gathers most of the poems concerned with the representation of the body during sexual intercourse: this presentation of the body is the purest, most explicit way in which the body is explored in the verses. Poems of this section are *Ejaculation*, *Desire*, *Firstiling*, that address the coitus in a direct way, and where the body is mainly semantic. Other poems in this section, including *King Adam*, *Aphrodite to Mars*, *History Dim*, are pseudo-mythical poems that rewrite human history and beliefs in an ironic way. Here, the body is still explicitly addressed in the description of sexual climax, but it also acquires allegorical function, metaphorical weight and an ironic tone. In *King Adam*, the Genesis of man is re-written with mocking and provocative tones, as Adam does not seek forbidden knowledge but strives for the moment of ejaculation.

More interestingly, though, the hypotyposis of the body acts at a structural or functional level. In these poems, including *Wing of Lucifer*, the body is not addressed explicitly, but is evoked by the mention of bodily functions. Another one of them, *Kindly*,⁸⁴ opens solemnly, with "God spoke kindly to mine heart –" and continues with a bathos "He said: "Thou art allowed to fart!"." The poem then goes on with a series of "(f —)" on the edge of each line – onomatopoeic sounds that gained this poem censorship until the 2011 edition. Such poems can be defined as "poems of embodiment" (Gammel & Zelazo 2011), given the hypotyposis of the body at a semantic *and* structural level.

The third level of hypotyposis of the body in the Baroness's poetry is the processual one. Most of the poems included in the sections "Poems of the City and Consumption" and "Performing Nature" show how the sexuality of the Baroness's body extends into the metropolis and into nature. By setting bodily sexuality within both metropolitan and natural scenes, the Baroness challenges the Dada paradigm of

⁸⁴ This poem became famous for its inscription inspired by Joyce's *Ulysses*. This poem is deliberately provocative, part of the Baroness's project of liberating women from sexual taboos, the struggle for gender equality and denunciation of social psychological and physical pressures on women. Such a programmatic protest, which was unsurprisingly attributed to the Baroness's suspected neurasthenic disease, was expressed through the description of physical functions.

the dominating machine. The frame of the body is applied to her poems about nature to reach an “ironic inversion of romanticism’s encounter with the sublime” (Zelazo & Gammel 2011: 120). Likewise, the paradigm of the sexual body is applied to the city: instead of enduring a mechanisation on behalf of the city, the body succeeds in sexualising all kinds of urban experience. The city is narrated through the phases of a bodily process, producing a sexual narrative of the metropolis. On such dynamics, I will however debate in the next section, which centres on the relationship between women, art, writing, and city.

The graphic arrangement of the verses establishes vertical pushes that dart through the page, in the quick sequences of one- or two-words verses. Such visual directrix, alongside the highly physical relationship between the author and her poetry – every poem being written by hand – seals the presence of the body at the compositional and graphic level too. In conclusion, the hypotyposis of the body, multi-layered and multi-functional, inter-medial and constitutive, is the rhetorical structure that supports the Baroness’s entire production.

1.5. Unaffiliated aesthetics

In different ways, the art of all four writers is always on the verge between word and image. Looking at the comparative settings proposed, fascinating conclusions arise on the nature of these artists’ experiments with intermediality.

The use of drawing as corresponding to poetry characterises, for instance, several combinations in the corpora of both Djuna Barnes and Mina Loy, to the point that it seems a pattern. Similarly, profusion of colours in Zelda Fitzgerald’s paintings appears to be associated with her preference for dense and articulated prose, as if her desire to condense memories, impressions and wishes, could be fulfilled by these two genres. It has been interesting, then, to study how these sorts of ‘temporary alliances’ between verbal and visual genres stand on rhetorical basis. However, such bonds between poetry and drawing, and between colour-painting and prose, seem to be easily untied, in some cases. For instance, many of the Baroness’s poems display elliptical verses as merging with the colours of the background, thus not conforming the

regularities highlighted. Yet, again, the pervasive use of colours appears to be somehow related to gender awareness, in the paintings by Zelda and Elsa. Such difficulty to encapsulate the corpus in strict formulations represents indeed its source of interest and continuous critical challenge.

Modes of provocation, exploration, artistic transit, reckless intermediality in all four writers also defy their assimilation into aesthetic groups. In different ways, each of them detached from recognised avant-gardes, thus avoiding theoretical crystallisation. Most of the times, challenging borders was a dangerous choice, as we are constantly reminded while reading the work of the Baroness. In this respect, the cases of Barnes, Loy and the Baroness proved particularly meaningful to study the problem of critical labelling.⁸⁵ While their geographic wanderings coincided with artistic wanderings, they always put themselves outside the many artistic groups they transited across, including women's groups.

Duchamp's comment on the Baroness "She is not a Futurist. She is the future" could easily apply to all four the profiles, since in different ways they showed to be ahead of avant-garde itself. Undoubtedly, there are plenty of further channels of analysis, besides their use of lines and colours, that illustrate how all four found ways to run ahead of their time. One of these is the exploration of the antithetical pair centre vs. margin, which runs throughout their corpora in the forms of representating the urban landscape.

⁸⁵ This is because all of them formed their identities as artists while being geographically and intellectually involved in European centres of avant-gardes – each of which had a specific manifesto – including Munich (for both), Berlin, Paris (at different times) and Italy. Zelda Fitzgerald, instead, remained almost completely outside the scheme of artistic affiliations, as she was never actively, or directly, involved with her husband's intellectual acquaintances. She certainly came in touch with Parisian modernism, but as 'wife of the genius' Scott (to use Stein's phrasing), rather than for her own talents – that up to those years were not directed to writing or painting anyway, but to dance exclusively.

Chapter 2

The lure of the city

*And all great art is born of the metropolis
(or in the metropolis).*
Ezra Pound, 7th November 1912.

The city of New York underwent great and fast transformation between the nineteenth and twentieth century, becoming at once the city of focus and transit of many artists and writers, including the four under consideration. Particularly, it impacted significantly upon their narratives, contents, and even language. During its climb to become the financial capital of the century in the 1910s and 1920s, the city of New York experienced growth in every field, from the economic to the social, to the artistic – a process whose speed obviously involved bitter downsides. Both lure and downsides are extensively textured in the visual and verbal corpora of the writers I have chosen, in such ways that they seem to fit de Certeau’s much later considerations:

Its [New York’s] present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future. A city composed of paroxysmal places in monumental reliefs. The spectator can read in it a universe that is constantly exploding. (de Certeau 1984: 91)

Certainly, New York was not the only “gigantic mass” to throw a lure of attraction and repulsion on artists and writers. The opposite forces that animated the city fascinated and repelled artistic creativity on a transatlantic axis between European and American metropolises. Cities began to expand, metaphorically too, to form a trans- and

international urban *koiné* of artists and writers that connected Dos Passos to Gertrude Stein, Scott Fitzgerald to T.S. Eliot. In *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (1983),⁸⁶ Marshall Bermann shows the complex dynamics between modernism and modernity, meeting and interacting on the urban field. The complex “texturology” (de Certeau 1984: 92) emerging from Bermann’s work supports the idea of cities as transnational geographical and metaphoric spaces, where philosophical thought, literary production and art intertwine. Borders among such disciplines become porous; a new aesthetic of urban modernity lives on the surface of the city and hermeneutically serves the purpose of representing and interpreting the modern city.

New York seems to exert a particular fascination on Barnes, Loy, Zelda and Elsa. At least for some years, New York became the gravitational centre of their lives and works, though not for all simultaneously. Djuna Barnes’s stories and related vignettes, and Zelda Fitzgerald’s *Save Me the Waltz*, along with her paintings, portray the formation process of the new American urban core, depicting both its vitality and its conflicting aspects through different but powerful means of expression. The poems by the Baroness and those by Mina Loy expand on the downsides of galloping capitalism and on the birth of consumerism.

As in the first chapter, here I have highlighted the three main ways in which the city is represented, borrowing the specific terminology from the visual art; the snapshot,⁸⁷ the panoramic tableau and the collage apply to both verbal and visual representations of the city. Once I have traced the techniques with close-reading and close-observation, I will illustrate the common rhetoric denominators which support these artistic expressivities.

2.1. Close-ups and snapshots in Djuna Barnes

In most of her articles and stories from 1913 onwards Barnes used to assume the role of a city walker, whose task was to frame and to picture aspects of the city. While

⁸⁶ Marshall Bermann, 1983, *All that is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Verso).

⁸⁷ A term which I borrow from photography, in fact, but which I mainly apply to Djuna Barnes verbal and visual sketches of the American years. Like the snapshot, Barnes’s sketches are quick and spontaneous, and they are specifically aimed to portray small portions of (urban) reality.

many scholars see Barnes's journalistic pieces as mere "muscular stretching" in preparation for her more mature works such as *Nightwood* (Levine 1991: 29), they do have literary and artistic relevance in their own right. Particularly, they show a unique balance of text and image which is hard to trace in later works. Such integration offers the perfect ground of analysis to compare the rhetoric of words and drawn lines, to highlight symmetries and parallelisms.

Barnes wrote more than forty pieces of journalism about New York, including interviews, articles, stories, anecdotes and satires. The stories are extremely varied, and while some read naïve and amusing, other explore serious social issues – always with Barnes's typical humour. Douglas Messerli, who wrote the forward to the first edition of *New York* (the 1989 collection of Barnes's American articles and short stories edited by Alyce Barry), asserts that Barnes succeeded in grasping the "simultaneity of the beastly and the saintly, of cultures 'high' and 'low'. In these still-fresh portraits, the city of New York is perceived by Barnes as an enormous landscape of theatre, of circuses, operas, street performances, carneys, hawkers, con-men, clowns, and just a few saints." (Messerli 1990: 12) Barnes's idiosyncratic combination of high style, comic acuity, and disquieting oddness allows her to frame all the alienated, uncomfortable scenes of an urban panorama as well as the most fascinating ones.

2.1.1. The female Spectator

A close-up point of view appears to be the first common denominator of Djuna Barnes's texts and images. As if they were verbal snapshots, isolated frames that zoom on particular scenes, all the stories about New York begin *in medias res*. No background knowledge is provided about the scene which is about to be shown; introduction and setting lack completely:

Once, twice, thrice the cup of life has been emptied; once, twice, thrice the wheel has ceased to spin and run down; once, twice, thrice a girl, leaning across a polished table top, has learned that only a strip of wood separates her from the garden of love. [...] So, at Coney, the night in a fashionable

hotel sees the same play out to the end. Beneath the glare of the electric lights, under the seductive charm of the band behind the palms, the straight black eyes of Therese glow. (Barnes 1913: 43)

The *incipit* of “The Tingling, Tangling Tango as ‘Tis Tripped at Coney Isle” depicts the scene of the dance room with a few quick strokes that let the reader sketch the essence of the setting. The linguistic texture is at once dense, synthetic, precise and evocative. The use of adjectives is considerable but controlled, while Barnes is focused on defining a few effective details, which make the scene essential but vivid. Syntax does not merely describe, but indeed embodies the scene itself using rhythm: sentences are hardly ever longer than one clause, and the use of full-stops and semi-colons is extensive. Overall, the syntax is dry and paratactic, as hammering, regular and definite as ink strokes. All the meaning is condensed in well-chosen words, including “run down,” “spin” and “lean,” that weave a texture of motion and dynamism.

The language of this piece also shifts on the visual sphere, where a contrast between black and white, darkness and light dominates the scene. Rhetorical devices enrich the linguistic level with metaphors, similes and synaesthesia, but, to those who are familiar with Barnes’s satirical tones, the tropes employed acquire irreverent nuances. Grandiloquent and synesthetic phrases like “under the seductive charm of the band behind the palms” obtain an ironic and sarcastic effect.

The drawing accompanying “The Tingling, Tangling Tango as ‘Tis Tripped at Coney Isle” shows strong assonances with the verbal text of the story, thus supporting the suggestion that words and images share the same rhetorical ground.



Djuna Barnes, 1913, “The Tingling, Tangling Tango as ‘Tis Tripped at Coney Isle.”

Evident at first glance, the exaggeratedly posh pose of the male character in the vignette accompanying the story echoes the irony that in the text is obtained through the hyperbole. The woman behind him, might as well be Therese, whose “straight black eyes [...] glow.” In the vignette, the point of view is close-up, there is almost no background, and figures are incomplete. While in the short story specific lexicon and accurate word-choices arrange the scene with a few details about the characters and even fewer about the setting, in the drawing Barnes only takes care of the facial expressions, whereas she leaves the clothing, furniture and even the lower part of the woman’s body incomplete. The body of the man is only hurriedly outlined and filled in with approximate black colouring. In comparison to the careful studies of the Beardsleyan vignettes, this one clearly reflects the speed of the sketch, which leaves little time for further stratification. The stories and vignettes only display the foreground, and are often unconcerned about leaving details or aspects of the foreground unexplored, so that the reader can complete the image independently. The quick and evocative nature of the sketch suits perfectly the articles and illustrations about New York.

As Sha observed, the sketch is the closest visual means to human perception, because it is selective, and it only allows the observer to see the meaningful aspects; from these, the observer can abstract the rest of the scene, which is otherwise only

partially perceived by the individual. Barnes's vignettes are extremely basic, incomplete and with very little stylistic elaboration. The contiguity of text and image at this level is self-evident: the stories begin *in media res*, they have neither past nor continuation, no development, growth or change; similarly, the drawings have no three-dimensional stratification, they have no past, or background, because the foreground is the only dimensional space available.

2.1.2. Rhetorical implications

The adoption of a close-up point of view is what enables the comparison between text and drawing of "The Tingling, Tangling Tango as 'Tis Tripped at Coney Isle." Among the implications of such narrative choice, there are elements of rhetoric and syntax that are worthy of attention.

Once again, the synecdoche is the dominant rhetorical feature. According to de Certeau, synecdoche naturally accompanies the adoption of close-up points of view, which in turn urge the artist to select carefully the parts which are implied in the figure and to charge them with metaphorical meaning.

Synecdoche expands a spatial element in order to make it play the role of a "more" (a totality) and take its place (the bicycle or the piece of furniture in a store window stands for a whole street or neighbourhood). [...] Synecdoche makes more dense: it amplifies the details and miniaturizes the whole. (de Certeau 1984: 95)

In the small portion of text illustrated and in the related drawing, synecdoche is still efficient enough to let us abstract (sketched) figures and a (very incomplete) setting; but we are unable to abstract a whole scene from the fragments, which we can only leave as juxtaposed in the air. In this phase of Barnes's work, synecdoche starts developing the dysfunctionality it later acquires in *The Book of Repulsive Women*.

Like sketched lines, sentences also fail to connect back to a totality: the various fragments do not seem to refer to a whole and syntactic items appear to fail building up full sentences. In Barnes's visual frame, lines and details are juxtaposed into sorts

of paratactic organisations; in the text, clauses are similarly juxtaposed in asyndeton. Parataxis can therefore be broadly applied to both writing and drawing as a composition technique: in writing, parataxis consists in the juxtaposition of sentences, whose dependence on one another is weak and loose; likewise, lines are hardly ever continuous in Barnes's drawings, which depict instead an approximated sketch – such a strategy, which evokes but does not manifest a whole, serves as a counterpart to the weak links among sentences in parataxis.

Referring once again to de Certeau, asyndeton is a syntactic structure which well suits close-observation, in this case streetwalking; it understates the connections between fragments, empowering (or forcing) the reader to see with the eyes of the streetwalker:

Asyndeton, by elision, creates a “less,” opens gaps in the spatial continuum, and retains only selected parts of it that amount almost to relics. [...] Asyndeton disconnects them by eliminating the conjunctive or the consecutive (nothing in place of something). (de Certeau 1984: 95)

In the case of some stories, the language is so drained that it becomes almost mechanical, thus apparently contradicting de Certeau's opinion that the margin of subjectivity in the close-up observation is irreducible. *Incipit in medias res*, “right-word” strategy and elliptical syntax all took Barnes to extreme sorts of experimentation which challenge the very limits of prose, in an extreme use of asyndeton:

Scene: The tracks along Meeker Avenue. Year: 1913. Time: 3:30, any day.
(Incidental remark: It was some job getting Connors on the run.)
John Kelley “Kid” Connor's motorman, comes along on the front deck of a trolley car, power and brake handle in hand; old, too, and “wise in his craft.”
(Barnes [1989]: 81)

“Conductor ‘Kid’ Connors. Forty Years Ringing Up Fares” belongs to a series of nine interviews, “Veterans in Harness,” that Barnes conducted in the autumn of 1913 for the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*; the interviewees are elderly men, mostly former immigrants, who are still at their jobs. However, the interviews are not conducted with a question and answer model, they are rather organised as sketched portraits that

alternate direct speech with descriptive sections. Each interview is constructed to be a little frame of the subject, which is similarly reproduced in the sketched portrait. The opening lines of “Conductor ‘Kid’ Connors. Forty Years Ringing Up Fares” (1913) show how far Barnes reached in her experimentation with parataxis. Commas, semicolons or weak conjunctions like “and” and “or” do not support the diversity between the clauses they connect; most clauses cannot be even classified as such, because they lack either subject or verb, or both. They are so elliptical that they resemble asides, but they are used as clauses, put next to one another in a paratactic organisation. Sometimes commas are even put after a lone complement, a time adverb or a conjunction, as if to separate the numerous items of a list rather than to assemble the clauses of a sentence.

The beginning of the story is so condensed that it recalls stage directions, thus hinting at a possible incursion of drama into journalistic prose. Setting, time, characters and scene are condensed in a few lines, listed through an essentialised conception of asyndeton.

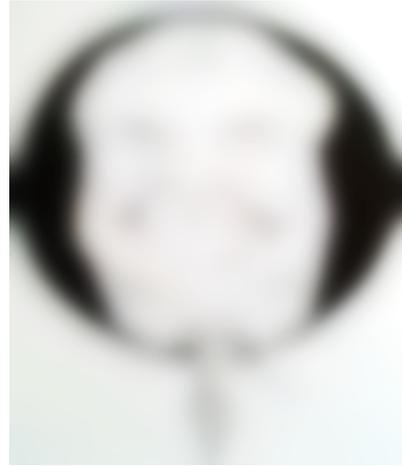
The interviews (verbal sketches) are all accompanied by quick and essential face-portraits, sometimes caricatures, often partially unfinished or so quickly sketched that they appear incomplete. Among the many portrait-frames that accompany the interviews, the illustrations of “Veterans in Harness” support my argument that the sketching style is close to parataxis in narrative terms. The sketched portraits of Thomas Baird and Dan Sheen belong to the same collection of interviews, and well exemplify the phase of sketching style that Barnes was exploring in 1913. Figures are not as essential as those of *The Book of Repulsive Women*, which would only be published two years later. We cannot yet speak of dysfunctional synecdoche, which only takes place in parallel to the approach to poetry as a literary genre. But the figure is not complete either, and lines are not always continuous, somatic traits are roughly outlined, and some details are even absent. Perhaps there is still too much of the human figure in these pictures to compare it with the bodily fragments scattered in space in the drawings of 1915, but they show the direction of Barnes’s techniques.



Djuna Barnes, 1913, “Thomas Baird” and “Dan Sheen,” from *Veterans in Harness*.

The beard of Thomas Baird, his right ear and his right eye are left to the observer’s compensatory imagination. Dan Sheen’s face is created by an opposite technique that yet produces a similar effect to that of the first image. The right side of his face appears heavily crosshatched, so that the eye is reduced to a black patch and the observer has to engage in a visual process of compensation to complete the figure.

The evolution of Barnes’s drawing style is clear to see when her drawings are compared in chronological sequence; “Thomas Baird” and “Dan Sheen” illustrate the 1913 stage, while “Irvin Cobb” and “James Buchanan Brady,” below, show the progression towards the essentiality of the 1915 drawings.



Djuna Barnes, 1915, "Irvin Cobb."

Djuna Barnes, 1914, "Though He Is a Diamond in the Rough You Can't Get Away from Him Without Taking a Memory You Are Not Likely to Forget."

The sketches of Irvin Cobb and James Buchanan Brady explain how fundamental the years spent as a journalist have been for Barnes's developing a fully aware artistic reflection. From a linguistic point of view, Barnes's stories represent an interesting moment of transition. Tropes are not yet completely emptied of their rhetorical function, but they are strongly challenged, as remarked by the irreverent similes of "Becoming Intimate with the Bohemians." The prose has few examples of the one- or two-words lines that are found in the 1915 poems, but it is fragmented into brief clauses through the use of asyndeton. Syntactic units may not be verses yet, but they certainly show a push in that direction, only being held together by weak paratactic links. As a counterpart, the drawings do not initially exhibit the massive dichromatism of later illustrations, but as they approach 1915, the drawings indulge in progressively more essential lines and colour masses. When considered chronologically, they exhibit a progression towards encoding and encrypting, which passes through the fragmentation or agglomeration of the drawn lines.

2.1.3. Frames: from journalism to fiction

Comparing the stories with the related drawings on a rhetorical level, thus evidencing the use of corresponding visual and verbal techniques, drives me to widen the scope to the narratological level. The aim is to illustrate how the nature of the point of view, tropes, and narrative choices converge into (and are determined by) the construction of the frame, which is the narratological structure of the urban texts and images under analysis. Throughout Barnes's whole literary work, the frame undergoes transformations and evolutions, but is always structural to the composition. Both in the early stories and in later, longer works, the frame circumscribes – and sometimes *imprisons* – content and characters. Some of Barnes's stories from the 1915s and her 1928 novel *Ryder* appear ideal to illustrate how the frame evolves from the New York journalism to the literary works of the late twenties.

“Becoming Intimate with the Bohemians” (1916) is one of Barnes's most famous New York stories, and serves as a great example of how the frame is used as a common narratological device of the verbal and visual vignettes in the early phase of Barnes's career. The wider frame is Greenwich Village, home of the New York bohemians. The area is clearly delimited by Barnes's point of view, who uses the word “foreigners” to describe those who do not belong to the quarter, and employs phrases like “I personally am with them.” Within the wider frame of the artistic ghetto, Barnes brings together sketches of the most relevant characters, such as the writer and painter Marsden Hartley, Guido Bruno, editor of the *Bruno's Weekly*, and other bohemians.

Four o'clock in the afternoon and someone has spilled a glass of wine; it creeps across the tablecloth in a widening pattern of sulky red. It is morning in Bohemia.

In a little back room, with pictures hanging crooked on the wall, lies King McGrath, far from the tumult and shouting [...] Yea, for the King has a cold.

Now, while Jack lies there staring at the painted face of the Virgin, [...] the Queen of Bohemia arises, and I cannot tell you her name.

(Barnes [1989]: 223)

This passage evidences once again a considerable use of parataxis. A very essential but clear context can be pictured from the first few words; the initial paradox (“four o’clock in the afternoon [...] it is morning in Bohemia”) clarifies immediately the exceptional qualities of Greenwich Village, the bohemian quarter. The “people of the night” are presented in a rhetorical texture of paradoxes and bathos (“the King has a cold,”) soon establishing themselves as being marginalised from the rest of the metropolis. Within such a frame, Barnes zooms on corners and subjects as if she were tracing quick ink strokes on the blank space, etching isolated details on the white background. The external frame is clearly New York itself, while many of the vignettes focus on depicting interesting corners of the city. “Becoming Intimate with the Bohemians” exemplifies Barnes’s habit of tracing the frame very clearly from the beginning of a story. Specific time and place indications come sharp and precise, essential, as decisive and clear as a sketched lines. The description starts with only a few details of interest, with the circumstantial indications, which would normally be expected not to be mentioned. Such a technique, for example, focusing on a “sulky red tablecloth” before (in fact, without) any mention of an inn or a café, is representative of Barnes’s report-style.

As it is typical of the sketch, the narrator is in charge of what the reader is allowed to see; she provides very rich descriptions of restricted portions of the sight-field, but leaves the reader completely ignorant about what is outside them. Because of this lack of context and circumstance, the reader cannot develop a personal opinion on what or whom is described. The narrator’s opinion is not explicit, but is conveyed through both the semantic and the rhetorical texture. Suspense, irony, sarcasm, litotes, climax and bathos manoeuvre amusingly the reader’s gaze and opinion. The narrator also assumes an ‘I’-form, which is most of the time autobiographical, taking on Barnes’s role of reporter, interviewer, observer *and* bohemian artist. The restricted area of the frame had been carefully sketched and enriched by the narrator so that the reader is prepared to share her point of view once she has revealed her position. Such an intention is strengthened by the occasional use of “we” and “us,” which in many of the stories suggests the reporter’s wish to create a united front with her audience.

The passage above also displays dense intertextuality, which is another representative feature of Barnes’s writing and drawing. She makes reference to Nina

Hamnett, known as Queen of Bohemia in New York and Paris, and to Jack McGrath, known as the King of the Village. In the context of the frame as narratological *topos*, intertextuality assumes the potential of being the means that could take the reader outside the frame of the text. However, it does not give access to the context or setting of the story. Instead, intertextuality defines the nature of Barnes's stories, which run on the edge of journalism as a commodity and transnational literature.

In the following passage, anarchist Polly Holladay's eatery and Bravoort pub are hinted at as an artist hangout. The names of van Gogh and Bakst evoke a certain kind of art, thus suggesting the set of ideas shared by the people in the basement of the Bravoort, including Barnes herself:

Well, isn't Bohemia a place where everyone is as good as everyone else – and must not a waiter be a little less than a waiter to be a good Bohemian? [...] He feels that he has to be negligent before he can be Nietzsche.

Between this hour and six, which is known as Polly's hour or the hour of the Dutch Oven or the Candlestick, the tea tipplers and the cocktail dreamers gather slowly in the basement of the Bravoort. Upstairs is respectability, wife, children, music; a violin plays a sorry tune like melancholic robins on a telegraph wire charged with gossip. In the basement is all that is naughty: spicy girls in gay smocks or those capricious clothes that seem to be making faces at their wearers, such as the gowns of Gaugh. Wild, wild exotics of fabrics – effects of Bakst. Men with arms full of heavy literature, pockets jingling with light coin, resplendent in ties – hold, Allen Norton has described them: [...] And again – but no, you have an idea of those wrinkling satin ties. (234)

Traditional rhetoric is degraded by irreverent similes, for example: “a violin plays a sorry tune like melancholic robins on a telegraph wire charged with gossip;” bathetic juxtapositions such as “Men with arms full of heavy literature, pockets jingling with light coin” mock the rhetorical legacy of the anticlimax, only to further play with syntax and colloquial incursions such as “resplendent in ties – hold” and “And again – but no, you have an idea.”

The scene that I have considered exemplifies Barnes's conception and use of the frame as a structural device and as a rhetorical feature in the early years. Within the external frame of New York, Greenwich Village stands as a frame in its own right, which in its turn contains a myriad of smaller, close-up frames. In this case, the story

shows two levels, and represents therefore an evolution of the simple frames of the stories presented so far. The two frames do not communicate with one another, but remain parallel and symmetric. The vertical tension between the upstairs floor and the basement of the Bravoort is constructed through the differences between the people attending the two parallel settings; upstairs is an exhibition of a bourgeois (stereo)type, which is unequivocally recalled by the juxtapositional chain “respectability, wife, children, music.” A few strokes sketch the scene, which is later overloaded with the pathos of the “melancholic tunes,” and which is eventually satirised by the ridiculing simile of the gossipy robin on the telegraphs. The basement, specular to the upstairs floor, is crowded with all kinds of “naughty” characters. Interestingly, and thus highlighting the narrative symmetry, the characters that animate the basement are sketched and juxtaposed with the same quickness as the attendants of the upstairs room. The same ironic contrast between polished vocabulary and prosaic details is employed in the description of the lower floor. For the upstairs room, Barnes carefully chooses bourgeois stereotypes, which contain implicit criticism of the falsity and emptiness of decayed values. Upper-class prescriptions of respectability, of a family-model where the wife takes care of several children within protected spaces, with the soft notes of drawing-room violin in the background, are unmasked by the subsequent simile, where the word “gossip” reveals the nature of the context. The basement, instead, is animated by girls, who are surrounded by semantic threads of naughtiness and irreverence, but also of truthfulness, with the adjectives “spicy,” “gay,” “capricious,” “wild” and “exotic.” Such would be the subjects of a modern painting, where van Gaugh’s exotic female subjects caught outdoors replace indoor settings and wives or wives-to-be of traditional portraiture.

While the articles and short stories offered a limited field for Barnes to test the potential of the frame, the long prose of *Ryder* – which we cannot really define as ‘novel’ – proved an adequate testing ground. Barnes’s 1928 text evidences an extremely varied use of the frame, of which innumerable creative applications add to the reader’s confusion. In *Ryder*, published in 1928, the frame appears deeply transfigured, endlessly stratified and complicated. *Ryder* differs greatly from any of Barnes’s previous literary endeavours, both in terms of form and content. Within the external frame of the family chronicle, *Ryder* is a highly experimental work which

covers a wide range of literary genres and forms. According to Ponsot,⁸⁸ it imitates and mocks an outstanding range of literary forms, including “sermone, anecdote, tall tale, riddling, fable, elegy, dream, epigram, vision, parable, tirade, bedtime story, lullaby, satiric couplet, parallel structuring, ghost story, debate, sententia or aphorism, and emule or epitome activated as epiphany” (Ponsot 1991: 94). The drawing style too appears to have evolved from the journalistic vignettes, and has become stratified and intertextual, recalling traditional genres and rhetoric, which are constantly challenged by mundane contents.

Within such experimental virtuosity, it is clear that such traditional elements as coherence or cohesion have no place in the plot or in the style. Fragments of bodies – similar to those in *The Book of Repulsive Women* – serve the purpose of creating continuity, although certainly not a unity. Once again, dysfunctional synecdoches prevent the parts from being connected by abstraction. Parataxis and asyndeton are also present, although exacerbated in flashing deliriums; the endless monologues of doctor O’Connor, which run for entire paragraphs before meeting a full stop, serve as good examples of the evolution of parataxis. The units (not even *sense* units) are emptied of syntactic connectors, juxtaposed with no semantic connection, only graphically aligned by commas and semicolons.

He [a man, not further qualified] looked into that mirror when he was a growing lad – in that room he was born, – well, he looked into that mirror as a lad, and understood that face. What must it be? When he looks and sees a face he does not understand? Troubled – why? [...] He says to himself, ‘I must abandon you. How shall I abandon you?’ Thus he makes for himself a pact. If I kill me, my corpse shall be, in my terms absolute, and by myself, myself made not myself – voilà! (Barnes 1928: 203)

The doctor, who speaks, is meant to be a mentor to Wendell, an inveterate cheater who only causes pain to his whole family. But the doctor’s parables show no moral, no sense and no point. Clearly, his didactic dialogue is merely formal, as he raves following spontaneous associations. Rhetorical questions, parataxis and any other type of syntax undermine the construction of unitary meaning. Narration is denied, as

⁸⁸ Marie Ponsot, 1991, “A Reader’s *Ryder*,” in Broe (1991), pp. 94-136.

progression is impossible to pursue. Sentences only have the *looks* of meaningful sequences, but they end up being delirious juxtapositions of incoherent clauses. By extension, dialogical articulations only maintain the external structure of actual conversation.

Ryder is the longest ‘novel’ Barnes has written, longer than *Nightwood*. Yet, every chapter is stylistically and semantically different from the others, as if each of them enclosed in a frame one aspect of human misery. In *Ryder*, the frame as a *topos* is developed to become symbolic and structural. One chapter is a letter; another one is a parable; others are confessions, poems or passionate exhortations. There is no connection between them except for the fact that their characters are all members of Wendell Ryder’s family. The chapters-list gives an idea of the diversity of the narrative frames, also considering that none of them are longer than a few pages.

- 1: Jesus Mundane
 - 2: Those Twain – Sophia’s Parents!
 - 3: Sophia and the Five Fine Chamber-pots
 - 4: Wendell Is Born
 - 5: Rape and Repining! --
 - 6: Portrait of Amelia’s Beginning --
 - [...]
 - 16: The Coming of Kate-Careless, a Rude Chapter
 - 17: What Kate Was Not
 - 18: Yet for Vindication of Wendell
 - 19: Amelia and Kate Taken to Bed
 - [...]
 - 27: The Beast Thingumbob
 - 28: If Some Strong Woman –
 - 29: The Psychology of Nicknames
 - 30: The Cat Comes Out of the Well
 - 31: No Greater Love Hath Any Man.
 - 32: The Soliloquy of Dr. Matthew O’Connor (Family Physician to the Ryders) on the Way to and from the Confessional of Father Lucas
 - [...]
 - 44: Fine Bitches All, and Molly Dance
 - 45: Dr. Matthew O’Connor Talks to Wendell on Holy Inspiration
 - 46: Ryder – His Race
 - 47: Going To, and Coming From
 - 48: Elisha in Love with the Maiden
 - 49: Three Great Moments of History
 - 50: Whom Should he Disappoint Now?
- (Barnes 1928: 1)

Each of the chapters/frames encloses a vignette whose borders cannot be crossed by the characters. Individuals are prisoners in their frames of daily sorrow, victims of human relationships which they are unable to develop through communication because their own psyche has become a prison, a frame. Similarly, the drawings do not offer a means of escape for their subjects. They either illustrate one of the chapter's scenes, or reproduce caricatures of the subjects; prisoners within the limits of their own frames, characters cannot transit across the borders of the vignettes, which do not constitute a sequence. Like the verbal language, which evidences significant changes from the New York years, the style of the drawings appears radically different from the urban sketches. It clearly hints at European woodcuts and emblems of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries; but such authoritarian visual genres are soon desecrated by bestial subjects.



Djuna Barnes, 1928, illustration from *Ryder*.

Barnes's attitude to visual traditional genres appears similar to the ways in which she puts herself into conversation with the literary tradition. While she de-authorises woodcuts and emblems by associating them with subjects of modern degradation, she demystifies a different literary form in every chapter, or frame. Such processes also

stage complex and sometimes problematic dynamics between gender and genre. The hybrid literary and visual forms that Barnes explores from time to time – early in her report-short-stories and later in her eclectic ‘novel’ – invite us to reflect on such issues as genre negotiation with men’s literary tradition. I will address such issues in the third chapter, where gender- and genre-claims become louder as I analyse Barnes’s later works.

2.1.4. Theory and praxis of urban walking

According to de Certeau, whose formulations are useful to approach Barnes’s stories, streetwalking and close observation push the artist to focus on particular city-frames, excluding what surrounds them. Such an approach results in a range of formal instinctive style choices, including brevity, conciseness and precision, and in the use of specific tropes of thought and speech, including respectively synecdoche and asyndeton. However, Barnes’s use of such devices results in a peculiar kind of fragmentation that goes beyond the general effect of the sketch-like quickness they normally achieve.

In order to study Barnes’s peculiar ‘street-walking’, de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) can be usefully supplemented by Giuliana Bruno’s *Atlas of Emotions* (2002). According to Bruno, a close-up point of view is not only subjective, but emotional too, so that there is an interesting connection between motion and emotion.

When we speak of site-seeing we imply that, [...] the spectator is rather a *voyageur*, a passenger who traverses a haptic, emotive terrain. (Bruno 2002: 16)

A mapping of space is engaged in the (e)motional dynamics of establishing, traversing, and leaving places. (Bruno 2002: 84)

Rather than being ‘emotional’, though, Barnes’s gaze appears ‘gendered’. In this respect, Bruno’s reflections on space-gendering appear more suitable.

The figure of the promenade is [...] created by way of peripatetics located in the path of reception, and developed along the observer's route. The architectural ensemble [...] share the framing of space and the succession of sites organized as shots from different viewpoints. Additionally, the elements are adjoined and disjoined by way of editing. [...] Architecture – apparently static – is shaped by the montage of spectatorial movements. (Bruno 2002: 56)

Far from being emotional, Barnes's gaze is nevertheless 'gendered', as it re-defines the paradigm of urban streetwalking for twentieth-century women. It can perhaps be argued, that, being a woman artist in the metropolis, Barnes needed to find a sort of legitimacy for her own "streetwalking." She succeeded in fashioning for herself the role of the reporter – neutral, professionally allowed to work on site; by doing so, she became a 'female spectator' of the city, thus defining a new (gendered) perspective of urban walking.

To some extent, Barnes seems to embody a peculiar type of *flâneuse*, which does not however fully correspond to Deborah Parson's considerations in *Streetwalking the Metropolis* (2000). Barnes's New York activity as a journalist does not really fit in the idea of a "leisured *flâneuse*" in the Baudelaireian style, as it is suggested by Parsons. Barnes's *flânerie* is rather connected to the forms of journalism, including down-to-earth pragmatism mitigated by humour, satiric appeal and irony – far from what Parsons defines as Barnes travelling through "the inner streets of the mind and the outer streets of the city, to trace a self and a text" (Parsons 2000: 182).

Perhaps, to conclude, a very loose connection can be evoked with Virginia Woolf's 1927 essay "Street-Haunting. A London Adventure." Both Barnes and Woolf walked the streets, Barnes with reporting purposes, Woolf with the expedient of buying a pencil – to *sketch*, indeed, peculiar corners of the metropolis. While Woolf's sketches, somehow more fluently, portray a flashing fluid of witty ekfrastic vignettes, Barnes's urban frames are organised into a wide and rich system, the most external of which is the metropolis itself.

2.2. Zelda Fitzgerald's second birth

Unlike Barnes, who was born and grew up in New York, Zelda only moved to New York as an adult, after spending a tranquil, pampered childhood and adolescence in the countryside. This latter circumstance was foundational, according to Nancy Milford, who starts Zelda's biography by saying: "If there was a confederate establishment in the Deep South, Zelda Sayre came from the heart of it." (Milford 1970: 1) According to Milford, the years spent in Montgomery influenced her later experience of New York. She highlights that Zelda's origins and her position as the youngest daughter of a wealthy southern family let her grow up as the jewel of the family, the beauty of the countryside, talented, dreamy and emotional. "From the beginning she was her mother's darling and her pet. [...] Mrs Sayre nursed Zelda until she was four years old. She showered her with attention and praise; her faults were quickly excused." (Milford 1970: 3) Thus, Zelda's girlhood passed like a romance, in a privileged environment, where she, the Montgomery dancing *belle*, was paid attention by friends, men and relatives, and was praised for her beauty and her talents.

Zelda's completely different (from Barnes's) experience of the city, so romantic and familiar, was deeply embedded in Zelda's personality and psyche, and flew naturally into her adult writing and painting once she committed to represent metropolitan scenarios. Significantly, she came to know about New York through Scott's letters, where he told her about the marvels of the metropolis. From these tales Zelda started weaving a romantic vision of a city she had never seen before, making of it a sort of a larger-scale-Montgomery – a dreamy composition of expectations, opportunities, fantasies and love. Such a mental canvas was impressed deeply upon Zelda's teen-psyche, and always remained an emotional substrate in any later representation of the city. For years before actually moving to New York, she dreamed about its lightened streets, its stages, ballet rooms, social events, idealising the whole metropolitan lifestyle in vivid colours. In *Save Me The Waltz, Alabama* (her fictional alter ego) recalls how she used to daydream about New York; like Zelda, Alabama first gets to know New York through her boyfriend's letters, and starts composing mental images of the city, images that always accompany her later recollections.

[Alabama] "I meant to make money in America."
"Everybody intends to."
"I had letters."
"You can put them in your book when you write it."
"I am not a writer."
"All people who have liked America write books. You will get neurosis when you have recovered from your trip, then you will have something that had so much better be left unsaid that you will try to get it published."
"I should like to write about my travels. I liked New York."
"Yes, New York is like a Bible illustration, isn't it?"
"Do you read the Bible?"
"The book of Genesis."
(Fitzgerald 1932: 72)

Significantly, New York is described in biblical tones, with the traits of a genesis; for Alabama and Zelda, whose careers and artistic profiles were launched in the metropolis, New York assumed all the traits of a second birth. What appears to be a naïve conversation, full of day-dreams, is in fact dense in contents, commonplaces, rhetoric and references. The American dream is enclosed in the first two lines, and is followed by another commonplace, that of writing a travel-book about the American city. In this collection of stereotypes, the Englishman sounds assertive and aphoristic,⁸⁹ and Alabama/Zelda sounds witty too, with the ironic statement "I am not a writer."

Zelda's verbal and visual recollections of the city (which she compiles years after having left New York through the voice of Alabama) always maintain a common substrate of romance, which might derive from her juvenile romantic experiences of Montgomery and idealisation of New York. She never gave up her deeply-rooted fantasy of New York as a dreamland full of opportunities, even when it strongly contradicted her direct experience. Thanks to this thick emotional substrate, her frames of New York and Paris are different from those of the other writers; she encloses a rich, even panoramic view of the city within her frames, emotional tableaux that condense events and memories in peculiar, idiosyncratic ways.

⁸⁹ Elsewhere in the novel, Alabama's perception of Englishmen in America is clarified: "These Englishmen were sent to New York to save them from decadence and the American gentleman is seeking refinements in England."

2.2.1. Subverted perspectives

Zelda Fitzgerald's urban paintings are evidently antipodal to Barnes's dry sketches of New York. They are also realised later in time, and, while they were painted in the 1930s and 1940s, they depict the New York of the 1920s. Zelda's pictures of New York are retrospective, in clear contrast to Barnes's on-site sketches, because Zelda became a professional painter only decades after having lived in New York.



Zelda Fitzgerald, 1944ca, *Washington Square*.

Zelda Fitzgerald, 1940s, *Central Park*.

The nature of Zelda's point of view in her paintings of New York emerges as peculiar at first glance. Far from depicting a reduced portion or small details, Zelda's frames show extensive panoramic views of the city, observed from a distant point of view. However, the observation point remains *only physically* detached. Zelda's paintings do not appear to fit the conventions of panoramic perspective, if we judge by Benjamin's thoughts (1939) on panoramic representations of the urban reality.

Zelda's representations of the city are all characterised by a feeling of nostalgia, stratified with memories, expectations, and enthusiasm – all in the space of the same frame. Such a peculiar retrospective panoramic view sets the mechanics of a dual point of view. In the two paintings above, Zelda finds herself both *inside* and *outside* the city she paints; she is physically distant but psychologically involved. In

Washington Square, the arch, the buildings behind it, and the shops⁹⁰ compose the panoramic view framed in the painting. But the married couple marching in the foreground – Zelda’s daughter Scottie and Ensign Jack Lanahan, married in 1943 – seem to marching toward us and outside the frame. The baby-pram, the young child and the dog behind them probably represent Zelda’s family life, and the phases of Scottie’s growing-up. Leaving biographical correspondences aside, the painting is particularly interesting because of its point of view, which is half panoramic, half internal. Differently from that of Barnes, Zelda’s frame is never *closed* or completely circumscribed. The figures inside find a way to force the frame-borders, as a consequence of her emotional involvement. All memories are connected in Zelda’s mind, so that when she tries to frame them, no matter how panoramic the frame is, they give the impression of coming from, and heading towards, what it outside the frame.

Central Park illustrates this last suggestion even better; although the observer is *in* the park, she renders an overall, panoramic representation of the city. Multiple, heterogeneous components of the modern city coexist within the frame: skyscrapers, the park and its river, pedestrians, artists, businessmen reading newspapers. These aspects of the urban context are configured in opposition to one another, and yet they establish a strange dialogue. Nature, for example, represented by the trees, is opposed to the cement of the buildings on the skyline, but it is nonetheless connected to them somehow: the leaves on the trees are vaporised into patches of the same colour in the air which symbolically cross the bridge, and then become sky clouds. They gradually lose substance, to become the smog inhaled by the people on the other bank. Thanks to Zelda’s oneiric poetics of representation, dynamism prevails and allows metamorphosis to occur, even between apparently incompatible opposites. In the modern city, nature melts with urban architecture and businessmen walk side by side with ballet dancers. Perhaps it could be argued that the bold juxtaposition of people from different contexts embodies Zelda’s desire to incorporate all aspects of her life in a collage-painting. However, every subject or aspect of the painting connects strictly to the others through colours, shapes and style. The frame encompasses a colourful and flowing representation of the city, more than a patchwork of collage-units. The

⁹⁰ The shop’s tent on the left has the same pattern of the *Puppeufee* circus tent.

merry emotion, expressed through the colours, permeates and connects all the elements in the frame of happy memories, all of which the observer enjoys simultaneously.

The two paintings analysed seem to echo Scott's (and David's) juvenile letters, which coloured New York with candy colours and day-dreams. The following passage from *Save Me The Waltz*, which describes Alabama and David's euphoric life in the metropolis, highlights the similarity between Zelda's visual and verbal narrative technique:

The New York rivers dangled lights along the banks like lanterns on a wire; the Long Island marshes stretched the twilight to a blue Campagna. Glimmering buildings hazed the sky in a luminous patchwork quilt. Bits of philosophy, odds and ends of acumen, the ragged ends of vision suicided in the sentimental dusk. The marshes lay black and flat and red and full of crime about their borders. Yes, Vincent Youmans wrote the music. Through the labyrinthine sentimentalities of jazz, they shook their heads from side to side and nodded across town at each other, streamlined bodies riding the prow of the country like metal figures on a fast-moving radiator cap.

(Fitzgerald 1932: 57)

The point of view belongs to Alabama, who is both physically and emotionally involved in the frame described; but since the book is written in retrospect and the narration is in the third person, Zelda's external description lends a panoramic margin to the view. The picture resulting from such a combination is therefore *panoramic* in the spectrum which is covered by the frame, but is also highly involved and *emotional*.

Urban features of New York and Long Island, like streets, buildings and marshes, are secondary to the realisation of the tableau. They serve as background for the pastel colours of twilight, and for art, philosophy, jazz music, the true subjects of the painting. This emotional tableau condenses the light and darkness of the city. The harmonious contrast between what is melancholic and "sentimental," and between what is artificial and technological, is smoothed and reconciled in Zelda's rhetorical use of language, which floods the page from the first sentence.

"The New York rivers dangled lights along the banks like lanterns on a wire" opens the panoramic frame by depicting the coexistence of natural and artificial lights in the city. The contrasting elements of the streetlights on the banks and the river

reflecting the light of dusk are connected through a texture of assonance, consonance and alliteration. “L” is the prevailing sound, repeated in alliteration (“lights-lantern”) and reiterated in the following metaphor, of which it stresses the weight: “glimmering buildings hazed the sky in a luminous patchwork quilt.”⁹¹

While walking as a child with her mother, Alabama confessed her desire to move to New York once she has grown up. ““I want to go to New York, Mamma,” said Alabama as they read Dixie’s letters. “What on earth for?” “To be my own boss.”” David’s letters⁹² too leave a great impression on Alabama’s young imagination – like Scott’s letters did on Zelda – and root deeply in her mind. As it emerges from the paintings and the novel, Zelda-Alabama sees the city through the lenses of her girlish expectations, even after witnessing the dark sides of the metropolis. Thus there are at least three temporal phases stratified in the novel’s urban visual and verbal frescoes: Alabama’s childhood and girlhood, the (fictional and biographical) years spent there as a young wife, and the recollective adulthood when she condenses it all in her emotional panoramas.

Another meaningful example⁹³ underscores Alabama’s (and Zelda’s) very visual recollection in the novel. After a few glamorous years in New York, Alabama and David leave for Europe. Heading to Paris through Provence, the couple looks back from their vantage point on the ship at the New York skyline.

The coast of Europe defied the Atlantic expanse; the tender slid into the friendliness of Cherbourg amidst the green and faraway bells and the clump of wooden shoes over the cobbles.

⁹¹ A darker shade, contextualising the sense of anxiety related to the double faced city, is textured in a gloomier semantic chain, which includes “bits,” “ends,” “suicide” and “crime,” and is reinforced by colours like “black” and “red.” Light and darkness, pastel nuances and dark colours are not simply juxtaposed but intertwined in the same tableau, harmonised by jazz rhythms.

⁹² When David left for the port of embarkation, he wrote Alabama letters about New York.

“City of glittering hypotheses,” wrote David ecstatically, “chaff from a fairy mill, suspended in penetrating blue! Humanity clings to the streets like flies upon a treacle stream. The tops of the buildings shine like crowns of gold-leaf kings in conference—and oh, my dear, you are my princess and I’d like to keep you shut for ever in an ivory tower for my private delectation.” (23)

⁹³ Or, as another example: “In the city, old women with faces as soft and ill-lit as the side-streets of Central Europe offered their pansies; hats floated off the Fifth Avenue bus; the clouds sent out a prospectus over Central Park. The streets of New York smelled acrid and sweet like drippings from the mechanics of a metallic night-blooming garden. The intermittent odours, the people and the excitement, suctioned spasmodically up the side-streets from the thoroughfares, rose in gusts on the beat of their personal tempo. Possessing a rapacious, engulfing ego their particular genius swallowed their world in its swift undertow and washed its cadavers out to sea. New York is a good place to be on the upgrade.”

New York lay behind them. The forces that produced them lay behind them. That Alabama and David would never sense the beat of any other pulse half so exactly, since we can only recognize in other environments what we have grown familiar with in our own, played no part in their expectations. (Fitzgerald 1932: 73)

In Alabama's memories, New York is the place where she was born as an artist and dancer. As she leaves New York behind, she recalls melancholically the forces that animated the city, the impulses that steadily tore apart the bowels of the urban texture, making such a "gigantic mass" into a perpetually dynamic creature. Going beyond de Certeau's personification of the city in the "gigantic mass," the metropolis appears sublime to Alabama, like a creature fed by creativity, capable of demanding the best and the worst from its inhabitants. In Alabama's extremely concrete mental image, the city is daubed with big, emotional strokes.

Her expectations for their new life in France are as vivid as the warm colours of her canvases. The scene is almost synesthetic, dense as it is with sounds, colours and emotion. Even more intense is the panoramic frame of Manhattan behind them. The city, which we could imagine being painted in orangey and grey tones, is associated with "the forces which forged them" by syntactic analogy. Thus, the *leitmotif* of the city being alive begins and is then strengthened in the subsequent sentences.

2.2.2. Beyond the frame

Alabama's (and Zelda's) point of view qualifies as dual. Especially in the last piece analysed, the point of view on the city could not be physically more external. It is even conveyed in third person, which should invite a certain detachment. But the view of the two coasts is not just subjective and nostalgic, it is at once extremely emotional and concrete. Alabama visualises vividly the French soil, the shore with its pebbles, and even the gentle noise of driftwood lapping onto these stones. Such peculiar duality finds only partially space in theoretical formulations, especially de Certeau's and Benjamin's ones on the panoramic view.

To Benjamin, “long perspectives of streets and thoroughfares correspond to the inclination, noticeable again and again in the nineteenth century, to ennoble technical necessities by artistic aims.” (Benjamin 1939: 159) Here, the tendency to represent unitary panoramic views of the city appears to stem from a political plan which aimed at depicting, or encouraging, a sense of coherence and order through architecture:

The institutions of secular and clerical dominance of the bourgeoisie were to find their apotheosis in a framework of streets. Streets, before their completion, were draped in canvas and unveiled like monuments. (*Ibid.*)

Here, Benjamin roots the origin of the panoramic view in a European architectural tradition, which he applied particularly to the Paris of the nineteenth century. Still, Benjamin’s considerations do not apply to Zelda’s tableaux of Paris, which discard such concept of the panoramic view, understood as neat and ordered.

Benjamin’s thoughts about the panoramic observer seem virtually to find, even momentarily, development in de Certeau’s reasoning. In *The Practice of Everyday Life* de Certeau appreciates that the symmetry between the panoramic and the unitary, between the tableau and objectivity, is valuable only on a theoretical level:

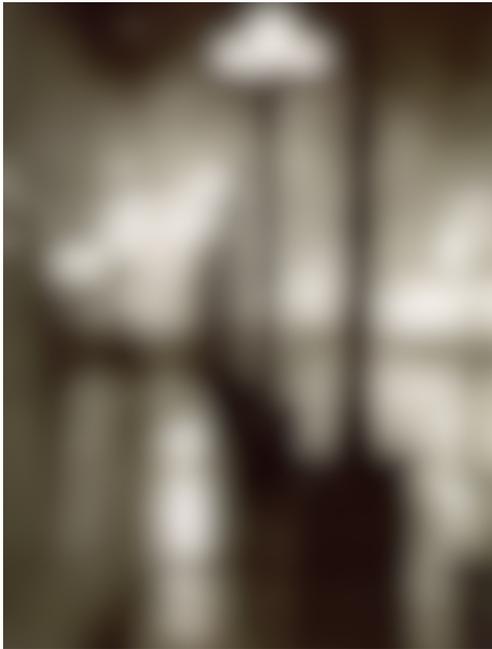
The panorama-city is a “theoretical” (that is visual) simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and misunderstanding of practices. [...] another “spatiality” (an “anthropological” poetic and mythic experience of space), and to an *opaque and blind* mobility characteristic of the bustling city. (de Certeau 1984: 93)

Yet even de Certeau’s reasoning applies only marginally to Zelda’s use of the panoramic model. In depictions of New York, a city which lacked a centuries-long tradition of urban representations, the panoramic pattern in the “European” sense does not find space – not at the beginning of the century at least. Panoramic representations evolved spontaneously in Europe throughout centuries, whereas they were developed at a later date in the United States and was interpreted in different ways.

Zelda’s peculiar points of view on the city sets up conversations with other panoramic models from the early 1900s, including those proposed by photographers

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such as A. L. Coburn and Alfred Stieglitz. Between the 1900s and 1910s – and in the 1910 collection, named *New York* – Coburn realised several photogravures and photographs of the city displaying a strong Impressionistic taste to the panoramic frame, which seems to be evoked in Zelda’s watercolours. Stieglitz’s role-plays between subjective and objective, between panoramic and close-up, and between internal and external point of view, seem to be also part of Zelda’s background.



Alvin L. Coburn, 1905, “Broadway at Night.”



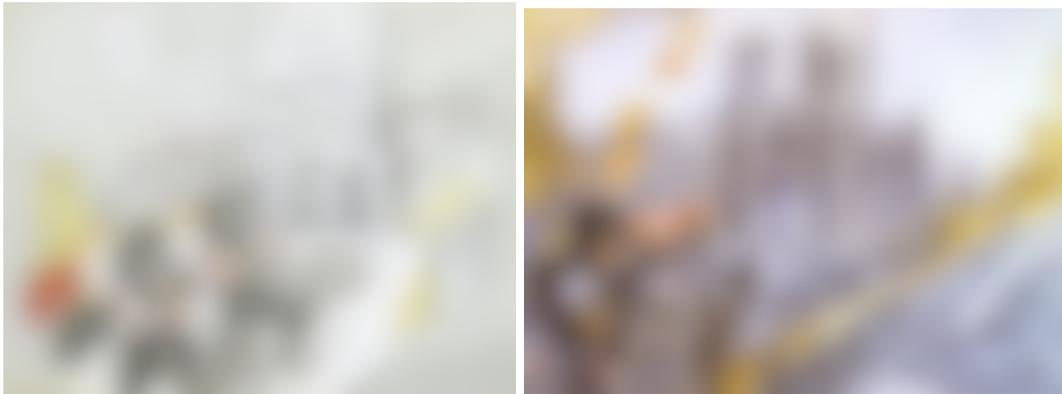
Alfred Stieglitz, 1911-1913, “Two Towers—New York.”

Almost thirty years after Coburn’s and Stieglitz’s works, Zelda proposed a curious technique, which moved from panorama to close-up in the wake of a newly formed tradition of interpretations and re-scriptures of the panoramic view. Zelda Fitzgerald’s external, all-embracing point of view becomes paradoxically emotional and intensely subjective. The falsifying impersonality of the panoramic view, which was mistrusted by de Certeau and Benjamin, may be re-evaluated if, by analysing Zelda’s technique, we acknowledge that an irreducible subjectivity of perspective enriches, rather than invalidates, the panoramic representation.

The following comparison appears relevant to highlight even more the contrast between the European panoramic model and Zelda's own emotional panoramic view:



Georges Stein, 1901, *Notre Dame—Paris*.



Zelda Fitzgerald, 1944ca, *Notre Dame, Paris*.

While Georges Stein's panoramic view of Notre Dame square and streets (1901) displays considerable originality in the proto-Impressionist painting style and technique, it shows to be influenced by a European tradition of panoramic representation, thus conforming nineteenth-century panoramic models. From almost the same observation point, Zelda's assemblage condenses instead everything but objectivity and proportion. In her emotional tableaux, she gives birth to a kind of panoramic view which is opposed to the (mainstream) European understanding of

‘panorama’. Like she does in the New York frames, she splits the point of view into two, a physical and an emotive perspective, which do not coincide.

Zelda’s two paintings of *Notre Dame* are very similar and it is unclear which was painted first. Yet, somehow, they are complementary, and are worth being analysed together. The first painting seems to be less complete than the other; it clearly shows the use of graphite together with colours, and the top left corner is particularly bare. However, the foreground seems to be more complete, since in the second canvas the carriages on the left side of the frame are cut in half. Moreover, the shapes in the first painting are watery, less concrete and poorly detailed; the carriage caps turn into umbrellas in the first foreground, and the buildings in the background blur with the yellow spray on the left. The second painting is wider in scope on the right hand side, which encompasses the riverbank and part of the bridge, but the carriages on the left side are cut off. The umbrellas are still there, orange this time, but they are being carried away by the wind.⁹⁴

The orangey clouds of the bushes and trees turn into a kind of smoke in the air, and eventually into clouds, thus connecting earth and sky. The desire to connect all the layers and dimensions of the composition is once again achieved through the use of colours, which remain Zelda’s main narrative device. The unusual but suggestive matching of greys, oranges and reds produces a melancholia that echoes Zelda’s mood as she committed her memories of the city to the painting. The unrealistic shades she uses to personalise her urban scenes remind us that we are looking through the frame of Zelda’s emotions.⁹⁵

Very often, and as the paintings of *Notre Dame* show, the objects and subjects of her painting exceed the frame. The cut-off carriages in the second *Notre Dame* exemplify how the dynamic pushes that move the objects within the frame do not find

⁹⁴ Umbrellas are a *leitmotif* in paintings during the 1930s and 40s; a luxury accessory until the nineteenth century, umbrellas became more accessible in the twentieth century, a fancy utility for ladies of fashion and wealthy men. For Zelda, the umbrella was certainly an accessory which confirmed her attention to the Parisian fashion just as much as her drop-waist skirts and high heels.

⁹⁵ Without digressing too far from the topic of the frame in the two *Notre Dame* paintings, I think a brief consideration of the physiognomy of the horses is worthwhile. Although the low quality of my resized images makes it hard to notice, the horses have red lips and eyelashes; such a ‘make-up’ gives them a similar look to the other painting I analysed in the first section, *Puppeufee*. This detail should not be neglected, because it triggers a reflection on the concept of the puppet that I will develop later in my work. While in *Notre Dame* the horses’ faces might just convey a naïve tone to the whole picture, reminding us of Zelda’s playful way of subjectivising the frame, they can be understood within a wider discourse on Zelda’s reasoning on the mask.

an origin or end there. As a matter of fact, such an overflow of figures outside the frame only confirms the amount of pathos and emotions that overload the canvas. Zelda's paintings are emotional, other than motional, since they are moved by dynamic pushes that find their origin in her psyche. While viewing the panorama, the observer also enjoys an open window into Zelda's mind, her memories and feelings.

2.2.3. Hypotaxis and palimpsest: the architecture of vision

The narrative of 'exceeding the frame' acts in both paintings and texts; in both, it lies on rhetorical basis, particularly on a figure of speech, the hypotaxis. On canvas, elements connect, intertwine, stratify on one another like a continuum flux, that even forces the borders of the frame. Characters seem to move on centrifugal pushes, and to head towards outside the frame. All elements seem to be fluid, moving in and out the frame, overloading the surface with colours and emotions. In prose, the flow of words and thoughts seems to force syntactical schemes similarly to how shapes and characters force the borders of the frame in the pictures. The rhetorical common ground for these 'excesses' seems to be the use of hypotactic constructions.

Hypotaxis implicates complicated structures. As it consists in the subordination of syntactic units in a complex sentence through the use of causal, consequential or other conjunctions, the reading requires more time. A text organised with a hypotactic structure is more complicated, but also appears more cohesive, so that the general sense is that of a whole concept. While each paratactic unit could theoretically stand on its own, hypotactic units need the clauses on which they depend to make full sense. As a result, paratactic discourse produces a sequence of independent concepts, while hypotaxis develops one articulated and complex concept. If visually we can imagine parataxis as linear, hypotaxis consists of a complicated architectural structure that has as many levels as the clauses it includes in a sentence.

Zelda Fitzgerald's verbal and visual corpora share an extensive use of hypotaxis, here considered as a linguistic strategy and a *forma mentis*. Zelda's thinking presents itself as highly visual, and as such imprints on her narrative choices. On canvas, the simultaneous work on shape, line and colour allowed her to increase her spectrum of

expressive possibilities; on the written page, her use of complex syntax and her way of playing with adjectives and words in profusion enabled her to deal with the complexity of the character's (and her own) simultaneous thoughts and emotions. The result is, in both cases, the construction of architectural systems of vision:

The rickety taxi poured them through the splendid funnels of Provencal shade and scrambled them over the parched stretches between the vineyards. It was as if the sun had absorbed the colouring of the countryside to brew its sunset mixtures, boiling and bubbling the tones blindingly in the skies while the land lay white and devitalized awaiting the lavish mixture that would be spread to cool through the vines and stones in the late afternoon.

(Fitzgerald 1932: 87)

When Alabama feels overwhelmed, as in the passage above, regular hypotaxis turns into a critical over-stratification of clauses, which expresses the character's will to convey all her feelings and thoughts at once. In such view, a full stop, or even a semicolon, would interrupt the flow of her emotions, which may be contradictory, but always simultaneous. The hypotactic structure serves in such cases to support the labyrinthine architecture of Alabama's psyche.

In both paintings and novel, Zelda forces the tolerance threshold of narrative structures, altering their standards to suit the complexity and simultaneity of her emotions. Whilst in Barnes's work parataxis was carried to its extreme, namely asyndeton, hypotaxis is taken to excess in Zelda's feverish emotional compositions.

2.2.4. Urbanised prose

The city is constantly present in the novel in themes and references. But as the narration proceeds, and as Alabama grows up as a city woman, the urban architecture and its rhythms affect the character's thinking too. Once in Paris, her obsession for ballet becomes dominant, the central (if not the only) topic of narration for several chapters. Panoramic views are internalised by Alabama, who is self-focused in her loneliness and her obsession. The colours of Paris only marginally touch Alabama's

attention, since she is focused on the colours of her daily rehearsal.

November filtered the morning light to a golden powder that hung over Paris stabilizing time till the days stayed at morning all day long. She worked in the grey gloom of the studio and felt very professional in the discomfort of the unheated place. (Fitzgerald 1932: 135)

Compared with the extensive description of New York, the references to Paris hardly create frames; in fact, they resemble single strokes, giving mere hints of the city only to quickly return to Alabama's concerns. In the short quotation above, the autumnal light tinges the frame with gold nuances and colours it with melancholic tones. But the focus is immediately moved back to Alabama, who rehearses in the grey light of the studio. The urban picture suffused with a golden light remains empty.

At other points the frame does not remain empty, but appears too sketched and elusive to be classified as a panoramic view, as in this description of Alabama's journey to her ballet lesson:

One morning Alabama came early to her lesson. Paris is a pen-and-ink drawing before nine o'clock. To avoid the thick traffic of the Boulevard des Batignolles, Alabama tried the Metro. It smelled of fried potatoes, and she slipped in the spit on the dank stairs. (Fitzgerald 1932: 161)

The passage above, which represents one of the rare cases when Zelda detaches herself from hypotactic patterns, reflects Alabama's hurry to reach the studio; among the one-verb sentences, a panoramic reference to Paris finds limited space. The metaphor of Paris as a pen-and-ink drawing is particularly meaningful: not only does it reinforce the argument that Zelda's thinking is highly visual; it also signals how deeply the city has been internalised in her thoughts. The reference to Paris comes absentmindedly and remains undeveloped, suggesting that she is unconsciously aware of the city around her.

Although urban panoramas are hints in the narration, the city does not disappear completely. Long and panoramic descriptions of the city do become rare, but the narration starts to be studded with phrases which typically belong to the urban semantic field. Daily actions, thoughts and reflections start echoing urban architecture

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and rhythms. The city passes from being an explicit setting to being a metaphor of life and eventually a form of thought. Initially, the city (New York) is continuously named, referred to, described; then, as the years go by and Alabama moves from New York to Paris, it gradually disappears from the text and becomes embodied in its language.

Their life moved along with a hypnotic pound and nothing seemed to matter short of murder. (Fitzgerald 1932: 134)

Bonnie was growing fast and full of anecdotes. (Fitzgerald 1932: 134)

Short and apparently weightless phrases such as these pass by unnoticed in a reading that does not target the exploration of the faces of the city in the text. But, as a matter of fact, the lexicon they stage is not neutral. The life of Alabama and her family is described as moving “along with a hypnotic pound;” for as normal as it is to perceive one’s own life to pass at a very high speed, the phrase chosen recalls the hypnotic pound of the city, its hectic beat, and relentless motion. Likewise, by describing Bonnie as “growing fast and full of anecdotes,” Zelda underlines the symmetry with the fast evolutions of the city itself, always full of anecdotes to tell, learn or gossip about.

Gradually, the city shifts from being an exterior place to an interior place, a frame of mind rather than a setting.

“If you don’t stop that humming, Alabama, I’ll lose my mind,” he complained.

She supposed it was annoying the way the music of the day kept running through her head. There was nothing else there. Madame told her that she was not a musician. Alabama thought visually, architecturally, of music—sometimes it transformed her to a faun in twilit spaces unpenetrated by any living soul save herself; sometimes to a lone statue to forgotten gods washed by the waves on a desolate coast—a statue of Prometheus. (Fitzgerald 1932: 162)

In this passage, David is exasperated by Alabama’s obsession with ballet. When she is at home, she hums the themes of her choreographies and revises steps; she has even convinced Madame to take Bonnie as a pupil. David’s plea that she contains herself

starts a chain of association in Alabama's mind that appear extremely relevant. That "Alabama," and therefore Zelda, "thought visually" was already clear. But her also thinking "architecturally" supports my suggestion that the city becomes textured into the language. Many of the elements that were once objects in Zelda's panoramic and emotional frames recur in her architecturally articulated thoughts. Familiar twilight colours permeate the dreamy space of her vision, where she is alone; a monument dominates the scene, a statue of Prometheus, perhaps inspired by the torch-bearing Statue of Liberty. The statue, the waves and the coast immediately recall her farewell to New York, which she paid from the boat as she wandered on board, picturing the French shores. Zelda's language seems unconsciously to conform to Hemingway's statement that "prose is architecture," with which he expressed the need to reinvent prose at a structural level.

The frame acts in a similar and yet more complicated way in Zelda's novel, because the panoramic view is both ekphrastic and psychological. On the ekphrastic level, the frame encloses wide portions of the urban scenario that appear to be coloured by Alabama's feelings, which are in turn as carnivalesque as Zelda's memories. On the psychological level, there is an interesting reversal in which, instead of having emotions permeate the urban frame, the urban architecture moulds thoughts and feelings. There are moments when Alabama's psyche and the city seem to overlap:

Through the blue lights of the place and the red lamps in iron grilles, the white skin of Madame glowed like the Arctic sun on an ice palace. She did not drink much but ordered caviar and smoked many cigarettes. Her dress was cheap; that saddened Alabama—she had been such a great dancer in her time. After the war she had wanted to quit, but she had no money and kept her son at the Sorbonne. Her husband fed himself on dreams of the Corps des Pages and quenched his thirst with reminiscences till there was nothing left of him but a bitter aristocratic phantom. The Russians! suckled on a gallant generosity and weaned on the bread of revolution, they haunt Paris! Everything haunts Paris. Paris is haunted.
(Fitzgerald 1932: 138)

The scene opens with the blue lights and red lamps at the venue where Alabama and Madame are attending a gala event. The colours of the place smoothly become the colours of Madame, within the same sentence. This is a signal that we are witnessing

the scene through the mind-frame of Alabama, for whom places, people and memories melt in the space of her daydreams. The associative chain runs from Madame to her cheap dress, to her unfortunate financial decadence, to her husband, who contributed to her economic failure, and eventually to the Russians in Paris. Paris, haunted by the Russians, soon becomes the space of her mind, which is haunted by everything. In this light, word-choice shows double-edged. Once Alabama has grown up, her connection with the city is so strong that she uses words that can apply to both herself and to Paris. Sometimes, the loaning of a word from one context to the other is clear; at other times, phrases are combined so naturally that it is hard to say whether they refer to the character or to the city.

The urbanisation of language results from the ultimate merging of Alabama's mind and heart with the urban landscape. The (emotional) textualisation of the urban scenario, which is tellingly progressive in the novel, represents how the relationship between character and city, subject and context, has overstepped the frames of the page and of language. Like in Zelda's urban poems, where subjects seemed to step over the frame in fluid streams of colours, in the novel, characters have absorbed urbanity at an unconscious level; they have become a whole with the city, in a waltz of colours and synesthetic shifts.

2.3. Modern *simulacra*: Loy's urban myths

In a 1924 letter published in the *Transatlantic Review*, Mina Loy chastises those who ignore the impact of modernity on literature and art.⁹⁶

Modernism is a prophet crying in the wilderness of stabilized culture that humanity is wasting its aesthetic time. For there is a considerable extension of time between the visits to the picture gallery, the museum, the library. It asks 'what is happening to your aesthetic consciousness during the long long intervals?'

The flux of life is pouring its aesthetic aspect into your eyes, your ears—and you ignore it because you are looking for your canons of beauty in

⁹⁶ The whole letter is quoted in Lawrence Rainey, 2005, *Modernism: An Anthology* (Oxford; Malden, MA: Blackwell).

some sort of frame or glass case of tradition. (Rainey 2005: 437)

This quotation appears particularly relevant for its explicit use of the word “frame,” which is the core of my analysis in this section. But I also chose it from among Loy’s several aphorisms on modern art because of its figurality and spatiality, which are idiosyncratic in her poems and canvases. According to her, traditional culture, including art and literature, is “stabilized,” static and obsolete in museums and libraries; allegorically, modernism denounces such ‘waste of aesthetic time’ on behalf of humanity, which seems deaf to the call of modernity. It also denounces those who look for aesthetic canons in museums and libraries, which only host simulacra.

2.3.1. **Disorienting architectures, degenerate myths**

Loy’s 1924 letter helps to introduce what seems to be her tendency to evoke tradition then to empty it from the inside. Particularly, the way in which Loy dialogues with myth conveys specific spatial traits to her poetics. Her poetry, as originating from her architectural aesthetics, is intrinsically spatial, both considering the layout and the forms it stages.

The poems and canvases Loy realised during her stays in New York – meaningfully described by Roger L. Conover as “the land without myth and the land of gender” (Loy [1997]: xiv) – prove ideal for the exploration of urban paradigms of space. Particularly relevant to my investigation is “Lunar Baedeker,”⁹⁷ which Loy wrote between 1920 and 1923, and which gave its name to her first American poetry collection in 1923. In the poem, Loy introduces the myths, chimeras and curses of the city, qualifying them as spatial paradigms, so as to rewrite urban architecture and to re-establish urban spatial hierarchies. “Lunar Baedeker” ranges through mythological

⁹⁷ Baedeker Verlag was a German publishing house founded in 1827. Intended for those visiting cultural capitals, Baedeker travel guides outlined what was worth seeing, both outdoor sites and indoor museums. Loy’s “travelogue” undermines Baedeker’s ready-made-itineraries right from the title, which ironically suggests sightseeing by night. While travel guides are intended to orient readers, readers of Loy’s “Lunar Baedeker” are likely to be disoriented, firstly because of the nocturnal setting to the wandering, and secondly because of the collage-like organisation of sites and frames. All the poems in this collection throw us into the middle of things, giving us little context, and showing panoramic views, or close-up sketches.

and Biblical references, which seem to constitute a genesis of the modern city through the degradation of myths.

Lunar Baedeker

A silver Lucifer
serves
cocaine in cornucopia

To some somnambulists
of adolescent thighs
draped
in satirical draperies

Peris in livery
prepare
Lethe
for posthumous parvenues

Delirious Avenues
lit
with the chandelier souls
of infusoria
from Pharoah's tombstones

lead
to mercurial doomsdays
Odious oasis
in furrowed phosphorous

the eye-white sky-light
white-light district
of lunar lusts

Stellectric signs
[...]

Onyx-eyed Odalisques
and ornithologists
observe
the flight
of Eros obsolete

And “Immortality”
mildews
in the museums of the moon

“Nocturnal cyclops”
“Crystal concubine”

Pocked with personification
the fossil virgin of the skies
waxes and wanes
(Loy 1923: 81)

Undoubtedly, the almost sculptural graphic organisation of the verses imitates the verticality of New York skyscrapers, thus visually preparing the setting. A similar evocation comes from figures of sound: jarring alliterations, “silver” and “serves,” and “cocaine” and “cornucopia,” and “waxes and wanes,” open and close the poem. But the feeling of unease that pervades the first few lines does not only come from the shrill acoustics produced by sibilant and occlusive consonants. Once it has been clarified where and what it is that the fallen angel is distributing, the Biblical image of the silver Lucifer is immediately degraded. While this steep degradation strengthens the vertical motion of the Fall which is evoked by the presence of Lucifer himself, the architectural structure of the poem is reverberated in a mythical atmosphere. The vertical downward push is maintained throughout the poem, firstly by the image of the “peris,” androgynous elves of Persian mythology representing the descendants of fallen angels, and then by the continuous tension between earth and sky, street-lights and “sky-lights.” While the presence of Lucifer and the nocturnal atmosphere prepare the setting of a ghostly city, the inhabitants change into “somnambulists” ready to cross the River of Forgetfulness in Hades. The oxymoronic and alliterative pair “posthumous parvenus” places the city dwellers into a paradox that reiterates the analogy between the city at night and the infernal city. The stanza beginning with “delirious avenues” connects the image of the city by night, home to sinful souls, to the carousel of white lights. The opalescence of the moon is far from bringing positive clarity and light to the night time; as the moon dilutes all colours until everything fits the grey-scale, it dries out reason until everything and everyone is delirious. Illness and sickness spread deceitfully, hiding behind appealing positive images such as “infusoria / from

Pharoah's tombstones." The vertical force-line connecting earth and sky is here opposed to the horizontal sprawling of bacteria, a motion which is also evoked by "mercury" a few verses later. While perpendicular force-lines push against one another, the collision is also called to mind by "doomsdays," meaningfully used in the unusual plural form. The urbanism pronounced by "Delirious Avenues" is developed into the triangle sky-city-individual, embodied by the trio of lights "eye-white sky-light / white-light." Such a triplet introduces the connection between man, earth, and sky by alluding to the invention of electric light, condensed in "stellectric signs;" such a neologism, which combines the words "stellar" and "electric," invokes the impact electricity had on reshaping the landscape of cities at night.

Loy's "logopoeia" – to borrow the phrase coined by Pound when he presented her to the readers of *The Little Review* – results from her aesthetic system; since she blamed traditional language for being unable to grasp "the flux of life," she assembled verbal units to suit the dynamism of their subject matter. Words such as "stellectric" are not merely a capricious protest against traditional poetic language, but they embody a profound critique of univocal and static codes. Such reasoning on verbal language also applies to her visual language, where, as we will see, it is expressed through the collage technique.

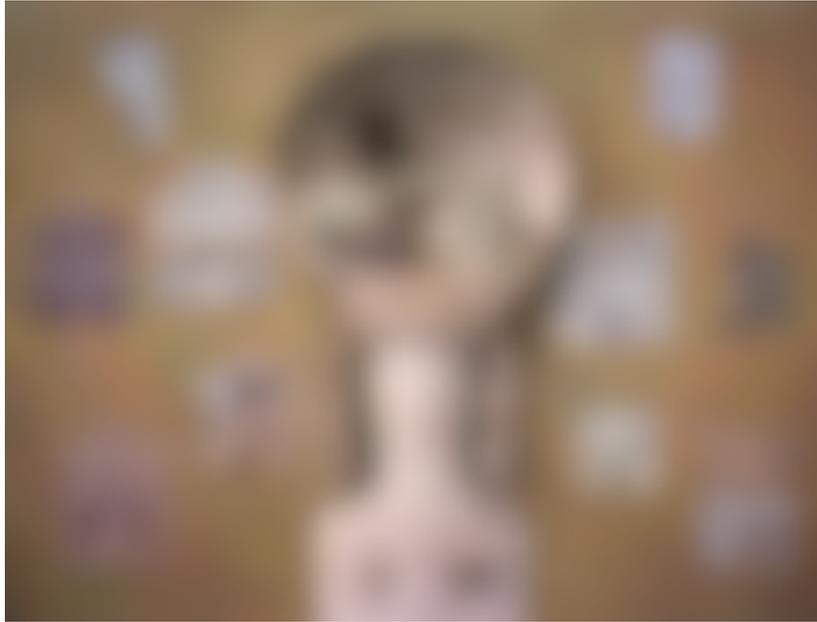
"Onyx-eyed Odalisques,"⁹⁸ Loy's phrase for 'prostitution', tightens the bond between stone and flesh and therefore between object and subject; but it also opens the way for a metaphor of urban love, which is then explicated in the phrase "Eros obsolete." Such a qualification suggests modern life and urban scenarios leave space for neither love nor myth. Not for traditional, majestic, authoritative myth, anyway. If a myth of modernity exists, it lies in the deconstruction of the ancient one, in its fragmentation and serialisation. As a consequence, "Immortality" (personified) is declassified, resised to a minimum and assigned to detrimental organisms like "mildews." This is Loy's way of paying tribute to techno-scientific discovery, the modern chimera. The many spatial metaphors of the poem, not least the enclosure of "Immortality" into a microscopic space, culminate in the final stanza, another architectural and metaphorical construction. The poem ends meaningfully with the image of a non-living

⁹⁸ Eyes are a prominent theme in Loy's verse; often, she uses false eyes to demonstrate the absence of a soul.

thing that was once alive (the fossil), wrapped in a cloud of metaphors about the moon and virginity; the metaphor of the moon as a virgin draws from the mythic association of the virginal goddess Diana/Artemis with the moon. However, classical myth is turned into a fossil in the modern world; if the virginal moon-goddess was meant to move tides and regulate the rhythms of life in the past, its fossil only “waxes and wanes” fruitlessly in the metropolitan night.

The architectural force-lines of the poem, which I named vertical and horizontal, do not aim to trace a path (like in a Baedeker travel guide) but serve only as the echo of a once functional structure. The modern, ghostly city presents instead emptied structures, collapsed frames that contain no myth or knowledge, instead function as a *memento mori* for the contemporary reader. Loy’s sacred or mythical figures stand for a gallery of simulacra, aimed at pointing out that images have lost substance. By extension, modern mankind, which is to blame for having created and lost control over machines, lacks substance too. Dehumanised into “puppets,” men have become simulacra of their own selves, parading in a city that resembles a gallery of ghosts.

The poetics encapsulated in the lines of “Lunar Baedeker” runs through all phases of Loy’s production, and across all forms of expression of her artistic genius. The comparison of “Lunar Baedeker” to a much later painting, *Househunting* (1955), is justified by the presence of the same degradation of the myth – and of images into simulacra. In *Househunting*, Loy rephrases her discourse on urban indoor and outdoor spaces in visual terms, grounding on the same tropes and techniques (i.e. myth and collage) she had used back in 1923. All the elements and motifs that I have pointed out in her poem appear in the varied units of the assemblages, including factories, smog, barracks and alienated individuals.



Mina Loy, 1950ca, *Househunting*.

Although Loy composed *Househunting* only in the late 1950s, the collage is reminiscent of surrealist techniques in the disposition of shapes, use of colours, and management of the space. Echoes of Breton's Surrealist Manifesto (1924), like the 'pure psychic automatism' in the assemblage of forms, surface from the mythical architecture of Loy's 1955 collage.

The observer's attention is caught straight away by the flat, pinkish, mottled background and is then led immediately to the monumental half-bust of the woman in the foreground. The colour of the background (recalling that of wallpaper or wall-carpet) and the presence of a female subject produce an involuntary evocation of a house, or at least of an indoor space. So do the domestic objects gathered above her head, in the concave aureole: knitting kit, a teapot, a laundry basket and a clothesline to which a pair of trousers is pinned. According to Burke, this is "the most personal of Mina's constructions." (Burke 1996: 422) Yet the Italianate buildings hovering in the background and the windows and bridges floating around the half-bust suggest that the scene does not necessarily take place indoors. Carolyn Burke's interpretation, validated by her conversations with Peggy Guggenheim, suggests that the metropolitan units around the subject represent a door-way to her soul, a hypothesis that also explains the title; according to such an interpretation, Loy realised "a construction that

summed up years of trying to understand the costs of ‘outcasting’ – living in a way that did not ‘fit in anywhere’.” (Burke 1996: 422)

Burke’s interpretation does not explain fully, however, the intertextuality of the canvas, nor does it consider its position in the relationship with the mythical (and myth-themed) tradition. The woman, modelled in the delicate flesh-tones of the Pre-Raphaelite school, seems to reference Botticelli’s *Venus*, basing on the analogy between the paper concave aureole on her head and Venus’s shell. But any comparison is discarded immediately by her puppet features, which echo the somnambular profiles of “Lunar Baedeker.” Glorious and monumental, the modern Venus stands isolated, de-humanised, rather than über-human like she was in Botticelli’s *Venus*. Loy’s puppet-Venus looks absentminded and alienated, while she is transplanted from the sea that gave her birth, to the urban surface. Her blank gaze reflects the emptiness of the wall behind her, that evokes the unreal tones of the city by night of the poem. On such surface, the monumental woman collects her scattered memories. All the units around her are linked by their belonging to the urban architecture, a detail that establishes a connection between human being and the city. Like they used to do in the poem, buildings and streets in the painting reduce the woman to a puppet, who is now only capable of collecting her thoughts in disconnected cement units.

The puppet hints at the degradation of the myth in the same way that Eros was depicted as a pathetic obsolete bird in “Lunar Baedeker.” Myth has to maintain a (paradoxical) frame that activates the intertextual reference. But Loy’s intention of emptying the architectural mythical structure from the inside is clear both in the transfiguration of the woman into a puppet and in the materials employed to realise it – cardboard and paper. Loy’s reference to a repositioning of myth, traditional themes and artistic styles in modern spaces is undoubtedly a rhetorical game aimed at de-institutionalising any past trust in superior knowledge. The only kind of knowledge accessible to the modern man is fragmentary and self-referential, like the spread out scraps of memories and thoughts.

The comparison of “Lunar Baedeker” and *Househunting* can be inscribed in a narrative of deconstruction that runs across two decades in Loy’s production. While the ghostly architectures of “Lunar Baedeker” seem prophetic in the depiction of progressive consumption brought about by capitalism, the disconnected collage-units

of *Househunting* illustrate the consequences of such a system, and of the dysfunctional relationship between man and machine.

2.3.2. Frames and dissolution

Loy's poetics of dismemberment and alienation, well embodied by monumental architectures and mythical frames, is further developed in Loy's later works. Particularly, later poems focus on the consequences of urban progressive consumption, resulting in the progressive dissolution of mankind. The comparison of "On Third Avenue," written in 1942, and *Christ on a Clothesline*, painted in 1959, offers the opportunity to study how the consequences of urbanisation and mechanisation are similarly addressed in verbal and visual codes, despite the temporal distance between poem and painting.

The ghostly materiality of "Lunar Baedeker," has evolved into immateriality in "On Third Avenue," and the opalescent, sterile light of the moon has turned into the artificial lights of factories.

On Third Avenue

1

"You should have disappeared years ago"—

so disappear
on Third Avenue
to share the heedless incognito

of shuffling shadow-bodies
animate with frustration

whose silence' only potence is
respiration
preceding the eroded bronze contours
of their other aromas

through the monstrous air
of this red-lit thoroughfare.

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

For their ornateness
Time, the contortive tailor,
on and off,
clowned with sweat-sculptured cloth
to press
upon those irreparable dummies
an eerie undress
of mummies
half unwound.

2

Such are the compensations of poverty
to see—

Like an electric fungus
sprung from its own effulgence
of intercircled jewellery
reflected on the pavement

like a reliquary sedan-chair,
out of a legend, dumped there,

[...] Such are the compensations of poverty
to see—

Transient in the dust,
the brilliancy
of a trolley
loaded with luminous busts;

lovely in anonymity
they vanish

with the mirage
of their passage.
(Loy 1923: 109)

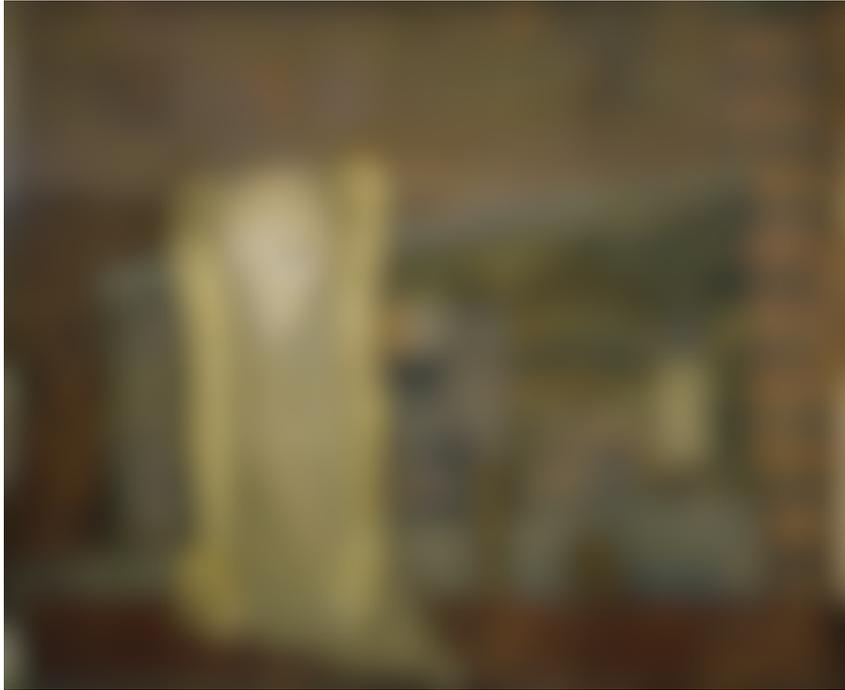
“On Third Avenue” opens with an idea of disintegration, which is certainly reiterated by the layout. The ghostly crowd of somnambulists depicted in “Lunar Baedeker” appears further dehumanised and prepares for the metamorphosis into machines, which are later processed inside the factory. People are dehumanised into “shadow-bodies,” anonymous and serial like the other products of consumerism; their human traits have “disappeared years ago.” Paradoxically, the normally overcrowded street is identified with the place where individuals exchange their humanity for anonymity, the “heedless incognito.” An atmosphere of immateriality lingers everywhere around the disappearing and disappeared human being, since the “potence” of the city lies in its intangible qualities: its shadows, “eroded contours,” “respiration,” and “aromas.”

The objectification of the individual is simultaneous to the personification of the city, animated by red lights. The pale allusion to a majestic and monumental past is weak, with a brief mention of “bronze,” but is almost immediately turned into a gigantic and monstrous creature consisting of the thick urban air. Neon-signs have completely replaced any other source of light, leaving nothing of the (already fossil) moon of “Lunar Baedeker.” If “bronze” appeared too weak as a hint to monumentality, the stanza’s opening “For their ornateness” confirms the connection, introducing the sad metaphor of the modern man, “clowned with sweat-sculptured cloth.” While subjects devolve into “dummies,” “Time” is personified as “the contortive tailor” who works with “material” as in “fabric;” he also alters “the material” in a broader sense, as he transforms people from subjects into objects, or “mummies.” While the degraded version of the Greek god Chronos reminds us of the space denied to myth by modernity, the image of the mummy also fits into Loy’s deadly imagery; like the “virgin fossil” in “Lunar Baedeker,” here Time dresses figures like mummies, the material vestiges of what once were living people. Neither myth nor legends find space or authority, as is suggested by the denigrating description of the “reliquary sedan-chair / out of a legend” in the second section. They are only present all over in a depowered version, to remind us that mankind, the once flourishing civilisation that invented myth, has now been mechanised.

The second part of the poem reiterates the refrain “Such are compensation of poverty / to see ——,” which opens the anaphoric sequence of “like.” Nature and technology are condensed into oxymoronic pairs echoing the “stelletric signs” of “Lunar Baedeker,” but they stress more the responsibility of the individual. The imagery of scientific progress comes back with the identification of a fungus (the mildews of the previous poem), which is pervasive, devious and generated by man. The fungus of technology, the seed of capitalism, contained its curse from the beginning, but dazzled with its effulgence – the electric light. Images of a deceitful and transient brilliance are intensified in the last two stanzas, burdened by the lexicon of ephemerality: “transient,” “trolley,” “vanish,” “mirage,” “passage.” The mocking intentions of the exaggerated consonances in ‘l’ and the alternate rhyme schemes, which are absent in the rest of the poem, underscore the black humor of “lovely in anonymity.” Not only does the scene dematerialise people and things, but things that are already intangible, such as movement and light, become ethereal. In fact, it also dissolves people who were not fully material in the first place, the “shadow-bodies.”

“On Third Avenue” solidifies individuals for a brief moment into sculptures made by Time. They are maintained and employed as forms, or *frames*, but they are no longer *structures*. Within the emptied shell of myth and urban architecture, both having been eroded from the inside by the fungus of technology, everything is immaterial. In the mythical past which is echoed by both the poems, myth used to stand for knowledge and entry to a higher truth, and architecture had functional and structural valence. Now, neither myth nor architecture has a meaning beyond the exterior frame, which is self-referential.

The immateriality of the human beings in “On Third Avenue” is based on the progressive erosion of the spiritual substance enclosed by their bodies, a spirituality that has been taken away by mechanical processes. Human bodies are dehumanised into puppets, thus revealing their self-referential nature. Similarly, in *Christ on a Clothesline*, painted in 1959, dehumanisation has allegorical tones, embodied and demystified in the figure of an ‘Everyman-Christ’ hanging among dirty rags.



Mina Loy, 1955-1959ca, *Christ on a Clothesline*.

Dark red shades, suiting the tones of the Passion, colour the atmosphere. The decadent buildings on the background and the dehumanised, dissolving human figure on the foreground recall explicitly the themes of “On Third Avenue,” thus enhancing a comparative study of poem and image. In the painting, the dark red band at the bottom evokes the border of a balcony or building, but it does not lessen the uneasy feeling of suspension which is conveyed by the figure hanging from the clothesline, and by the view, from a probably high storey, of the opposite buildings.

What is striking about the figure pinned to the clothesline is the flatness of his expression and the anonymity of aspect, which remind us of the “anonymity” of the “mummies” of the 1942 poem. If it were not for the title, the stigmata on hands would probably go unnoticed. The very face of the Christ repudiates a visual tradition of representation of Christ on the Cross, whose facial expression is usually captured in extreme sufferance. Rather, the indifferent face of this Christ, alienated from the context of the ultimate sacrifice, seems to suggest that there is no sacrifice in modernity which is capable of redeeming mankind. The apologetic gesture that he is miming with his hand works eloquently in the same direction.

Another trait empowers the comparison of this Everyman-Christ to the

“shuffling shadow-bodies” of the “On Third Avenue” poem is that the man-Christ appears incorporeal and airy, his legs dissolving into a rag fluttering in the wind. Such airiness puts into (evanescent) shape the lexicon of ephemerality that characterises the finale of the poem. Like in the poem, the process of de-humanisation seems to be also caused by the city behind him. The ramshackle barracks in the background, the brick buildings behind it and on its right, even the brick-edge seem to come forward in light of the consideration that they might be the cause of the man’s condition; they slowly replace the man in the foreground becoming, like they do in the poem, the focus of narration, while men fade into the background. In this reframing of the picture, the Christ acquires (or in fact loses) identity, since it comes to represent the everyman living in the metropolis.

In “Lunar Baedeker” the silver Lucifer, the most luminous of all angels in God’s eyes, falls into no Inferno but into the modern hell, the city, to traffic cocaine; likewise, the Passion of Christ, symbol of the divine sacrifice to wash human sins, hangs now like an over-washed rag, which will never be white again. The association between the washing of sin and the cleaning of a rag is as sacrilegious as it is tragic; it is so tragic, in fact, that it is bathetically funny in a tone of black-humour. Objectified, de-humanised, dissolving into a ripped rag, the religious icon is only one of the many simulacra of Western art and civilisation. Like myth, the religious icon was once a quintessential image, which had a complex architectural structure; although visible to anyone, it referred to a higher knowledge. Now, de-contextualised as it is, it has lost sense and purpose.

To conclude, it is worth remarking that in Loy’s aesthetics, it is not just the superior truth or knowledge which should be doubted; if there ever was this truth, it has been lost and to search for it is pointless. What is more radically questioned is the power of the image itself, which is mistrusted to the point that it cannot be anything but self-referential or self-ironic. By deconstructing the content and substance of myths and icons, Loy only leaves their *frames*, thus setting a museum gallery of skeletons and fossils of what once was referential art.

2.3.3. Haunting city, haunted language

In *Becoming Modern*, Carolyn Burke considers that:

[The “Love Songs”] are haunting not only for their exploration of sexual dissonance but because they are drenched in the atmosphere of World War I. They are a peculiar kind of war poetry. Their range of attitudes – the tonal shifts from hopefulness and anticipation through wariness and suspicion to vexation and bitterness – may all be understood as those of the outsider, the nonparticipant, the woman whose life is put on hold yet deeply affected by the collapse of civilization around her. (Burke 1996: 208)

As the war affected her poetry in many ways, indeed thematically, but also linguistically and psychologically, thus the city is inevitably textured in the poems between the 1920s and 1940s in several ways.⁹⁹ War and city appear to impact on Loy’s poetry primarily in narratological terms: the *frame* becomes the only feature capable of representing the process of de-humanisation. The frame also becomes the limit of human observation, thus becoming the margin of subjectivity, the “mental spatiality.” The product of such framing, the verbal or visual image, is therefore identified as unreliable and unstable, changing according to the point of view, the context or the cultural and biographical background of the observer. Moreover, it can be reframed, interpreted and read differently by the observer. Acknowledging the ontological unreliability of the image is certainly the hardest premise to accept in Loy’s aesthetics, because it conditions any reading and observation of her works. Yet, it is the most fascinating too, since it is only possible to find connections among the units of Loy’s collages once it has been accepted that the image has no fixed objective reality.

Loy’s urban framings produced a particular kind of collage, that involves deep rethinking on the nature of the point of view. While the collage does not necessarily imply multiple points of view, Loy’s use of miscellaneous materials also suggests the

⁹⁹ Loy’s late poems, composed in the 1940s, continue to study the evolution of the processes of dislocation. “Compensation of Poverty” addresses the city directly, without centring on human beings, since they have been ingurgitated by the monstrous urban mass.

presence of different points of view, a myriad of angles, perspectives and heights. Different points of view assume the metaphorical valence of different frames of mind, opinions, judgements: the traditional and the new; the human and the mechanical; the androgynous and the gendered; many antithetical pairs can coexist side by side, since every individual could potentially enframe the city from endless points of observation, or even from a same point of view but at different moments; under such premises, the image's margin of changeability grows exponentially. Moreover, the discrepancy between how the image is conceived and realised (either in words or in a painting), and how it is perceived and interpreted by its audience, enlightens an interesting aspect that Loy addresses directly. In both poems and paintings, the city gradually advances to take the foreground, pushing individuals to the background. In this way, Loy shows how the city, which was indeed shaped by individuals, tends eventually to ingurgitate its own creators. If the city is the product and the producer of its own images, the individual is by analogy the creator and the creation of the city and of its innumerable images. This dialectic tension between foreground and background prompts reconsideration of the instability of the urban image, which is re-qualified as dynamic and dialectical, rather than just unstable and changeable.

As Roger L. Conover, editor of *The Lost Lunar Baedeker*, observed, "her anti-career, if you like, was marked by so many seeming contradictions, counter-allegiances and inconsistencies that she was often considered unbalanced." (Loy [1997]: xiii) Embracing Conover's view, Loy's collages serve the aim of dissolving the legacy of form, genre, gender and traditional rhetoric from the inside out, regardless of any consequent contradiction. Particularly, her poems enter many of the controversial sites of the city, both indoor and outdoor places; bedrooms, bourgeois homes, streets and alleys are the setting for Loy's poetic lens on people, clothing, habits and vices. In this sense, Loy's poems and paintings are highly spatial, representing both the interior space of the psyche and the material spaces of the city. Poems are designed to become architectural spaces, structured by language; for Loy, the poetic space is the place to dismantle "the architectural structures that confine the self, enforce gender limitations and restrict feminine sexuality."¹⁰⁰ (Churchill 2006:

¹⁰⁰ Suzanne W. Churchill, 2006, *The Little Magazine Others and the Renovation of Modern American Poetry* (Aldershot: Ashgate).

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The representational implications of such motion are certainly numerous and varied, inevitably affecting language too. In fact, the linguistic disconnectedness of Loy's poems and paintings does not result from an inability of visual and verbal codes to recount modernity; on the contrary, it is a conscious choice made with regards to contents, language, narrative system and code, so that images could keep pace with the constantly moving, dialectical, contradictory reality of the city. As a result, her poetic language does not merely have demystifying, deconstructive purposes, but is instead programmatic and constructive. In this respect, many of her early critics objected to the use of intellectual formulations and archaic vocabulary. Only contemporary fellow writers such as Pound, Moore and Williams, not to mention all the European modernists, could peer inside her "Trojan verse" to see that it was "hijacking Victorian vocabulary and conceptual posturing in order to subvert the values and expose the mechanism such constructions were meant to euphemize." (Conover 1997: xv)

Over three decades, Loy developed a consistent (yet not systematic) corpus of poems and collages that is useful today in mapping the city's progression towards capitalism and in studying the effects of that capitalism on art. If Loy's engagement with politics was acknowledged and praised by a reduced scholarship at her time, her political and social critique and her economic insight have certainly been re-evaluated from the 1980s onwards, and are largely praised by ecocritics today. Loy's condemnation of thoughtless consumption is textualised in Loy's radically sharp-edged and embodied language. While her themes denounce the objectification of the subject and the commodification of art, her language shows to have absorbed the same paradigms of disintegration and mechanisation. In this way, her verbal and visual corpus appears cohesive in semantic and formal choices, as well as in rhetorical foundation, thus resulting into an interesting and idiosyncratic field of investigation.

2.4. The Baroness's physical poetry

While the city is hardly ever represented in the Baroness's paintings and drawings of the 1910s and 1920s, the visual aesthetics of the embodied metropolis and mechanised individual is significantly present in the poetry of those years. The volume of poems about the city, which mainly incorporates the city of New York – but appears reminiscent of Berlin and Paris too – has a relevant sculptural margin.

The principles of the Baroness's collage technique derive from the hypotyposis of the body in her verses, through which she could *unframe* the various facets of metropolis in order to then blend them together, inscribing them into the experiential frame of her own body. In her (therefore physical) urban poetry, which she tellingly always wrote by hand rather than by machine, the whole page becomes the frame. Her writing hand becomes the channel for the city to flow through her body, to be eventually poured on the page in a sexual, embodied language. On this note, her poetry is extremely visual, since it comes to the page mediated through the body and organised in graphic verses.¹⁰¹ Among the frames she dissolves and blends in name of a physical and visual poetry, there are frames of vision and interpretation; concepts of ready-made; traditional communicative patterns and linguistic conventions.

2.4.1. Sexualised city, mechanised body

“How to perform the city in poetry” is the very suitable title under which Gammel and Zelazo gathered those of the Baroness's poems which clearly refer to urban reality. These poems are based on a surreal hybridisation, where words oscillate osmotically

¹⁰¹ In “Thoroughly Modern Elsa,” 2011, Brian Kim Stefans underscores the fact that the Baroness wrote all her poems by hand, never using typewriters. I have identified such willing use of her body to write poetry as the key of the Baroness's embodying process, of city into language and of the body into verses. The fact that she wrote her poems by hand represents the control she had over the blank page and the extremely physical relationship she had with writing. Moreover, by writing everything by hand she tightened the connection between verses (often written in red or green) and the numerous sketches that she realised within the poetic space. The absolute and in-depth integration of body and city lies on the Baroness's aesthetics of unframing and reframing the individual – even blurring biological sex in the process – and the metropolis.

Brian Kim Stefans, 2011 “Thoroughly Modern Elsa,” in Los Angeles Review of Books, (16 December 2011) (Los Angeles, CA: LARB), n.p.

between machine and body, nature and artifice, spiritual and earthly worlds. In some poems, such as “This is the Life – in Greenwich Village,” the metropolis appears as a transgressive and contradictory place; “Tryst,” for instance, documents the city’s sensory overload. Other poems, like “Appalling Heart,” represent the city as both the object and the medium of perception.

“This is the Life – in Greenwich Village” (1919-22ca) shows a sequence of very different ‘stanzas’; it begins with a dialogical exchange within a studio, and continues with scraps of conversation emanating from the room. The second piece of conversation highlights the usual double entendres of Elsa’s sexual humour, with words such as “tinkle,” “sousing” and “vibrate.” The poem continues with Greenwich Village by night, narrated by the same voices as the first part:

This is the Life – in Greenwich Village

[...]

Evening

(Jazz music – voices – penetrating from illustrator youth door)

(Raucous Female Voice)

They don’t need to go to bed at all!

(High Pitched Male Voice)

Ain’t Life – dear simple – when you look at it – – – –

(Raucous Female Voice)

Evaporated!

(Suave Host Voice)

Emotional Economy

(Raucous Female Voice)

Mass famine –

Cheap overproduction –

Two-in-one – all in nix mix up mess –

Backyard tincan clutter clatter-ratter –

[...]

(Chorus prim)

Impossible – dangerous – uncivilized

Untinned – natural – animal!

Don't let it in again.
(EvFL [2011]: 108)

In this poem, which evidences a strong dramatic component, scraps of overheard conversation are assembled into a hybrid form between theatre and poetry. The layout is as well relevant, presenting isles of language (written in red ink) only apparently organised in dialogical form, but without semantic relations.

Neither the conversation nor the description of the quarter is discursive, being hiccupping and fragmented instead. The fictitious dialogue is deconstructed into brief cues and sometimes even just into exclamations that do not really answer the interlocutor. The critique encoded into the deconstructed frame of human communication is quite evidently that technological society has deprived human beings of their natural social skills and their spontaneous impulse to communicate. Every word or phrase between the dashes sounds like a micro-frame enclosing a hint or a flash of a vision. Consumerism is condensed in a few verses, each of which encapsulates the massiveness of the phenomenon in short phrases, as in a structural oxymoron; “mass,” “over-,” “all” belong to the same semantic area of excess, which contrasts with the other extreme of consumerism, compression, condensed instead in consumer-friendly deals, “two-in-one,” serial production, “tincan.” The antithetical pairing “nix mix” seals this contrasts between too much and nothing, between overproduction and mass famine, the essence of consumerism.

The last stanza is left to the chorus, introduced to stress the dramatic tone of the Baroness's poem, and to show her position on separation of genres. As in classical theatre, the chorus has the role of commenting on the main action or theme with a moralist overtone; but the identity of the chorus is here transfigured into that of the judgemental, hypocritical well-thinking mass, thus exemplifying the only possible outcome of the encounter between traditional forms and modernity. “Impossible” can refer to both the consumerism attacked in the previous stanza, or the savage, “untinned” animalistic nature of the uncivilised. The last verse is also ambiguous, where “it” could refer to basically everything talked about in the poem, and “in” could refer to either the studio, the main setting of the poem or to the consumerist society.

Although this poem is representative of the Baroness's urban poetics, it offers limited examples of her linguistic play, which is instead more substantial in other

Part II

works, for instance “Appalling Heart.” “Clutter clatter-ratter” is the only visible phonetic play of the poem analysed, and it is nowhere near as extreme as verses like “Palstapatt pornéoqvorr” from “Teke Heart,” or “Swish – sh – sh – sh – sh –” from “To Home.” As a general tendency, the urban poems are less abstract and less playful with phonetics than the other Futurist/Surrealist poems she composed in the same years; yet, there are a few interesting examples.

Some of the features present in “This is the Life – in Greenwich Village” appear meaningfully exacerbated in poems like “Tryst,” which was probably written in 1922.

Tryst
Smouldertint –
Icefanged –
Black –
Unrest –
Bloodshot –
Beetling –
Snorting –
River –

Chafes
At
Checked
Motion –

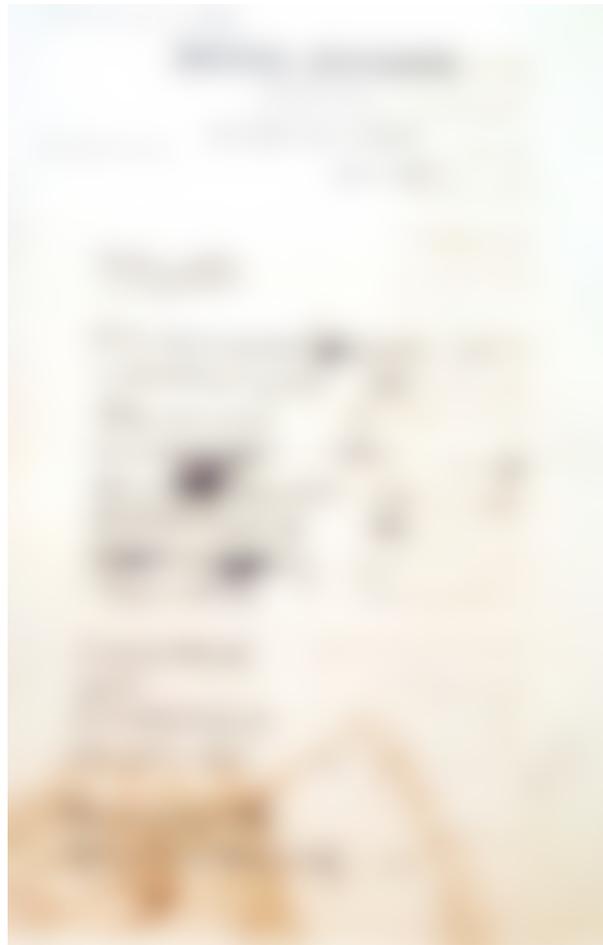
Sluggish
Glowering –

Foggy
Neck –

Soggy
Chest –

Crest
Hoary – – – –

Groggy
With
Quest –



(EvFL [2011]: 104)

To
Ocean – – – –

Towering
Glory.
(EvFL [2011]: 104-105)

As the image shows clearly enough, “Tryst” was written in black ink (whereas “Greenwich Village” was written in red) on Hotel Hudson stationery paper. Such a choice supports the remarks about the Baroness’s aim to demystify long-established genres both formally and physically; the act of entrusting her poem to a small sheet of a city-hotel-headed paper highlights her intentions to blur the limits between art and consumerism and to criticise the serialisation of art. The machine-typed heading also contrast ironically with the title, a literary word for lovers’ secret rendezvous. However, in the poem there is very little of the romantic context announced in the title. It rather assembles a series of flashing heterogeneous images of both the city and the body.

While the city is certainly New York, the frame encompassing the steep waterfall of verses is once again the page, made physical by the hand-writing. The body in the poem could belong to either a man or woman given the presence of both “soggy / chest” and “his / quest;” there might as well be two bodies. Regardless of the number of bodies actually involved, “Tryst” illustrates how *embodied* the Baroness’s poems can be, and to what extent the urban texture can be integrated with the body in a reciprocal, osmotic process. The restless city, caught in its frantic motion with all the colours and contrasts of the first few verses, is progressively blurred with the body; the river is “snorting;” the human neck is “foggy.” Such a co-penetration lies obviously in the premise of the un-framing of both the city and the body in the first place.

Gradually, the urban motion is humanised and sexualised, while the human intercourse is mechanised.¹⁰²

The process does not lead to an exchange though, or to a reversal where the city becomes completely human and the body completely alienated. On the contrary, the poem indulges in the depiction of the osmotic process itself. The “quest” can apply to both the city and the body; the river runs towards its goal, the ocean, achieved at the end of the poem. But the quest is “his / quest” too, aiming to its “towering glory.” Both the river’s quest and “his” quest culminate in the ocean, so that the metaphor of water applies to both the river’s delta and to the bodily fluxes. The finale *in crescendo*, “towering / glory,” condenses all the vertical tension of the poem, which is in fact a climax. Certainly, there is a strong analogy between the climax, and the “towering” graphic structure of the poem. The layout itself evokes sculpturally the verticality of the urban buildings, while they mime the crescendo of physical pleasure. On this note, skyscrapers are re-coded as phallic shapes, and sexual tension is transferred into urban schemes. Such an interaction is made possible by the frame of the (physical) page, lieu of encounter of body and urbanity.

Indulging on the visuality of “Tryst,” which offers an absolute vertical directrix, the dashes seem to acquire additional meaning. The dashes, the Baroness’s favourite punctuation mark, appear intensified and agglomerated towards the end, guiding the reading breath in that direction. The use of single-word lines and long dashes produce a post-modern version of the enjambments-fall, which is to be read quickly and frantically:

At the same time, the Baroness’s dash symbolizes her extensive linking – her integrationist sensibility traversing multiple media. In part through her use of both the dash and the portmanteau, the Baroness’s poems mirror her

¹⁰² Eco-critic Donna Haraway’s qualifies the modern body as a cultural object and a hybridisation between nature and machine, a sort of a cyborg. In the Baroness’s poems, the body is indeed absorbed by and integrated within the urban landscape, so that it is remodelled as a cyborg; nature is blended with technology, as in the poem “X-Ray,” which describes radiation being transmitted through trees and people. But the process is reciprocal, and the city is humanised, naturalised and textured into a bodily language. In her prose poem “The modest Woman,” she defines herself as an engineer and a product of engineering at the same time: “Why should I – proud engineer – be ashamed of my machinery – part of it?” The Baroness, the engineer of a fascinating but peripatetic way of writing poetry, a poet unaccepting of normative methods, was also the engineer of her body, which she adorned with vegetables and technology.

own body. They are sinewy and muscular – flexing against the page, against syntax, and against language itself, creating an embodied, performative poetics. (Stefans 2011: 12)

Even the dash, according to Stefans, is sexualised. It guides us along the bodily and urban musicality of the poem, along its frantic, constantly accelerating rhythm. Although phonetic mannerism is restrained in this poem, the verses appear cohesive thanks to figures of sound; two pairs of verses show, for instance, their second verse as beginning with the high-sounding consonant of the previous verse, such as “snorting – / river –” and “sluggish / glowering.” Other verses have alliteration in the initial consonant and rhyme too, like “chest – / crest.” These and many other phonetic links among the verses seem to contrast with the punctuation and the layout, which aim to distance them from each other. Yet, even such contrasting tensions apply to the relationship of attraction-repulsion which exists between the city and the body.

All the features highlighted for “This is Life” and “Tryst” are mixed together in the carnivalesque whirlwind of “Appalling Heart,” the third example of this paragraph. The title anticipates the boundary between the city and the body, preparing the reader for the metaphor of a beating heart. Such metaphor is evidently conveyed by the graphic organisation of the verses, longer than usual, yet full of caesuras. They look and sound like heartbeats, hammering and rhytmed by dashes and pauses, exclamations and graphic distancing.

Appalling Heart

City stir – wind on eardrum –
dancewind: herbstained –
flowerstained – silken – rustling –
tripping – swishing – frolicking –
courtesing – careening – brushing –
flowing –lying down – bending –
teasing – kissing: treearms – grass –
limbs – lips.

[...]

shellscented – seafaring –
foresthunting – junglewise –
desert gazing –
rides heart from chest –

Part II

lashing with beauty –
afleet –
across chimney –
tinfoil river
to meet
another's dark heart

Bless mine feet!
(EvFL [2011]: 103)

City, nature and body are perfectly integrated in this poem thanks to their encounter on the page-frame, surface of osmotic interaction between verbal, visual, acoustic. First un-framed and then reassembled by the writing hand, urban, natural and bodily parts do not form a collage: the units are too dynamic, feverish and fleeting, but at the same time they are all tightly connected together through the physical act of writing.

It is rather a comprehensive process, which is driven by the human heartbeat as its engine. The city is a “dancewind,” a neologism that condenses the ideas of a whirlwind, dancing motion and natural wind in the same word. The city vibrates with a heartbeat and fuels all sorts of motions, expressed with gerunds so as to stress their dynamism. Some of the motions are mechanical, like “rustling,” others are natural, like “flowing” and “bending,” some are human, like “teasing” and “kissing.” The pair “kissing: treearms” is deeply suggestive, since it is particularly evocative of the following associative chain “grass – / limbs – lips.” The city finds a way to urbanise nature, “tinfoil river,” and nature breaks into the urban landscape with a savage energy, “seafaring” and “junglewise.” One of the verses that I omitted condenses “appalling sister!” following an associative chain similar to the one I quoted. This verse makes the link explicit between city and nature, sisters in diversity, but nevertheless “lashed with beauty.” Phonetic links help to connect the units/beats between the dashes, which once again act as the metronome of the poem.

As a last comment on this poem, a great number of words are neologisms or compounds, puns and word-plays; the linguistic texture is so different from the other two poems analysed that it invites a digression on the Baroness's work on and use of language.

2.4.2. Urbanised language

As argued by Gammel and Zelazo, the Baroness's urban poems are not just close-up vignettes of the metropolitan landscape, but they also absorb the language and semiotic system of the city itself. While attempting to deconstruct the consumerist culture, the Baroness both consumes and is consumed by the metropolis through language.¹⁰³

While speeding through the subway tunnels, or walking up Broadway or Forty-Second Street at night, the Baroness's quick eye would register the illuminated advertisements for Pepsodent, Wrigley's Spearmint, or Maxwell Coffee. (Gammel and Zelazo 2011: 98)

The transgressive body is urbanised at the same time as the city is turned into a transgressive creature. In light of this process, language is reinvented to incorporate the fusion of body and machine.

Words belonging to the corporeal and metropolitan semantic areas cross their formal frames, thus producing hybrid idioms. The Baroness's techniques of portmanteau are indeed typical of a transnational urban avant-garde, concerned with exploring processes of mechanisation through the language. The highly original glossary the Baroness constructs in her poems always derives from the assumption that language is the key to unframing all systems. Poems like "Phalluspistol," "Noiseflickingswish," or sculptures like *Limbswish* (a word that occurs often in her poetic oeuvre) are miniature works of art in their very titles, as they condense the prosthetic body, modern technology and natural instincts. Only language that is free to undo its formalities has the potential to create infinite assemblages, and can therefore keep up with the dynamism of the embodied city in motion, and the mechanised body in process. The Baroness's language is therefore kinetic and processual, briefly enframing a body-nature-machine assemblage in the space of a neologism, only to release it immediately afterwards so that the parts can mutate and combine again.

There is more than one way in which the Baroness reinvents language so that it is no longer a codified and frozen system. The first and more basic way is certainly

¹⁰³ In the poem "Tailend of Mistake" she encapsulates this dichotomy in the opposite pair "consumptive/assumptive."

the Futuristic phonetic poem. Phonetic poetry was not, for the Baroness, only the “language of trauma,” the sound made by poets “to protest the sounds of cannons of World War I” (Gammel 2011: 15). Phonetic poetry was for her the sound of the human body too, the sound of sexuality pervading everything around her. While her techniques echo linguistic practices of the Futurists, the Dada poets or the Berlin Surrealists,¹⁰⁴ her acoustic poems were free from any avant-garde practice, and independent from any ready-made – so that they were always fresh and genuine, but also “uncomfortable, arresting and seductive.” (Gammel and Zelazo 2011: 17) The Baroness’s sonic poems emphasise the libidinal performance in such a way that it validates the already strong corporeal presence. While exposing urban mechanisms, her portmanteau words support the embodiment of her poems, sexualise the poetic rhythm to a greater extent (while the content is already sexualised by the language) and enact Shklovskian “defamiliarisation” (1917),¹⁰⁵ which implicates a conceptual and perceptual renovation of the language. Her sonic poems capture and somehow fill the gap between sensory perception and the acquisition of meaning, because, while dislocating meaning, they actually liberate it in a proliferation of fusions, fractures and sounds. Some poems, like “Teke Heart,” are completely acoustic, proving that sounds effect an extra-lexical stammering, suggesting that the rhythm of a poem does not need to be semantic. This poem in particular recalls a dialogue because of its question marks and exclamation marks, thus suggesting that communication needs to be liberated from the constricting frame of linguistic coherence:

Teke Heart

Qvixfrinjachléde – jachleide – jachmosa –
Mosa – achmosa – qvarksirnk – ach – qvarlsé
Kalstu ljasab – rinne vrusta –
Acha aché –
Jach – ché?
[...]
Acke flasse – qvmk. Teke
Achm – té
Ackm –tk – kté!

¹⁰⁴ Perhaps she had read the sound poetry that the Berlin poet Elsa Lasker-Schüler had written in 1902.

¹⁰⁵ In his 1917 essay “Art as Device,” Shklovsky illustrates “defamiliarisation” as the artistic technique used by avant-gardes of presenting common things in unfamiliar order, in order to alter the perception of the familiar.

A – ja – ja hachm ackm sjrinstre –
[...]
(EvFL [2011]: 184)

Human verbal conversation as a traditional communicative pattern is deconstructed into pure sounds, and replaced by sensorial exchanges. It is not even relevant to investigate which language do sounds belong to; German seems to be an option, but there are sounds such as “é” or “ché” that could equally come from French or Italian.

Other poems alternate sounds, words and compounds which have been invented for the purpose; this is the case of “To Home,” dedicated to Jane Heap, who in 1923 organised the Baroness’s return to her German home-cities, Munich and Berlin.

To Home

Gull scream to:

Fieldadmarshmiralshall

J.H.

Of Dreadnaught:

T.L.R.

Shaggy – merry- gray skin caviar pimply chevreaux –
Patent leather’s black shine – taffeta’s shirred –
Twirly – whirly – green-gem-studded-deep miriardbreasted –
 spume milk laced – carbonpaper – tinsel – tinfoil tinted –
 frothknit –crochet –scallop filigree – galloping – stamping
 horse –
Race glass sea – agog! Boundless – abounding –
Gog – agog! Cradle beloved of bronzed – steel orb adventure!
 Tall salt sea mate seetheart –silver arrow beflitt by
 rocking – dipping carmine eyed – beaked – tied – gulls –
[...]
Diamond nostrils ejaculate
Brilliant carouse!
Mine – thine
To home!
Hussa!
Toot!
Ree daareee –

[...]
“Pl – p – up –
Plup lup – lup p –
Llllup – ee – ee ee –
Ee – ee – ee – – – –
[...]
(EvFL [2011]: 185)

In the poem, the editor is described as an “admarshmiralshall” (admiral and marshall) riding a horse, both literally and metaphorically; Heap financed the Baroness’s journey home and led the avant-garde press with her work at *The Little Review* – which is hinted at by “carbonpaper.” The whole poem has a galloping rhythm, which can also be heard by reading the sounds-sequence “Pl – p – up – / Plup lup – lup p – / Llllup – ee – ee ee – / Ee – ee – ee – – – –.” As Gammel-Zelazo argues, the sound of the animal’s hooves triggers an association with the roar of a ship’s engine, reinforced by the “Slllllsh” and “swish” of the waves (2011: 17). The poem obviously does not lack a sexual component; verses such as the first one, and others like “Diamond nostrils ejaculate / Brilliant carouse! / Mine – thine –” permeate the metaphor of the galloping with a sexual allure. All the elements of the poem, the horse, the sea and the ship combine and blend in the sensorial pleasure of the body – likely the Baroness’s own body, since she underscores her presence in the poem with “Mine.” Once again, nature, technology and body are all integrated through language in a sensory carnival, also stressed by the fifty-six verses of pure sounds that follow the last semantic verse “To home!”

The Baroness’s use of German, her native language, is particularly interesting too. After she moved to America, she mainly wrote in English and translated some of her previous poetry from German into English. On a scrap of paper, she wrote verses using bright red ink which show her considerations about German and English languages:



EvFL, 1923-1926, [*I hate hate*].

(EvFL [2011]: 262)

Since this reflection is relatively mature (it was written between 1923 and 1926) it does not account for her whole oeuvre, which is far from been written entirely in English.¹⁰⁶ Yet, her preference for English over German is expressed more than once, even in some letters.¹⁰⁷ While French and Italian loanwords or partial loans are not just sporadic, German words, sounds and structures are certainly not occasional. The “hate hate hate” is even harder to believe if we consider the large contribution she made to German avant-garde poetry before learning English. On the contrary, German is highly incorporated into the Baroness’s English poetry, both in the early poems when she was getting acquainted with the language and later, once English had become her first language.

¹⁰⁶ The Baroness’s spelling oddities in English would be equally worthy of further analysis. Irregularities prove too widespread in her poetic work to be merely ascribed to her German origins. For instance, she always spells ‘people’ as *‘poepel’, and frequently omits the letter ‘c’ in words as ‘excitement’ or ‘acknowledge’; she is inconsistent with the use of ‘e’ or ‘a’ in participial adjectives (‘independent/independant’), she neglects the apostrophe in possessives, and abuses the hyphen as a word-connector (*‘after-all’). Sometimes, spelling errors also have semantic implications, for example her use of ‘were’ instead of ‘where’, or ‘than’ for ‘then’. Mistranslated Germanisms occur with considered regularity, like ‘becoming’ to mean ‘get’ (German *bekommen*), while full German words are frequently used within verses in English. In a letter to Djuna Barnes, dated in the 1920s, she declared: “It is written like half mad in syntax [...] I am half mad – as is only sensible.” Clearly, a lack of proficiency in the English language cannot be identified as the (only) cause for Elsa’s spelling oddities, that may embody a cry of protest against grammar and linguistic prescriptivism.

The Baroness’s letter is quoted in Hjartarson, Paul I. and Douglas O. Spettigue (eds.), 1992, *The Baroness Elsa* (Ottawa: Canada Oberon Press), pp. 36-37.

¹⁰⁷ In a letter to Djuna Barnes, she wrote that she was “aroused by English sound – and depressed by German.”

In 1912 she wrote a poem, “Herr Peu à Peu,” composed in a playful mixture of German and English, which starts with “Er ist our Distinguished Conductor / In Cincinnati¹⁰⁸ – Der City of Pork –” and continues with similar alternations. Even when her poems became closer to her idiosyncratic use of dashes as the years went by, she never gave up German completely. “Love – Chemical Relationship” is a perfect example of her taste for linguistic hybridity; the poem is dedicated to Marcel Duchamp (“*Un enfant Français: Marcel (A Futurist)*”) and is written in a mock Old English style, with “thou”s, “thee”s and verbs in -st second person singular. One of the most suggestive verses of the poem is the following:

“Unity – Einklang – harmony – Zweifellosigkeit!”

Looking at the Baroness’s poetic production, it seems that German words are used through need when she cannot find satisfactory English translations; “Zweifellosigkeit” is an exquisitely German word and concept, which would probably lose part of its strength once translated to “incontrovertibility.” The theory of an intentional use of German where English lacks a successful translation applies to both the poems the Baroness wrote in German and later translated in English, and also to all those she wrote directly in English. Although she might have loved the sound of English words more than German words, she would not accept the compromise of translation when German offered a more suitable word.

Moreover, German words are not the only way in which the German language is present in the Baroness’s poetry. So far I have referred to words like “shell-scented,” “forest-hunting” or “culturedignity” as simple compounds, neologisms or portmanteau words; but, as a matter of fact, they imitate the peculiarity of the German language of building *Komposita*. The advantage of German composite words is that the meaning of the words is also condensed into a larger whole. Such grammatical and conceptual cohesion exists only in German, among the European languages spoken by the Baroness. In tune with her non-acquiescent demand for speed and conceptual effectiveness, the Baroness seems to have transferred this German grammatical

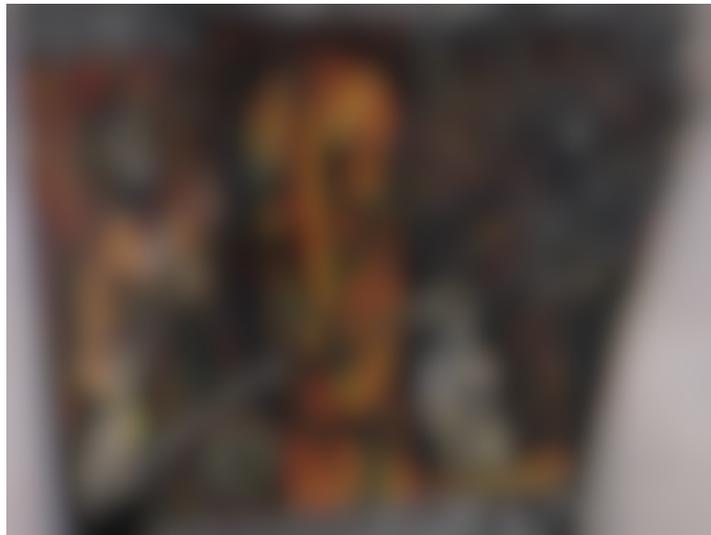
¹⁰⁸ In 1912 the Baroness had moved to Cincinnati on the Ohio River. The urban centre boasted a great number of German American societies, and had a German theatre with regular performances in Turner Hall.

scheme to English, disregarding linguistic legitimacy in the name of unframing language.

The Baroness herself does not sound fully aware of the reasons why she prefers English when she writes “I hate hate / hate something about German / sounds – words.” German permeates the texture of her poetic work so pervasively that it is hard to think that such a presence came unconsciously or unwanted into the texts. Rather, the openness of the English language towards loanwords and *Komposita* fits perfectly with the pattern of unframing, thus inviting to conclude that unframing recurs as a *topos* of all her art, including literature, visual art and carnivalesque performances.

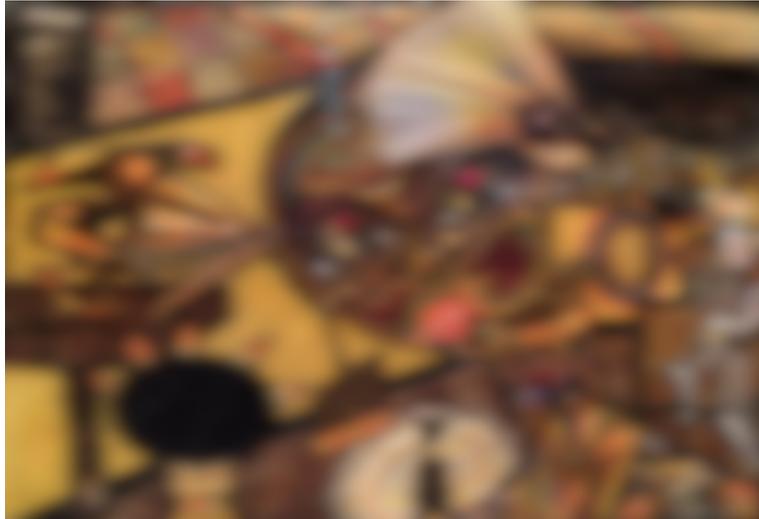
2.4.3. Urbanised faces

Although the city is not directly represented in the Baroness’s paintings and sculptures of the 1910s and 1920s, it is nevertheless themed in her visual art, once again through the exploration of the relationship between body and urban machine.



EvFL, 1920ca, *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp*.

EvFL, 1922ca, *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp*.



EvFL, 1923-1924ca, *Dada Portrait of Berenice Abbott*.

The canvases and sculpture above, evidently reminiscent of Dada techniques, show how the Baroness's negotiation of the portrait as a traditional genre is contextualised in her New York canvases. In the portraits of Marcel Duchamp and Berenice Abbott, she mixes organic and synthetic materials, in order to explore (visually too) the conflicting relationship between what is bodily and what is mechanical, between what is natural and what is urban.

In autumn 1922 *The Little Review* published an issue featuring several portraits of Duchamp by Man Ray and Joseph Stella. The Baroness, who was disappointed by his “determinedly frivolous – light – playful – prideless attitude,” turned her love (“what does he care about art? He is it”) for him into the opposite: “I hate him at present [and] I have a right to.”¹⁰⁹ But the Baroness seemed not to find it hard to experience both love and hate at once, and in winter 1922 she had a photograph of her *Portrait of Marcel Duchamp* published in *The Little Review*:

Serving up the artist like a desert in a wine glass, adorning him with feathers like a Ziegfeld girl, while perhaps alluding to Duchamp's investment in a feather-dyeing business, she poked fun at the fashionable avant-gardist who had it too easy in America and who was selling himself like a prostitute for public art consumption. (Gammel 2003: 301)

¹⁰⁹ Elsa to Jane Heap, quoted in Gammel, 2003, p. 300.

While she was working on the sculptural version of her “M’ars,” she challenged the domains of painting. His face looks like a leathery exotic mask smoking a calumet; with an odd smile, his face recalls the figure of a native American, evoking a “quintessential shape shifter, a cross-cultural border traveller.” (Gammell 2003: 303) His bicycle wheel displayed on the right, resembling a spider web, underscores the connection between mechanical and natural structures. Such a connection is also stressed by her actual use of mechanical units combined with natural fabric, stitching them together with sewing thread. Looking at the composition, the colours and materials convey a certain unity to the heterogeneous units of the collage.

The three fundamental unframed systems at the base of the Baroness’s art and poetry are intertwined in this painting too: the body, represented by Duchamp’s crookedly smiling face, is immediately objectified by the mask; nature is vaguely echoed in the stylised leaves on the right and in the spider-web structure; urban technology mechanises the spider-web into a bicycle wheel and also affects Duchamp’s masklike face, which is displayed as one object among the others, locked in its place, unable to move or even to acquire a different expression.

The *Dada Portrait of Berenice Abbott*, suffused with warm colours, uses similar techniques to the portrait of Duchamp. Berenice is showered with all sorts of ornaments, including hair jewellery, a brooch, fake eyelashes on her red ruby eyes, and buckles; her face too is completely transfigured into a mask, perhaps even more exuberantly than Duchamp’s masklike face. Her doll’s lips contrast with the handlebar moustache in order to stress Berenice’s androgyny. All elements that refer to her life and career are present, such as the references to photography – hinting at Abbott’s career as Man Ray’s studio assistant. The black sun, geometrically round and surrounded by geometrical solar spikes, alludes to the reflectors used in professional photography. Crouching on the pedestal, a half-human and half-lizard figure holds a geometrised umbrella adorned with beads. In the foreground, the Baroness’s dog (who had displayed affection for Abbott), looks like a totemic figure, surrounded by a golden aura, which is in fact a round jewel. This portrait, like the one of Duchamp, contains all the elements of the Baroness’s aesthetics, although it insists on a critique of urban (bourgeois) consumerism. The abundance of jewels and precious objects appears to objectify Berenice’s face, rather than to adorn it. Her face is turned into an exhibition

object, thus presenting the theme of the mask and of the daily performance. The body is accustomed, *customerised* in a society of exteriority, consumerism and appearance; so is art, turned into an auction item, dressed up with exterior embellishments but on the edge of implosion. Nature is there too: the feathers being used as a beauty accessory and the horsehair brush symbolise the ruin of nature, which is domesticated, robbed and sold on the global market. Technology is less evident as a theme, only hinted at through the geometry of the forms and the references to photography, but it dominates the canvas with material and fabrics.

Both the portraits of Berenice Abbott and Marcel Duchamp, and the sculptural portrait of Marcel Duchamp evidence the Baroness's use of an extraordinarily wide range of materials, including organic and metallic paint, tinfoil, synthetic lacquer with varnish, glue, celluloid, organic thread, paper, cloth, horsehair, feathers, metals and glass. Captured in such heterogeneous assemblages, Marcel Duchamp and Berenice Abbott stand for the emblem of the modern man, a hybridised creature part-way between body and machine. In this light, the modern man appears to be once again (like in the poems) the victim of and responsible for the mechanisation of nature and his own body; while he transfers his sexuality onto the metropolitan and natural landscapes around him, technology mechanises him in return, turning him into an androgynous and un-gendered individual.

2.5. Metropolitan paradigms

The tension between visual and verbal is an element of constant dislocation in all texts analysed so far, which are in conversation with aesthetic experiences of the urban landscape in the early twentieth century. Particularly, while they move across (and take distance from) modern avant-gardes, all four writers under consideration interestingly explore the tension between centre and margin. Although they write at the centre of the urban scene, they often find themselves directed towards the margins.

While Barnes, Loy and Zelda Fitzgerald all experience the conflict of being simultaneously on the margins and at the centre (of both the urban panorama and of avant-garde), the Baroness problematises this pairing in more radical terms. Her

literary, artistic and social acting all challenge theoretical discourses on marginality, especially because of the implications involved in her *eccentricity*; instead of stigmatising a marginal position and occupying an alternative focus (Hooks 2000),¹¹⁰ she imposes herself into the centre of the *same* social context which had marginalised her. This paradoxical, yet circular, process gives rise to a final reflection on the relationship between periphery and centre, which helps in the attempt to position the verbal and visual poetics of the other writers considered too.

In different ways, but in the same decades, in the same geographical areas, yet at different times, Barnes, Loy, Zelda and the Baroness embodied forms of ‘eccentricity’, which allowed them to shift between centre and periphery, in a circular process of marginalisation and re-centralisation. The adoption of urban spatial concepts such as ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’, extended in terms of ‘centre’ and ‘margin’, results therefore ambiguous. For a start, such paradigm does not take into account the changeability of points of view, the plurality of which is fundamental in the representation of the polymorphous urban texture.

In an attempt to invalidate the legitimacy of marginality and centre as restrictive categories, Jussila Heikki¹¹¹ (1998) pointed out the danger of expanding the conflict to the paradigm ‘normal-other’. The many contributors to *Perceptions of Marginality* discuss the consequences of accepting any neat line actually as separating centre and periphery, normality and otherness. In the urban space, the physical act of moving away from the centre is gradual and progressive, as is the reverse approach back to the centre. Therefore, a more fluid movement seems to smooth the tension between geographical antipodes, thus allowing the categorisation of ‘peripheral’ to be not necessarily permanent.

When spatial concepts such as ‘centre’ and ‘periphery’ are extended to gender, they generate even greater confusion. The borders between normality and otherness appear diffusive, and the shift from one to the other happens in unpredictable ways. However, and as is argued by Judith Butler in *Undoing Gender*, there will hardly ever be enough degrees that would be sufficient to cover every nuance of ‘otherness’, and

¹¹⁰ Bell Hooks, 2000, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press).

¹¹¹ Heikki Jussila, Walter Leimgruber and Roser Majoral (eds.), 1998, *Perceptions of Marginality: Theoretical Issues and Regional Perceptions of Marginality in Geographical Space* (Aldershot: Ashgate).

to define its distance from a pre-established 'normality'. She comes to quite radical conclusions, in challenging the attempt to widen gender categories in contrast to a normalised social model: "how many genders can there be, and what will they be called?" (Butler 2004: 43)

Butler's critique reveals that the process of deciding what is 'normal' and what is 'other' is essentially arbitrary. If we re-apply Butler's observations back to the starting opposition between centre and periphery, we can say that the position of the women writers under analysis was constantly 'in transit'. Not only did they move across geographical borders, but across avant-gardes too, uncaring of (or resistant to) being affiliated to one or the other. They also moved across literary and artistic media, and explored the relationships between genre and gender as a zone of transit and negotiation.

Chapter 3

Remediating the self-portrait

*However you think of it,
it ends up as the fundamental fact of the mask.*
W. Benjamin, 1929.

All four of the writers under analysis seem to have difficulties with the idea of telling stories about themselves. From the texts and images that I have analysed so far, life-writing (or -painting) has been raised more than once as a problematic issue, including well-disguised hints at autobiographical experiences and attempts at verbal or visual self-portraits. Approaching now the last site of discussion in my thesis, I want to explore one more *topos* of the tension between verbal and visual expressivities; the relevance and weight of the autobiographical material in the texts appears in fact to derive from different forms of remediation of the self-portrait, the quintessential visual trope of representation.

As I anticipated when presenting the theoretical frameworks of my thesis, displaying the self proves, at very least, challenging for women writers and artists in modernity. Such resistance is based on several factors, most importantly on the need to define the identity of the feminine, gendered self, between individuality and collectivity; additional problems derive from the need to renegotiate their position within the literary tradition, particularly toward literary and visual genres that were traditionally defined as ‘feminine.’ Among these traditional forms of ‘feminine writing’ are those that talk about the self in private, intimate ways: diaries, memoirs, letters and, most importantly, autobiography. Separate from the monumentality of masculine (auto)biography, intended as mainstream and official chronicles of (patriarchal) power, feminine autobiography was perceived as an intimate, less theorised, and more fluid form of writing, often a channel for confession, and a

medium to express gender subordination. (Jelinek 1980; 1986)¹¹² Ultimately, the main challenges consisted in defining (op)positions within and against “modernist masculinity.” (Tickner 1994)

Within such a framework, traditional forms of self-depiction prove unsuitable, and therefore need reshaping. Under the impact of “a new level of critical self-awareness” (Marcus 2002: 196),¹¹³ modernist women writers engage in an aesthetic turn that affects biography and autobiography as genres, blurring the borders between them. In the early twentieth century, biography (re)emerges in both theory and practice, as crossing national boundaries¹¹⁴ to pinpoint a series of new common tenets. (Marcus 2002: 194) Strachey’s contribution was groundbreaking in this respect, as he created a visible distance with the Victorian biography – with the exception of a few late Victorians who had started to reform the genre.¹¹⁵ The “new biography” had to proceed instead in the search of fragments, rather than truth or objective knowledge. (Strachey 1918: viii) While the two decades 1920-1940 were,¹¹⁶ as phrased by Hesketh Pearson, “the day of the biographer” (1930: 289),¹¹⁷ the instability of barriers between biography, autobiography and other forms of self-telling characterises modernism. Ezra Pound’s *Gaudier-Brzeska: A Memoir* and *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*, Forster *Maurice*, Joyce’s *Giacomo Joyce* [1914] and *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* were only few of the many experimental works that proliferated in those years. Women partook actively in such a challenge, including, for instance Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and *Everyone’s Autobiography*, or Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* and *Flush*.

¹¹² See Estelle Jelinek (ed. by), 1980, *Women’s Autobiography: Essays in Criticism* (Bloomington; London: Indiana University Press); Estelle Jelinek, 1986, *The Tradition of Women’s Autobiography: From Antiquity to the Present* (Boston: Twayne Publishers).

¹¹³ See Laura Marcus, 2002, “The Newness of the New Biography: Biographical Theory and Practice in the Early Twentieth Century,” in *Mapping Lives: The Uses of Biography*, ed. Peter France (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp. 193-218.

¹¹⁴ Marcus notes how central figures like Lytton Strachey, André Maurois and Emil Ludwig, who developed akin aesthetics on the new ways to write biographies, had in fact little, if any, actual contact.

¹¹⁵ In *Eminent Victorians*, Strachey acknowledges that the work of a few late Victorians, including Samuel Butler, Charles Whibley and Edmund Gosse had started reforming the genre, although he thought the the genre was overtaken by unnecessary length and a pointless search for objectivity.

¹¹⁶ Ruth Hoberman, 1986, *Modernizing Lives: Experiments in English Biography, 1918-1939* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press).

¹¹⁷ From Hesketh Pearson, 1930, *Ventilations: Being Biographical Asides*, quoted in Altick, *Lives and Letters*, p. 289. In *Introduction to an Anthology of Modern Biography*, 1936, David Cecil claimed that biography was “the only new form of modern literature” (ix), thanks to the alliance of science and psychology it propelled.

In participating in such a debate on the renewal of the biographic and autobiographic genres, women also felt compelled to legitimise their voice as female modernist writers, therefore introducing the issues of femininity and gender in their autobiographical narratives (Cosslett et al. 2000).¹¹⁸ While traditional women's autobiography was perceived as private, confessional and intimate – as opposed to masculine autobiographies, weighty and meant for public consumption – new forms of feminine autobiographical writing include the processes of “making the self, bringing into being and constructing it for oneself and for others [...] to a developing sense of the self as made, rather than given, constructed, rather than innate.” (Wallace 2009: 64)¹¹⁹ Such narratives focus on the myriad ways in which feminine identities are constructed (and reconstructed), alongside the dynamics of appropriation of the body, and of its interactions with other embodied selves (Marshall, 1996).¹²⁰ While autobiography becomes in modernism a new comprehensive genre to “include all writing that inscribes subjectivity” (Mellor 1993: 157),¹²¹ it is also the medium through which to illustrate the “technology of the self.”¹²² (Nussbaum 1995: xi)

Under these premises, the self-portrait as trope of representation began to be differently textualised in fiction, poetry and drama, to show processes of self-*construction*, rather than of self-displaying. Max Saunders' studies provide a useful theoretical background for understanding the forms of autobiographical writing in the early twentieth century, an elusive field of study where cross-fertilisation and inter-breeding complicate the establishment of critical frameworks. Saunders' 2010 *Self Impressions: Life-Writing, Autobiografiction, and the Forms of Modern Literature* offers a taxonomy of the varied forms that writers from the 1870s to the 1930s experimented with, in terms of life-writing for the purposes of fiction. The forms he identifies – especially those exploring the relationship between self-portraiture,

¹¹⁸ Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury and Penny Summerfield (eds.), 2000, *Feminism and Autobiography: Texts, Theories and Methods* (London: Routledge).

¹¹⁹ Wallace, Miriam, 2009, “Writing Lives and Gendering History: Mary Hay's *Female Biography* (1803),” in *Romantic Autobiography in England*, ed. Eugene Stelzig (Farnham; Burlington, VT: Ashgate).

¹²⁰ Helen Marshall, 1996, “Our Bodies Ourselves: Why we Should Add Old Fashioned Empirical Phenomenology to the New Theories of the Body,” In *Women's Studies International Forum* 19(3), pp. 253-265.

¹²¹ Ann K. Mellor, 1993, *Romanticism and Gender* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge).

¹²² Felicity A. Nussbaum, 1995, *The Autobiographical Subject: Gender and Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press).

imaginary portraits and fiction – are particularly relevant to the understanding of the forms of ‘attempted’ self-portraits realised by the writers under analysis. A “(gendered) autobiografiction” is key to deciphering such a varied body of works. It identifies connections between traditional male and female autobiography, between the turn-of-the-century practices of ‘New Biography’ and the loose borders of the auto/biographical fiction, and with the issues of heteronormativity and gender construction.

In different ways, all four writers engaged in the production of *attempted* self-portraits, that evidence at once the presence of, and the resistance to, the autobiographical element. Many of their texts arise in contrast with the traditional features, to engage in dialogical forms of self-disclosure and self-disguise. For instance, Djuna Barnes took a strongly contrary position against the practices of disclosure in biography and autobiography:

“A biography, against my protest, both to author and to proposed publisher, will in a horrible probability appear in 1972. The awful point in all this sort of ridiculous “publishing” of a person, is for the public pleasure, I can’t stop it, so I shall suffer one more of these cheap “interpretations,” as they are called [...] God help my work, which is all they should be interested in. (To Peggy Guggenheim, undated)

But Peggy, you know what I think about this “tell all” to the idiotic public. Please do not speak of me, or say anything to these public gossips and slanderous tongues. And no pictures, of course! I know, everyone is writing about everyone. It’s “the thing” – and how they love the 20’s, knowing nothing about them, told or not told. And nothing is correctly reported. (To Peggy Guggenheim, 22 March 1978)

How many writers write “The Story of Their Lives”? Had I written mine, you would have read it. (To Agnes C. Ringer, 6 February 1968)
(Caselli 2009: 191)¹²³

In the letters that Barnes sent to Peggy Guggenheim, she expresses horror at the idea of a biography of herself. Her sincerity intensifies as she begs her friend not to speak

¹²³ I quote from Caselli 2009, p. 191, while the original letter remains unpublished and only available in Barnes’s archive.

about her or broadcast pictures of her, and as she refers to biography merely as “the thing,” a sort of infection in which “everyone writes about everyone.” Especially in light of Barnes’s early activity as a reporter, the vocabulary that she uses is noteworthy: “publishing,” “idiotic public,” “public gossip,” and “nothing is correctly reported” hint back ironically at the beginnings of her career, when she ‘reported correctly’ urban facts. Report narrative, however, must not be applied to the self, as she finds “ridiculous” the “‘publishing’ of a person.”

While playing with the semantics of ‘publishing’ (inverted commas in the original letter), Barnes calls into question several issues, including the distance between individual identity and public identity, between subject and *mask*, and the role of gender in fashioning a ‘commercial’ profile. Most interestingly, she invites us to be cautious in the tracing and framing of autobiographical material in her work. She almost warns us against attempting strict autobiographical or psychoanalytical readings of her work to learn more about the writer, rather than enjoying the reading – “which is all they should be interested in.” Yet, although she wrote no autobiography, the presence of autobiographical material is pervasive in her writings, as extensively argued by Phillip Herring (1995); there are also enough hints to justify psychoanalytical readings of this significant autobiographical presence, as argued by Louise DeSalvo (1991).

The conflicting attitude of ‘assistance-resistance’ towards autobiography and self-portrait, reframed in terms of gender and empowerment, is addressed in different ways in the works under analysis. Like Barnes, all the artists considered seem to resist open disclosure; rather, they allocate their autobiography to literary masks, which change it, denounce it, disguise it, and reshape it into endless variables.

3.1. **Fraught autobiographies and self-construction**

Echoing the similarities between biography and portrait,¹²⁴ *auto*-biography and *self*-portrait also seem to be comparable at semantic and at formal level. In terms of

¹²⁴ Literally “Portraits share affinities with the literary form of biography” in Shearer West, 2004, *Portraiture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 50.

contents, both explore themes such as power, gender, group subjects, and individual subjects; formally, they “are not just likenesses, but works of art that engage with ideas of identity as they are perceived, represented, and understood in different times and places.” (West 2004: 11) Furthermore, both self-portraiture and autobiography seem to investigate the relationship between subject (sitter) and ‘painted’ icon, which, according to Antonia Byatt, has put in contact portrait and fiction since the birth of the novel (Byatt 2001).¹²⁵ Helpful to my analysis, Byatt delves into matters of authenticity, inviting reflections on the discrepancies between historical narrators and (autobiogra)fictional characters, and between painter and subject of the self-portrait. The focus on self-portrait as ‘icon’ is particularly relevant to explore the role and weight of autobiographical material in the corpus selected, which seems to be a constant undercurrent to the text as it both discloses and disguises the historical narrator. All conventions of traditional autobiography, including sequentiality, linearity and reliability are challenged and opposed in what appears to be a carousel of masks and puppets, rather than characters. Particularly Barnes’s and Loy’s novels and dramas – alongside the nightmarish circuses of Zelda’s paintings – seem to be haunted by a proliferation of masks, alter egos, *Doppelgänger*, aliases and imaginary self-portraits.

It is Mina Loy, in fact, who triggers us to reflection with her pamphlet in verses *Auto-Facial Construction* (1919) with an ironic play between revealing and hiding. Her pamphlet echoes, mockingly, the assertiveness of manifestoes, while it promises to instruct how to “construct” a daily *façade*. While Loy invites individuals to take control of their own facial making(-up), and warns them from the risks of letting society shape it for them, she implicitly acknowledges that context and circumstances do have that power to influence an individual’s looks. Such a tendency must be counteracted by the subjects, who need rather to create their own looks and therefore their social-use-image.

I will instruct men or women who are intelligent –
And for the briefest period, patient, –
To become masters of their facial destiny.
[...]

¹²⁵ Antonia S. Byatt, 2001, *Portraits in Fiction* (London: Chatto & Windus).

This means renaissance for the society woman,
The actor, the actress,
The man of public career, for everybody who desires it.
The initiation to this esoteric anatomical science is expensive,
But economical in result;
For it places at the disposal of individuals
A permanent principle for the independent conservation of beauty
To which,
Once it is mastered,
They have constant and natural resource.
(Loy 1919: 334)

Loy's instructions on the need to refashion the exterior looks to gain social benefits in terms of visibility and success call into question an aesthetic discourse on the communicative aims of the portrait. Traditionally, the portrait served to magnify the public image of the character depicted; such image was textured and carried by the image, rather than by the subject in person. What Loy suggests is that the subject's real face now has the role which was once attributed to the face painted on canvas. The body and the exterior looks are now entrusted with broadcasting a *profile*, in place of the portrait.

While the individual's control over the public image is emphasised, ironically, by hyperboles ("masters," "initiation" and "permanent"), the idea that it is the subject which has to change, rather than the image, is revolutionary. Rather than focusing on remediating the self-portrait, modern subjects should invest in renewing their looks and fashioning their own body, to produce the new icon, which becomes necessarily performative and dynamic in its social role. The consequences of such self-construction appear implicit in the process of disguise. No longer are subjects "masters" of their individuality, but of their "facial construction" instead.

Mina Loy's pamphlet *Auto-Facial-Construction* seems to be an ideal starting point for the analysis of the re-fashioning of the self-portrait in modernist feminine life-writing. According to Loy's scholar Rochelle Rives (2011),¹²⁶ *Auto-Facial-Construction* critically engages with the trope of prosopopoeia whereby the making of face amounts to the making of a speaker and, in the modernist context, a personality.

¹²⁶ Rochelle Rives, 2001, "Modernist Prosopopoeia: Mina Loy, Gaudier-Brzeska and the Making of Face," in *Journal of Modern Literature* 34(4) (Summer 2011), pp. 137-159.

For Loy, the possibility of efficiently articulating just what one means necessitates a sculptural restructuring of the face as it consolidates an individual organized around categories of personality and subjectivity. This sculptural vision [...] predicated its expressive strength on the power of personality as a consolidation of the interior and exterior dimensions of the human subject. (Rives 2011: 137)

Rives' arguments, which contextualise the process of facial construction in visual, "sculptural" terms, underscore how the close relationship between subject and face (formerly, in traditional self-portraiture, between subject and image) has implications on the construction of one's personality, because the face is *part* of the subject. In addition, the idea of 'interior-exterior' has to be redefined, since both are embodied by the performing subject.

3.1.1. Attempts at self-portraits: masquerades

In the works under analysis, the parallel pair 'self-portrait' and 'autobiography' shifts into the terms of 'self-construction' and 'life-writing'. The unsuitability of the former pair to depict the self-constructed modern woman is suggested by the scarceness of self-portraits by the four artists, as opposed to a proliferation of masks, and by the perpetual challenge of autobiography as a traditional genre. The sort of "womanliness" depicted in the very few existing self-portraits goes in the direction of what, in those years, Joan Riviere labelled as 'masquerade'.¹²⁷ In 1929 Riviere claimed that "womanliness could be assumed and worn as a mask," (304) distinguishing therefore a "genuine womanliness" and "womanliness as 'masquerade'." Although, as she explained, there is "no any such difference, whether radical or superficial" (*Ibid.*) between these two sorts of 'womanlinesses', the works that I explore show that the difference exists in the *attitude* at womanliness, between *being* and *acting as* a woman.

In light of such considerations, the self-portraits by Barnes, Loy and Fitzgerald can be defined as 'attempted self-portraits', because they already point in the direction of self-construction. Among the profiles under analysis, Zelda was the only one who

¹²⁷ Joan Riviere, 1929, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," in *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10, pp. 303-313.

actually realised a self-portrait in colours. According to Sally Cline (2002),¹²⁸ Zelda started her self-portrait in 1925, and then carried it with her during her travels with Scott. Although other sources attribute Zelda's watercolour self-portrait to later years, Cline argues that the fact that she used watercolour and gouache on paper rather than canvas supports her hypothesis that the portrait was realised during the years of travelling. As far as I can judge, it is hard to date the self-portrait precisely; but the technique Zelda employed makes me inclined to think it was done early in her career. Not only do the colours range between pastel nuances and orangey tones, but also the lines are smooth and regular. Although her facial expression is stern and potentially upset, a trait suggestive of Zelda's melancholy in the 1940s, her face is well proportioned and realistic, far from the puppet-like features that are common in her work from the 1940s.



Zelda Fitzgerald, 1925s/1940s, *Self-Portrait*.

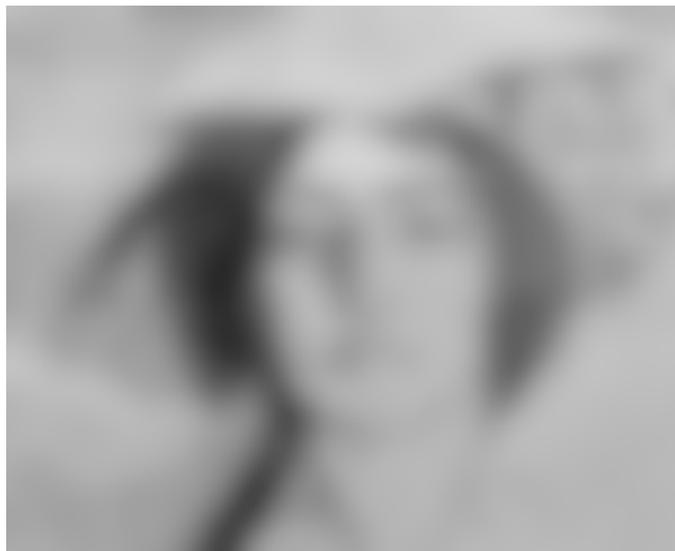
Regardless of when it was actually realised, Zelda's self-portrait possesses important qualities that fit my motive of the negotiation of the traditional self-portrait and

¹²⁸ Sally Cline, 2002, *Zelda Fitzgerald: Her Voice in Paradise* (London: John Murray).

Part II

autobiography. It undoubtedly echoes Marie Laurencin's watercolours on paper – this affinity is reinforced by the fact that Zelda was probably in Paris when she completed her self-portrait. It also converges loosely with the style of fashion cartoons, especially if we consider that, in those years, Zelda had engaged in the production of a small collection of fashionable watercolour paper dolls for her little daughter. Colours are anti-mimetic, in tune with an Impressionist mood; they engage in a subtext of chromatic resonances where the greys and blues around her nose echo the colour of her eyes and are in an open contrast to the rosy and orangey tones of the cheeks, amplified by the golden colour of the hair. Make-up dominates the foreground with Zelda's notorious red lipstick and blushed cheeks. Her looks convey Zelda's love for fashion even if the portrait does not show her clothing: the short fringe haircut and red lips are eloquent enough. Already in this early self-portrait, realised anyway before *Save Me The Waltz*, Zelda presents herself as a fashionable woman, with her make up on, in the anticipation of iconic Alabama, who wore her red lipstick since when she was a little girl.

Loy's and Barnes's remediation of the genre appears more radical at the first glance.



Mina Loy, 1905, *Self-Portrait*.

Loy's self-portrait is a sketch in pencil on paper. While the pose is rather traditional, the interesting characteristic of Loy's self-portrait consists in the use of the sketch-technique, quick and unfinished, as opposed to the features of canonical self-portrait. While her lineaments are indeed neat even in the sketch-like technique employed, there are parts that appear unfinished, and roughly cross-hatched. Potentially, the choice to entrust a small-sized pencil sketch with the responsibility of being the *only* self-portrait that Loy realised is telling in itself, as it undermines the authority of the self-portrait as a genre. This choice suggests perhaps that there are more suitable forms, i.e. masks, to actually represent the individual – somewhat paradoxically. Loy's most relevant remediation of the self-portrait can be witnessed, in fact, in her literary texts rather than in her paintings and drawings. Perhaps the verbal text offered a way to reveal and conceal, to make contradictory facets coexist, to combine many aspects of the human image in a way that mimetic representation could not.

Barnes's Beardsleyan ink caricature of herself puts her more openly at odds with the genre of self-portrait.



Djuna Barnes, 1919, *Self-Portrait*.

She appropriates the genre ironically, staging the terms of a provocation to the authority of portraiture, challenged by new media of visual representation such as the newspaper cartoon, and by the mocking tones of the caricature. She sketched her own self-portrait as essential and dry as the portraits of intellectuals and friends she wrote about in her articles. Big pendant earrings are the only detail of her facial looks, which, together with her middle-parted hairstyle, evoke the 1910s trend. The choice of the vignette as a medium for self-portrait suggests perhaps that she, like Loy, related the size (only 8x12 cm) to self-portraiture in the traditional self, and preferred to explore the potential of other forms of self-telling.

This quick overview of the actual self-portraits realised by the artists under analysis (except for the Baroness, who did not realise any) suggests a sense of impatience mingled with scepticism towards the visual genre. For different reasons, they all appear to be *attempts at* (either unfinished or parodic) self-portraiture, rather than ‘fully fledged’ self-portraits. They appear as momentary recreations, sketches, or unserious diversions, based on the assumption that self-portrait, in a narrow sense, is a blind alley. Moreover, the smallness of their number is emphasised by a large number of fictional masks, puppets and *doppelgänger*, which are more suitable, perhaps, to narrate the processes of the construction of the self.¹²⁹ In the following paragraphs, I will explore the terms of negotiations of self-portrait in their literary bodies, stressing how masks gradually, sometimes completely, replaced the autobiographical characters. On this note, I will try to identify the roles of such masks and their ways to alter, or even “counterfeit” (Caselli 2008: 215) autobiographical material.

¹²⁹ Interestingly, Barnes’s *Nightwood* is the first among Barnes’s text that lacks illustration, as if to suggest that visual genres have been remediated *into* verbal texture, rather than being just terms of comparison for new literary forms. Douglas Messerli, the editor of several collections of Barnes’s writings and drawings, tellingly hypothesises that “the drawings of Djuna Barnes must be understood within the context of her writings. [...] In her great *Nightwood* (1936), which contains no drawings, Barnes focuses much on her imagistic (and structural) concerns on linguistic descriptions of *tableaux vivants*, “living pictures.” Accordingly, it is impossible in the work of Djuna Barnes utterly to separate the visual from the linguistic. Her pen seems as ready to sketch visual images as it is to write down words.” (Messerli 1995: 5) In *Nightwood*, visual art and language have reached a superlative level of fusion in Barnes’s language, which seems to broaden even W.T. Mitchell’s ‘branch’ of the family of images that goes under the name of “verbal images.” Barnes’s verbal images do not merely consist in the metaphors and description identified by Mitchell, but *contain* images in both formal and lexical ways. In such a perspective, argues Messerli, *Nightwood* does not need to be illustrated in order to show images to the reader.

Douglas Messerli, (ed. by), 1995, *Poe’s Mother. Selected Drawings of Djuna Barnes* (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press).

3.2. Fiction: proliferation of masks

The scarcity of self-portraits invites us to meditate on the new, problematic relationship between subject-construction and self-representation. Interestingly, this lack of self-portraits is mirrored by a parallel proliferation of masks in the works under analysis. As the ‘painted subject’ evolves into ‘painted face’ in the shift from self-portraying to self-constructing, the distance widens between the historical narrator and the fictional *alias* in the process of ‘making-up’. While the autobiographical fiction as a ‘genre’ already increases the liberty (and liberation) of the narrator to create distance from the historical narrator, the autobiography-based characters of Barnes’s and Loy’s novels are actual masks, who play at hiding and revealing, disclosing and deceiving. In their novels, the mask is therefore a site of ambiguity, a liminal space where the character can undermine the authority of the narrator.

In the novels of Barnes and Loy particularly, masks seem to express an “act of resistance,” to use Adrienne Rich’s phrasing (1980).¹³⁰ However, not only do they resist what Rich calls “compulsory heterosexuality,” but also they appear reluctant to disclose themselves. It is therefore interesting to explore the mask as site of both ambiguity and resistance, and to study how it is differently employed as a narrative device in Barnes’s and Loy’s novels to re-fashion and redeem forms of self-portraying – and self-disguising. In this light, the mask is employed to re-mould and re-orient autobiographical material, and plays with the conventions of autobiography as a genre. While delving into the analysis of such processes, the interactions between gender and genre come to the surface, making the mask appear as the quintessential vehicle of ambiguity and transition.

¹³⁰ Adrienne Rich, 1980, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” in *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985*, Adrienne Rich (Norton: New York, 1985), pp. 23-75.

3.2.1. Backfiring alibis: masks in Barnes's *Nightwood*

Nightwood is a novel where, undoubtedly, masks proliferate.¹³¹ Investigating *Nightwood*'s double-edged masks, which work as both protection and prison for the characters, also offers an opportunity to expand on spatial dynamics, thus engaging in the processes of space-gendering and space-appropriation. While the novel lends itself to several readings,¹³² my analysis focuses on how Barnes's autobiographical fiction opposes the conventions of traditional feminine autobiography, perceived as *confining* the writing subject, creating new forms of feminine self-portraying. In Barnes's aesthetics, constructing mask(s) is the only possible way for subjects to socialise, and therefore to exist – to avoid “the morbidity of life,” (Barnes 1918) i.e. the absence of social masks.¹³³ As a consequence, her fictional masks explore in almost *meta-theatrical* terms the process of construction of their alibis for their (fictional) lives. In the meantime, such masks also show us the weight of autobiographical material in the character's (self-)construction, thus constantly framing the mask as a remediated form of the self-portrait.

Through mask construction, the characters of *Nightwood* aspire to liberation, thus overcoming both spatial and heteronormative *enclosures*. However, they seem to fail in the attempt. Although they expend all efforts to make their masks credible, and try to involve other characters in their masquerades to validate their alibis for living, they end up imprisoned in the fictitious identities that they have created.

¹³¹ To suggest that *Nightwood* is not the first text in which Barnes enjoys challenging the potential extents of autobiography, it is worth hinting back at *Ryder*, 1928. As I argued, *Ryder* could hardly be defined as clustered into genre definitions, not even loose one such as ‘autobiografiction’. *Ryder*, with its challenge of the family autobiography, announced to the readership Barnes's impatience towards traditional form of self-portraits, in that case family portrait, provocatively featuring more than thirty genres and sub-genres across fifty chapters.

¹³² T.S. Eliot himself, upon reviewing *Nightwood* for the 1936 Faber & Faber edition, wrote: “To say that *Nightwood* will appeal primarily to readers of poetry does not mean that it is not a novel, but that it is so good a novel that only sensibilities trained on poetry can wholly appreciate it. Miss Barnes's prose has the prose rhythm that is prose style, and the musical pattern which is not that of verse. This prose rhythm may be more or less complex or elaborate, according to the purposes of the writer; but whether simple or complex, it is what raises the matter to be communicated, to the first intensity.” (Barnes 1936: i)

¹³³ In a 1918 interview with Guido Bruno, she declared: “Morbidity? You make me laugh. This life I write and draw and portray is life as it is, and therefore you call it morbid. Look at my life. Look at the life around me. Where is this beauty that I am supposed to miss? The nice episodes that others depict? Is not everything morbid? *I mean the life of people stripped of their masks*. Where are the relieving features?” (Barnes 1919: 385) (emphasis is mine). Alyce Barry et al. (eds.), 1985, *Djuna Barnes: Interviews* (Washington, DC: Sun and Moon).

Undoubtedly, *Nightwood* contains autobiographical overtones, with Barnes being profiled as Nora, and Thelma Wood as Robin.¹³⁴ Yet, such correspondences are never univocal and complete, and certainly do not exhaust the possibilities of these masks. This first obstacle, consisting in the difficulty to establish a one to one proportion between each character and historical people around Barnes, warns us of the dangers of embracing exclusive or simplistic autobiographical readings. Not only do characters stand for more than one person in Barnes's life, as affinities that Barnes as historical narrator has chosen for them, but they also try to 'autonomously' construct other masks to wear over their own (already fictional) identities, thus questioning the authority of the autobiographical narrator.

In the first few pages of the novel, readers immediately meet the first of many processes of self-construction, which appears as well-thought and long pre-meditate, specifically purposed to the camouflage of the character's essence. Guido is busy fabricating a family heritage that could cancel and conceal his Jewishness, his "impermissible blood," and support his claim to a noble Austrian estate.

Against the panels of oak that reared themselves above the long table and up to the curving ceiling hung life-sized portraits of Guido's claim to father and mother [...] The likeness was accidental. Had anyone cared to look into the matter they would have discovered these canvases to be reproductions of two intrepid and ancient actors. Guido had found them in some forgotten and dusty corner and had purchased them when he had been sure that he would need an alibi for the blood. (Barnes 1936: 6)

Guido's constructed identity introduces us to a pattern of fabrication and falsification, aimed at concealing and forgetting the character's essence. More significantly, it introduces a *meta-narrative* dimension – or even meta-theatrical, in a broad sense – a sort of narrative 'mask on top of the mask': each of the characters tries knowingly and deliberately to disguise or change their essential (fictional) identity, of which little trace is left. Guido disguises his Jewishness to turn himself into an Austrian pureblood; nobody knows who Guido was before, or beyond, his camouflage of *noblesse*.

¹³⁴ Robin, generally accepted (Herring 1995) as the fictional adaptation of Thelma Wood, has been connected to the Baroness too (Gammel 2003), thanks to her traits of circus performer, and to Barnes herself, as suggested by her geographical migrations.

Interestingly, Felix, his son, appears to be the exact *replica* of his father's mask, since he stages exactly the same tragic pantomime as his father.

Felix [...] turned up into the world with these facts, the two portraits and nothing more. [...] Felix called himself Baron Volkbein, as his father did before him. How Felix lived, how he came by his money – he knew figures as a dog knows the covey and as indefatigably he pointer and ran – how he mastered seven languages and served that knowledge well, no one knew (Barnes 1936: 7)

In this case too, nobody, certainly not other characters, nor in fact us readers, have a chance to learn who Baron Felix had previously been, or who he was behind the aristocratic mask he constructed. In this respect, autobiographical reading triggers speculation (Herring 1991). Felix has been interestingly associated with two possible matches from Barnes's acquaintances: the novelist Felix Paul Grieve and the Baron Leopold von Freytag-Loringhoven, respectively second and third husbands of the Baroness. The former staged an actual process of name- *and* identity-switch from being the German translator Felix Paul Greve to acting the Canadian fiction writer Fredrik Phillip Grove. The possibility of the latter of the two rests on the fact that, through marriage, the Baron von Loringhoven transferred his noble title to Elsa, similarly (conversely, in fact) to how, in the novel, "Baron" Felix transforms the American circus performer Robin into an Austrian *Baronin*.

For Felix, and for all the masks in the novel, setting up a stable 'home' is a crucial (and excruciating) matter of concern. This theme perhaps hints ironically at Barnes's own several trans-Atlantic migrations, which suggest that identity does not correspond to stability and domestic enclosure. In fact, trans-national migration is widely explored in the description of Felix, too, who frames it in religious terms. He identifies the "step of the wandering Jew" as characterising trait: "no matter where and when you meet him you feel that he has come from some place [...] some secret land he has been nourished on but cannot inherit, for the Jew seems to be everywhere from nowhere." (7)

Felix's masks are endlessly duplicated in the novel. First he tries to extend his "alibi for the blood" to Robin, transforming her into a *Baronin*, and then to their son, the noble scion, who can secure the family progeny, and thus consolidate the lie. His

construction of a mask for Robin begins with the construction of an apparatus of space-related *memories* of the city he wants them to live in, Vienna: “he took her first to Vienna. To reassure himself he showed her all the historic buildings [...] With methodic anxiety he took her over the city.” (38) Buildings and monuments are meant to impress an *architecture of memories* in Robin’s mind, because Robin, like Felix, has no past – or none that we are told of, anyway. Felix also tries to create a present and future identity – “you are a *Baronin* now” – that he filters through the teaching of the German language; yet, he slowly becomes aware that his attempts are doomed to failure. While watching Robin sleep in a spontaneous and unrefined posture on an armchair, “he knew that he was not sufficient to make her what he hoped.” (39)

The dichotomy of ‘memory vs. oblivion’ runs as *fil-rouge* throughout the narrative, and is particularly relevant for the investigation of Barnes’s conflicting position on autobiography. Robin is *haunted* by the fear of forgetting and being forgotten, but at the same times rejects any set of memories that Felix (and later Nora and Jenny) constructs for her. Robin seems repelled, like Barnes, by the idea of seeing her story manipulated by others. Zooming out of the single novel, the tension between craving for/avoiding self-history (and ‘*herstory*’) provides a clue for the evaluation of the autobiographical material in Djuna Barnes’s works, from *Ryder* to *the Antiphon*.

Since Felix’s plan to create a mask of nobility for Robin fall through, he fails to construct his own mask too – he had decided to create Robin’s mask to validate his ‘fictional’ identity. This kind of failure, the inability to construct masks, is the (pathetic) tragedy in which all the characters of *Nightwood* are trapped.

The quintessential image of self-construction in the novel is embodied by the character of Jenny Petherbridge, Robin’s mistress, who takes her away from the love and care of Nora.¹³⁵ Barnes’s scholars have identified Jenny as the fictional adaptation of Henrietta McCrea Metcalf, Thelma Wood’s mistress, who eventually caused the break-up. Jenny is a widow four times over and “gains happiness by stealing the joy

¹³⁵ The case of Jenny Petherbridge appears particularly interesting for the discourse of the proliferation of the mask. Her (abusive) masks multiply in an endless gallery of reflections, like a kaleidoscope of fragments of the identities she has stolen: “By weeping she [Jenny] appeared like a single personality, who, by multiplying her tears, brought herself into the position of one who is seen twenty times in twenty mirrors – still only one, but many times distressed.” (Barnes 1936: 68)

of others” (58); she steals other people’s identities as well as she steals valuables and trifles, as a sort of identity-kleptomaniac, to construct her own mask(s):

Her walls, her cupboards, her bureaux, were teeming with second-hand dealings with life. It takes a bold and authentic robber to get first –hand plunder. Someone else’s marriage ring was on her finger; the photograph taken of Robin for Nora sat upon her table. The books in her library were other people’s selections. She lived among her own things like a visitor to a room kept ‘exactly as it was when –.’ (59-60)

She had a continual rapacity for other people’s facts; absorbing time, she held herself responsible for historic characters. [...] As, from the solid archives of usage, she had stolen or appropriated the dignity of speech, so she appropriated the most passionate love that she knew, Nora’s for Robin. She was a “squatter” by instinct. (61-62)

Like Felix, Jenny is eager to set up her own kleptomaniac archive of memories, in which she also wants to inscribe (Nora’s) love for Robin. Just like Felix’s (formerly Guido’s) portraits of his parents (actually two unknown actors posing in aristocratic costumes), though, the objects that Jenny collects are “second-hand.” Both Felix and Jenny are aware that the past they are making up is completely fraudulent, based on plagiarism of identity and theft of goods, and designed to deceive those around them. Yet they are eager to have at least some sort of background, regardless of whether it is “authentic” or “second-hand,” because they know that, without their masks, they cannot access personal or social dynamics.

The dichotomy of ‘second-hand vs authentic’ demonstrates once again the problem of autobiography in Barnes. Somehow Barnes, like her characters, willingly *fabricates* the autobiographic material that is conveyed by her masks. Perhaps such a choice originates from the desire to challenge authenticity as one of the postulates of traditional autobiography. Barnes’s autobiographical fiction conveys the deconstruction of both genre and gender practice, to not only to redeem feminine autobiography, but also to liberate women from subordination, freeing them to rewrite their own individual and collective histories.

3.2.1.1. Masks and space, enclosure and transition

The masks of *Nightwood* seem to connect to urban outdoor and indoor spaces, primarily streets and houses. Robin, the ‘silent protagonist’ of the novel,¹³⁶ is portrayed as an elusive character, who expresses her independence by wandering alone. All the masks that Felix, Nora and Jenny try to construct for her correspond to the spatial site of the house. As such, they carry the stifling traits of the practices of confinement and enclosure within domestic walls traditionally imposed upon women. Therefore, masks become narrative spaces, sites to question spaces traditionally intended for women, both in a narrow sense, i.e. the domestic walls, and in a broad sense, i.e. the feminine autobiography.

The idea that Robin’s wanderings between America and France symbolise Barnes’s transatlantic migrations and her identity as a writer on the move is only a hypothesis. It is a fact, instead, that *Nightwood* relies on a network of migrations that interweaves the lives of the characters on a transatlantic basis. Robin grew up in America, but moves to Austria, where she meets Felix and Dr O’Connor, and then to Paris, where she meets, and moves in with, Nora; eventually, she moves back to America with Jenny, whom she had also met in Paris.¹³⁷ Nora and Dr O’Connor (he has moved to Paris in the meantime) develop a strange friendship in Paris; their conversations – in which Felix is also named a few times (perhaps he is in Paris, too) – persuade Nora to follow Robin and go to America – there are no hints at specific locations, only at woods and countryside.

Both Vienna and Paris become sites of imprisonment, as they correspond to the domestic(ating) masks that Felix first, and then Nora and Jenny later, set up for her. Eventually, she has to escape from their houses and presence, attempting to find her liberation in the lonely outdoors. The opposition between domestic walls and streets in the novel becomes the means for discussing (and contesting) spaces – both house

¹³⁶ Chafid Rohman, “Revising the Human: Silence, Being, and the Question of the Animal in *Nightwood*,” in *American Literature* 79(1), (March 2007), pp. 57-84.

¹³⁷ The map of the places included in Robin’s wanderings supports, in fact, the association of Robin to the Baroness; such correspondence is also validated by the association of the ‘Baron’ Felix to the historical Baron von Freytag-Loringhoven, third husband of the Baroness. However, the Robin’s migration-map appears exactly reverse, if compared to the Baroness’s one: German-born Else Plötz went to America, where she married the German Baron; only late in her life, she went back to Europe, first to Berlin and the to Paris, where she died.

and autobiography – that were traditionally gendered as feminine, and for claiming access to new spaces for both art and femininity. In this light, both domestic space and autobiography are perceived as enclosure; migration/transition, in the sense of both geographic migration and exploration of traditional genres, stand instead for liberation.

Robin's wanderings "in search of a home" (34) attract others, who feel immediately protective towards her, and try to give her what she is looking for.¹³⁸ Robin insists on the fact that she needs a mask in order not to forget herself, thus validating the potential semantic overlapping of domestic space, memory, and autobiography:

She kept repeating in one way or another her wish for a home, as if she were afraid she would be lost again, as if she were aware, without conscious knowledge, that she belonged to Nora, and that if Nora did not make it permanent by her own strength, she would forget. (50)

Only, their domestic constructions cannot *contain* Robin¹³⁹ because they are part of their own fictional identities. Nora seems only momentarily to succeed where Felix had failed, when she takes Robin to live with her. After a while, Robin becomes restless again, and starts leaving at night for her urban wanderings. Meaningfully, the domestic "museum" of memories that Nora has constructed for Robin acquires stifling traits. Nora starts nourishing herself on the memory (an empty mask) of Robin, rather than on her very rare physical presence. By the time Robin leaves, Nora has already replaced the real Robin with the domestic mask she had constructed for her, and continues to live in a gallery of memories. Their once idyllic domestic space, furnished with things that Nora and Robin had bought together,¹⁴⁰ turns into an obsession for both of them: for Robin, because she cannot be contained; and for Nora, because her

¹³⁸ Although Nora tries better than Felix to follow Robin in her wanderings to Munich, Vienna, Budapest and Paris, she eventually tries to domesticate her, once again creating an indoor place for her that eventually becomes a prison.

¹³⁹ The very name of Robin evokes her innate impatience when feeling *caged*.

¹⁴⁰ "Every item in the house, every word they spoke, attested their mutual love, the combining of their humors." (50)

domestic *construction* backfires, and obsesses her with memories of Robin.¹⁴¹ Following the thread of unrestrainable Robin's sequence of 'going away', exiting and escape, her, the novel itself appears extremely dynamic. While she is married to Felix, she goes out and wanders for days; upon leaving him and their baby she shouts "I'll get out." (44) Such behaviour turns out to be a pattern.¹⁴² Equally abruptly does she leave all the spaces designed to imprison her, from Felix's hotel room, to Nora's house, to Jenny's flat, to the very carriage in which she was travelling with Jenny, turned hysterical by jealousy – the last scene in which we see Robin before she leaves for America. Once again, Nora's words reiterate the distance between memory and space: "Robin can go anywhere, and I nowhere, because I remember." (176)

From this perspective – and also making the connection with Djuna Barnes's own 'street-walks' in Paris – the city appears to embody the site of modern women's claim for accessing (not just urban) spaces that were previously off limits. On this note, Robin's *transitions* acquire (auto)biographic multi-referentiality: evoking both the historical persons of the Baroness and Barnes's own travels, she acquires a collective identity, representing all female intellectuals, who moved on the transnational chessboard of women's (transiting) modernism.

The refashioning of autobiography is carried out through the negotiation of paradigms of genre and gender, including idioms of spacing. The ultimate challenge to genre itself appears to be phrased in terms of narrative spaces. While the lack of "identity of name between the author [...], the narrator of the story, and the character" (Lejeune 1975:12) was already enough to break the "autobiographical pact"¹⁴³ and enter the looser field of autobiographical fiction, the 'narratological handover' from Nora to Dr O'Connor classifies *Nightwood* as one among the most interesting cases of

¹⁴¹ Initially, not long after Robin has left, Nora feeds herself on such memories, confessing to the doctor: "once, when she was sleeping, I wanted her to die" (116) and then, later, "I'm happier when I'm alone now, without her, because when she was here with me, in this house, I had to watch her wanting to go." (126). However, memories become haunting to Nora, and at least in two separate moments she feels the need to take off her mask and leave the house: first when she leaves at night to go to the Doctor's room to speak about Robin; the second and decisive moment is when she definitely shuts the doors of her house in Paris to go to America in search of Robin.

¹⁴² "Like a painting of the *douanier* Rousseau, she seemed to lie in a jungle trapped in a drawing room." (31)

¹⁴³ Lejeune, Phillip, 1975, "The Autobiographical Pact," in *On Autobiography*, Philippe Lejeune, transl. by Katherine Leary, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. 3-30.

modernist autobiografiction.¹⁴⁴ For the first two chapters, Nora is in charge of the diegesis (Hayden 2012), but, after a physical transition across her own house and Dr O'Connor's flat,¹⁴⁵ she gets literally "usurped" of her role as narrator.¹⁴⁶ (Hayden 2012: 74)

Doctor O'Connor is an extremely interesting mask, that offers a fertile site to inscribe the reflection of the (dismissed) authority of the autobiographic(tional) narrator into a discourse of gender and dynamics of power. In the novel, his appointment as "modern Tiresia"¹⁴⁷ (Booker 1991: 210-211) enables him to understand and inhabit other people's minds, becoming a professional but affectionate confidante to Felix, Nora – and through them, to Robin. In such gown – a "flannel nightgown"¹⁴⁸ – he is a self-professed prophet and self-acclaimed psychoanalyst, who uses an exaggerated variant of the talking therapy – perhaps as a parody of Freudian psychoanalysis. Like all other masks in the novel, though, the usurped narratorial role, understood as the ultimate self-constructed and kleptomaniac mask, backfires: ironically, he ends up lost in his (narrative) logorrhoea, overwhelmed by the weight of

¹⁴⁴ It also sounds worth hinting at the fact that Dr 'Matthew-Mighty-grain-of-salt Dante O'Connor' is the only explicitly intertextual character we meet across Barnes's works. There are certainly resonances among other characters, but *Ryder's* Dr O'Connor and *Nightwood's* Dr O'Connor are the only two who have the same name. In fact, they seem to be substantially the same character. In both novels, Dr O'Connor's mask brings him social privileges and he constantly boasts about his gynaecological practice, for having contributed to bring the other characters to the world. In both novels, although more explicitly in *Nightwood*, his medical and psychoanalytical practices "are constantly undermined and ultimately undone by his professionally incongruous deployment of a cross-gendered voice inherently resistant to, and rupturing of, the very masculinist medical authority he illegitimately invokes" (Hayden 2012: 74) However, there is an evolution of his function from *Ryder* to *Nightwood*. In the 1928 novel, the doctor is only one of the (delirious) voices, whose verbal ramblings have the same weight of those of other characters, despite their larger verbal volume. In *Nightwood*, instead, he takes over the voice of the narrating 'I'.

¹⁴⁵ First, Doctor O'Connor goes visit Nora to her house; then, she goes to his flat to speak with him about Robin. This 'spatial intersection' is pivotal for the handover of the narratorial voice.

¹⁴⁶ Hayden, Sarah, 2012, "What Happens When a Transvestite Gynaecologist Usurps the Narrator?: Cross-Gendered Ventriloquism in Djuna Barnes's *Nightwood*" in *Cross-Gendered Literary Voices: Appropriating, Resisting, Embracing*, eds. Rina Kim and Claire Westall, (Houndmills; Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 74-92.

¹⁴⁷ M. Keith Booker, 1991, *Techniques of Subversion in Modern Literature: Transgression, Abjection and the Carnavalesque* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press), p. 268.

¹⁴⁸ As Nora enters Dr O'Connor's room, she has the impression to be violating an intimate space both literally and figuratively. She finds him lying in bed, "heavily rouged and his lashes painted," wearing a blond wig and "a woman's flannel nightgown." (Barnes 1936: 71)

his monologues.¹⁴⁹ When Dr O'Connor's "cross-gendered ventriloquism" (Hayden 2012) backfires, it forces him to relinquish his narratorial authority and "abandon the diegesis" (Hayden 2012: 77). However, there is no second handover back to Nora: after "Matthew's eventual, catastrophic renunciation of speech for silence," (*Ibid.*) the novel finishes with an inconclusive ending.

In conclusion, the exploration of the processes, dynamics and implications of self-construction in *Nightwood* helps to reveal Barnes's transgressive and transitional position towards the traditional *topoi* of the autobiographic genre and of the self-portrait. Additionally, it enables the exploration of her politics of negotiation of literary and social spaces that appear to be regulated by heteronormativity. The collection of masks that we encounter in *Nightwood* acquires the features of a gallery of *partial* self-portraits; every character shows affinities with Barnes herself, either with her identity as a woman, with her a profile as a writer, or with her self-construction as a public icon. Every mask is entrusted with a small bite of her story, which is twisted into a disrupted collection of confessions and lies, anecdotes and made-up stories. Meaningfully, Dr O'Connor's relinquishment, marking the end of *Nightwood*, also marks the end of Barnes's long-fiction writing. Only after ten years would Barnes engage again with literary endeavour with her drama in verses *the Antiphon*, which, through performance, increases exponentially the power of the mask as a form of life-writing and self-portraying.

3.2.2. Auto/biographical traps in Loy's *Insel*

Mina Loy approaches the problem of remediation of self-portrait and autobiography in more psychological terms. More specifically, she expresses her similarly conflicting relationship with genre conventions in a play with the reader's expectations. Her only

¹⁴⁹ In *Nightwood*, all dialogues are rather groundless. However, communication seems to get harder and harder towards the end, since when Dr O'Connor undertakes the role of the narrator. One of the many examples of how he and Nora talk *to* each other, rather than *with*, is set in the Nora's house: "Nora got up nervously and began walking. 'I'm so miserable, Matthew, I don't know how to talk, and I've got to. I've got to talk to somebody. I can't live this way.' She pressed her hands together, and without looking at the doctor, went on walking. 'Have you any more port?' he enquired, putting the empty bottle down. (Barnes 1936: 117)

novel, *Insel*, published posthumously in 1991, stages a parodistic narrative of genre and gender,¹⁵⁰ which satirises both tradition and avant-garde. She plays with the conventions of official biographic and autobiographic genres; for example, her position is clear from the title of the biography, named *Insel* after the biographee, but in fact telling the story of the narrating ‘I’ Mrs Jones.¹⁵¹

Loy also addresses dialogically some of the central tenets of Surrealism, thus providing a unique criticism of the movement while she was close to its centre.¹⁵² The experiential dimension and plastic figuration of the mask were certainly at the heart of Surrealism in the 1930s (Cheng 2009: 61),¹⁵³ where the mask was capable of both epitomising and exceeding the visual domain. (Lusty 2007: 84)¹⁵⁴ Of the Surrealist mask, though, Loy proposes a variation that crosses visibility and vision, authenticity and fraud.

Insel chronicles the struggle for artistic self-determination of Mrs Jones, the autobiographical narrator, in the face of an elusive biographee, a “more or less surrealist painter” (Loy [1991]: 3), who is able to induce states of delusion and hallucination. This strange encounter initiates the narrator to the world of the unconscious, which she describes as “a wilful descent into a forbidden psychology.”¹⁵⁵ (Loy [1991]: 99)

¹⁵⁰ As Hayden notes, “Loy adulterates Oezle’s biography with myriad inventions, omissions and alterations – pushing this ostensible *roman à clef* towards a parody of that form.” (Haden 2015: xvi)

¹⁵¹ The novel is loosely based on Loy’s friendship of three years with the German Surrealist painter Richard Oelze.

¹⁵² See Susan Rubin Suleiman, 1985, “Dialogue and double allegiance: Some Contemporary Women Artists and the Historical Avant-garde,” in *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, ed. Whitney Chadwick (New York: Thames and Hudson), pp. 129-135.

¹⁵³ Joyce Cheng, 2009, “Mask, Mimicry, Metamorphosis: Roger Caillois, Walter Benjamin and Surrealism in the 1930s,” in *Modernism/Modernity* 16, No. 1 (January 2009), pp.61-86.

¹⁵⁴ Natalya Lusty, 2007, *Surrealism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Aldershot: Ashgate).

¹⁵⁵ According to Hilda Bronstein, Loy’s words and themes echo those of Andre Breton in the *First Surrealist Manifesto* of 1924, where he writes of “*la promenade perpetuelle en pleine zone interdite*.” As Bronstein argues, “Breton’s reference is to the quest for access to the “forbidden zones” of dreams and the imagination, where, liberated from the constraints of reason and reality, the creative potential of the unconscious mind of the Surrealist might be harnessed in the name of social revolution.” (Bronstein 2000). To Bronstein, *Insel* addresses the problematic for women artists and writers in relationship to Surrealism, which, in Ades’s phrasing, “threatens to squeeze out any possibility for women in the Surrealist orbit to see them selves as other than the object or complement of male desire” (Ades 1998: 107)

Hilda Bronstein, 2000, “In Traces of the “actual”: How Writing Writes Itself” in *HOW2* 1(4), September 2000, n.p.

Dawn Ades, 1998, “‘Orbits of the Savage Moon’, Surrealism and the Representation of the female subject in Mexico and Postwar Paris,” in *Mirror Images: Women, Surrealism and Self-Representation*, eds. Whitney Chadwick and Dawn Ades (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), pp. 106-127.

Mrs Jones, the fictional adaptation of Mina Loy herself, is the real protagonist, who from the very beginning conquers the centre. In fact, we learn very little of Insel, while we rather follow the life of Mrs Jones, learning about the influence that Insel has on her psyche. The beginning of the novel proves telling, as it immediately orientates the focus on the biographer, rather than on the biographee:

The first time I heard of Insel was the story of a madman, a more or less surrealist painter, who, although he had nothing to eat, was hoping to sell a picture to buy a set of false teeth. He wanted, he said, to go to the bordel but feared to disgust a prostitute with a mouthful of roots. [...] What an incongruous end, my subconscious idly took note, for a man who must have once had such a phenomenal attraction for women. [...] For, to my workaday consciousness, he only looked like an embryonic mind locked in a dilapidated structure. (Loy [1991]: 3)

While the narrating 'I', Mrs Jones, comes forward before Insel, the semantic field of 'impressions' opposes immediately the idea that the biographer should have extensive knowledge of the biographee. Such verbal phrases as "I heard of," "must have had," and "looked like" map immediately the site of action of this auto/biography, which is the "subconscious," rather than the "workaday consciousness." On this note, Mrs Jones continues, a few pages later, with a blame that is absurd and paradoxical, especially set at the beginning of a biography: "I began to think it improbable I should even find a basis for this biography." (16)

Clearly, Loy uses the novel to openly challenge traditional autobiography and self-portrait. In a meaningful dialogue, the terms of such an opposition are made explicit directly by Insel and Mrs Jones, who debate on how to write Insel's biography. While set into explicit comparison in irreverent tones, verbal and visual genres are framed in the open critique to art consumerism – which we also saw addressed by Barnes in the letters to Guggenheim.

"I know how you can make money," I exclaimed agog with enthusiasm.
"Write your biography."
"I am a painter," he objected. "It would take too long building a style."

“You’d only have to write the way you paint. Minutely, meticulously – like an ant! Can you remember every moment, every least incident of your life?”

“All,” he replied decisively.

[...]

“the truth? Anyway, you can write under a pseudonym.”

“People would recognise me.”

[...]

Then, “No,” he reversed, “It’s not my medium.”

“Insel,” I asked breathlessly, “would you let *me* write it?”

[...]

“Don’t overdo it,” warned Insel, “it never works.”

“You can have your dinners with me and tell me – Can you really remember – the minutest details?”

“Every one,” he assured me.

“What a book,” I sighed with satisfaction.

(Loy [1991]: 13-14)

This passage, loaded with irony about the ludicrous ambitions of traditional auto/biography to tell *everything* and “the truth,” sets the premise for Mrs Jones’s work as a biographer – and ultimately of Loy as writer of autobiografiction. The terms of Mrs Jones’s biography, anticipated by the unusual opening of the novel, appear parodically antithetical to the conventions of the genre; punctuality, accuracy, linearity are completely dismissed by Mrs Jones’s biography, and replaced with vagueness, impression, and fluidity of space and time.

The character himself is far from the ‘ideal biographee’, as Mrs Jones later complains: “the minute details were fewer than I had bargained for, his leitmotif being his strangeness in so seldom having spoken.” (14) As a result, the character of Mrs Jones’s potentially best-selling “book” is a mask, *trapped* in the awkward position of being at once at the centre and on the margin of its own biography. The nebulous mask of Insel becomes therefore an ambiguous site of appropriation, where the negotiation of self-portrait and autobiography, and of Surrealist mask and modernist biography is based on play with reliability and deception.

3.2.2.1. Delusion, trust and treason

In Hayden's suggestive phrasing, masks (rather than characters) of *Insel* appear like a "network of false and chimerical connections to the surface." (Hayden 2015: xvii) While Insel becomes a mask, with endless potential for manipulation, disarticulation and re-articulation, fantasising and projection, Mrs Jones's camouflage as a biographer reveals Loy's sites of negotiation.

In this respect, it is worth mentioning that the 2015 edition of the book – the first one following the 1991 edition – came with an alternative ending, only recently unearthed in the Loy archives. The new ending, "Visitation of Insel," refocuses the reading of the novel on the identity of the character of Insel, putting him under a new, spectral light; more interestingly to my discourse on remediation, it undermines, the authority of Mrs Jones as auto/biographical narrator. While the novel was already considered to be an interesting case of modernist experimentation, which delved into the difficult relationship between genre and gender, and between self-portraiture and self-construction, the "Visitation of Insel" opens new debates, as it further problematises the authority of the narrating voice.

Mrs Jones appears peculiar even among the ranks of postmodern characters and Surrealist masks. In the novel, she is the undisputed and univocal narrating voice, and is despotic, in usurping Insel's space as biographee, thus openly challenging patriarchal power of traditional biography. Under the blame that her biographee has "no life to write,"¹⁵⁶ (18) she re-orientates the focus of her alleged biography onto herself, thus also moving towards autobiographic fiction. Until the alternative finale "Visitation of Insel" was published a few months ago, readership used to point at Insel as the ambiguous, elusive, sometimes lame character, and trusted Mrs Jones instead, enough to believe her viewpoint. Despite her unusual egocentrism as a biographer, and although trust in Mrs Jones's judgement was at times shaken by her occasional trips into her subconscious,¹⁵⁷ she appeared as a reliable narrator overall. By doing so, Loy

¹⁵⁶ The phrasing emphasises Insel's duplicity as an 'unreal character', which eventually turns out to be his real nature: "“You atrocious fake – you have no life to write – you're *acting* Kafka!” (18)

¹⁵⁷ For instance: "The psychic effort of reacting oneself from the creative dimension where one can remain indefinitely – like a conscious rock – immovable – in intellectual transmutation of long since absorbed actualities, while the presents actuality is let to hang – was devastating." (22)

played with the reader's expectations about autobiographic and biographic genres, even when the text is explicitly presented as a biography *sui generis*.

By appointing Mrs Jones as (self-appointed in her turn) biographer (yet in parodistic tones), Loy took advantage of the commonplaces about the biographic narrator, who is traditionally reliable. "Visitation" introduces the hypothesis that Mrs Jones is not reliable at all, and that in fact Insel does not exist, but is a projection of her own subconscious.

XVII

There was no mistaking this ecclesiastic 'current'. Here was my drug addict; divested of those shreds of flesh, easily as an aria relayed across the Atlantic, a recognisable 'invisibility' come to visit me. (159)

While "Visitation" also stages a different narrative flux, now consisting in fragments,¹⁵⁸ the mystical apparition of Insel certainly raises a lot of questions about him as a character, and about Mrs Jones's capacity to distinguish the real from the fictional. We thought him to be a rarefied corporality due to his drug addiction and starvation, his elusive personality, and his tendency to come and go in Mrs Jones's life. Yet, such clues are unravelled and given alternative explanation, upon the Insel's 'revelation' as a ghost. Suddenly, all the references in the book about Insel's rarefied, "transparent" corporality which "dissolved into a strange mirage" (27) acquire ironic tones, with the description of the palpable "invisibility" of his apparition. His physicality is often referred to as "forever fleeing," "ghostly," "blurred;" one specific passage seems to gain meaning:

Whenever I let him in he would halt on the threshold drawing the whole of his luminous life up into his smile. It radiated round his face and formed a halo hovering above the rod of his rigid body. He looked like a lamppost alight. Perhaps in that moment before the door opened he recreated himself out of a nothingness into which he must relapse when being alone his magnetism had no one to contact. (31)

¹⁵⁸ Mrs Jones appears 'weakened' after the two years that have passed since we last saw her in the novel; she has lost part of her autonomy as a character, now depending on her daughters, who take the role of keepers rather than carers. More interestingly, she seems to have lost her narrational authority too. We have no fluent narrative, thoughts appear fragmented in contents and layout, and her stomach-pain appears much worsened.

Upon first reading, we ascribed such traits to the poetics of transparency and paradox related to the character, who, tellingly, “existed on either side of paradox;” Insel also makes explicit how “in Kafka [...] I found a foreshadowing of my hounded existence.”¹⁵⁹ (17) In light of the finale, we realise how, like Kafka’s characters, he was an enigmatic mask.

While the actual (fictional) existence of Insel is not the target of my analysis,¹⁶⁰ it is interesting to reflect on the programmatic terms of Loy’s engagement with narratology. “Visitation” was meant to be an addendum to the very first edition, meaning that Loy played intentionally with conventions and assumptions since the first draft. According to Martin Price,¹⁶¹ the reader’s spontaneous trust in the narratorial voice lies on a long-established and unconscious reflex of trusting the narrator, who we assume has told us “all” or “all we are meant to know.” In the case of the auto/biography, we count on the narrator’s omniscience, or, at least, reliability. In the case of modernist and post-modernist texts, Price warns us against such cases of ‘reader’s overreaching’:

When we read a novel, whatever we need to know about a character is revealed to us in that work. By the end of the work our awareness of the character has come to some kind of resting point. We know by then all we need to know or at least all we are meant to know. All the questions or problems that are raised by the characters are resolved. If they are not, if the novel deliberately leaves the character ambiguous, the very ambiguity is a resting point. (Price 1983: 45)

Price’s comments explain the feeling of fulfilment enjoyed by the reader when the novel is finished, and are therefore relevant to explore the reader’s reaction when

¹⁵⁹ Both Kafka’s *Der Prozess* and *Das Schloß* are explicitly referred to in order to exemplify Insel’s existence, at once tragic, numb and creative.

¹⁶⁰ However, Julia Jordan’s 2011 considerations about the proliferation, in modernist literature, of “anti-characters” such as Insel are fascinating and helpful to explore the potential of the mask in fictional autobiographies. Her reflections on authorial actual or pretended “not-knowingness,” investigated in the works of Green, Woolf, Ford, Becket and others, provide useful hints to the framing of Insel character. (Jordan 2011: 170)

Julia Jordan, 2011, “Autonomous Automata: Opacity and the Fugitive Character in the Modernist Novel and After,” in *The Legacies of Modernism: Historicising Postwar and Contemporary Fiction*, ed. David James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 96-113.

¹⁶¹ Price, Martin, 1983, *Forms of Life: Character and Moral Imagination in the Novel* (Haven: Yale University Press).

“Visitation” comes to shock us. In most cases, argues Price, when the plot comes to a resolution, or when mysteries are revealed, the reader feels reconciled; when ambiguities remain and mysteries are not explained, the reader’s fulfilment turns into resignation. Instead, those finales such as “Visitation” – that bring with *coups the theatre*, or shocking twistings – leave readers in a state of alarm, while they engage in critical thinking to find explanations.

The unexpected finale comes twenty-five years after the first publication of the novel, to our confusion, more dramatically than the way in which it confuses 2015 readers who approach *Insel* and “Visitation” as a whole book. While earlier criticism on *Insel* sees itself newly challenged, more recent studies can range through newly problematic terms of analysis. Mine, in particular, has only begun to scratch the surface of the processes through which negotiations of genre and gender, (self-)portraying vs (self-)construction can be thematised through the *topos* of the mask – which in women’s modernity qualifies both as a remediated version of self-portrait and autobiography, and as a site of metanarrative consideration.

3.3. From performance to performativity

Most of the women under analysis engaged with the stage, either acting or writing for the theatre. The theatrical performance already appears as a liminal zone between the verbal and the visual, where the aesthetic partnership between word and image merge together on the stage. Moreover, performance adds further layers to the process of (self-)construction, consequently requiring the study of both ‘representational idioms’ and ‘performative idioms’ (Pickering 1994; 1995).¹⁶² Thus, while the character seems to be more accessible by being visible on the stage, it becomes harder to identify it, as it hides behind both the self-constructed mask, and the mask of his/her *dramatis persona*.

¹⁶² Although Pickering 1994 study addresses science rather than literature, his phrasing sounds happily applicable to literary paradigms of representation. Andrew Pickering, 1994, “After Representation: Science Studies in the Performative Idiom” in *PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association*, pp.413-419, and Pickering, 1995, *The Mangle of Practice: Time, Agency, and Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

The study of the gendered modernist theatrical mask serves here the illustration of another form of remediation of the self-portrait. It represents the intermediate stage between self-fictionalisation, which we saw with Barnes and Loy, and performativity – which I will address taking *Zelda* and the *Baroness* as cases of study. The field of investigation appears uneven and unstable, a farrago of tradition, disruption, acceptance and resistance, in which the play between self-disclosure and self-display assumes kaleidoscopic shapes. The exploration of this negotiation, which fluctuates between the subliminal and the explicit, the said and the unsaid, appears to me particularly fascinating in the theatrical works of Djuna Barnes and Mina Loy, respectively *The Antiphon* and *The Pamperers*; aside from offering interesting resonances with the other works explored in the thesis, they trigger reflections of the relationship between acting and playwriting.

3.3.1. Issues of genre and gender in women's modernist theatre

As a field of investigation, modernist theatre seems to be more problematic than modernist fiction, which is widely studied; particularly, criticism of women's modernist theatre remains circumscribed to a restricted scholarship, as of today.¹⁶³ There are several causes for such critical neglect, the main of which, according to Toril Moi,¹⁶⁴ is the fact that modernism in itself “is profoundly antitheatrical.” (Moi 2004: 249) “Modernism,” as a theoretical formula, has traditionally been attributed by critics mainly to the visual arts, fiction, and poetry, while drama has been neglected except for the consideration of a chosen few, including Ibsen and Strindberg.¹⁶⁵ Moi's

¹⁶³ See Katherine E. Kelly (ed. by), 2002, *Modern Drama by Women 1880s-1930s: An International Anthology* (London; New York: Routledge).

¹⁶⁴ Toril Moi, “Ibsen, Theatre, and Ideology of Modernism,” in *Theatre Survey* 45(2), (November 2004), pp. 247-252.

¹⁶⁵ Moi's scholar Kirsten Shepherd-Barr argues that the reason for widespread ignorance of modernist and post-modernist drama fits within a wider set of problems: “Theatre scholars have long been aware of how histories of modernism have neglected the stage. In fact, this awareness is linked to a larger problem of neglect of the genre of theatre within literary studies in general. The continued recycling of the same standard narratives of modernism – with a few important exceptions [...] – indicates a lack of interdisciplinary awareness in literary modernism despite the claims of its historians and practitioners.” (Shepherd-Barr 2005: 59)

Kirsten Shepherd-Barr, 2005, “Modernism and Theatrical Performance,” in *Modernist Cultures* 1(1), (Summer 2005), pp. 59-68.

j'accuse of criticism is reiterated in even more severe terms by scholars who endorse the case of women's modernist drama.

As argued by Katherine Kelly, critique has been dismissive of women's endeavours in theatre since the beginning: in the "eight of nineteen critical histories of the 'new,' 'the continental,' and the 'modern' drama published in the U.S. between 1910 and 1964," the only women dramatists "mentioned more than once are Elizabeth Baker, Lady Gregory, Susan Glaspell and Githa Sowerby" (Kelly 2004: 3). As she takes a strongly critical position against a long-established chauvinist practice spread in the critique of modernist drama, Kelly continues:

Barrett H. Clark's encyclopedic *Study of the Modern Drama* (1925, 1928) devotes 1.5 of its 500 pages to considering the dearth of female dramatists on the modern stage. Clark draws particular attention to the absence of talented women playwrights on the continent. Aside from Marie Lenéru, he "can think of no woman who has written a really big play.... And Italy and Spain?... I have neither seen nor read a single play by a Spanish or Italian woman." (309) [...] Clark identifies fewer than seven "good" plays written by women, noting that all of them suppress evidence of the author's gender: "Do you discover in any of these the feminine note?" Clark asks rhetorically. "If so, what is it?" (309) To write "well" is to suppress the "feminine note," to write like a man. (Kelly 2002: 3-4)¹⁶⁶

In fact, modernist women's playwriting has been victim of feminist policies of the time, too, which rather focused on women's activism in politics, their professions, and social life. Only in the 1990s did scholarship begin to evaluate the presence of women in modernist drama,¹⁶⁷ which, according to Bzowski's "checklist," (1992) accounts for almost 5,000 women playwrights active between the 1900s and 1930s: provocatively, Kelly asks "How could the work of 4,700 women writing in the U.S. and England – to cite two national examples – be mislaid?" (Kelly 2002: 2)

In light of Kelly's words, the fact that Mina Loy's plays should have passed practically unnoticed during her time sounds unsurprising. Her plays continued to

¹⁶⁶ Kelly quotes from Barrett H. Clark, 1925; 1928, *Study of the Modern Drama* (New York: D. Appleton & Co).

¹⁶⁷ See James Ellis and Joseph Donohue (eds.), 1985, *English Drama of the Nineteenth Century: An Index and Finding Guide* (New Canaan, CT: Readex Books), and Frances D Bzowski, 1992, *American Women Playwrights, 1900–1930: A Checklist* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press).

remain unappreciated even when her international fame as poet grew, overshadowed as they were by the resonance of her poetry. Some plays, like *The Sacred Prostitute*, remain unpublished as of today. It is only when the masculine canons of Surrealism and Futurism started undergoing revision through a gendered lens, that Loy's "Futurist" theatre also begins to be re-evaluated (Schmid 1996).¹⁶⁸ The two very short dramas named *Collision* and *Cittàbapini* were published together as *Two Plays* on New York's *The Rogue* in 1915, while *The Pamperers* appeared in *The Dial's* "Modern Forms" section in 1920. In the same year, Loy also wrote *The Pamperers*, the longest of her dramas, which I take as first case study in this chapter. Although Loy's theatrical production amounts to four short plays – a slim volume indeed if compared to the size of her production in verses and prose – it is worth critical attention: not only do such plays address similar themes to those faced in the poems, including the conflicting relationship between man and city, and a colliding dehumanised mechanical world; more interestingly, they inscribe the (self-)constructed stage-mask – now only a feeble echo of the self-portrait – in a framework of evoked and denied relationships with both traditional drama and modernist life-writing.

The reception of Djuna Barnes's *The Antiphon* (1958), which I chose as the second case study in this chapter, is more fortunate. Mainly, this is because *The Antiphon* was written when Barnes's fame as an artist had been long-established; in addition, she dismissed herself her four one-act plays of the 1920s as "juvenilia." (Herring 1991: 118-126) Although interest towards Barnes's early plays, especially *The Dove* (1923) has been recently rekindled (Plumb 2002),¹⁶⁹ their notoriety does not match that of *The Antiphon*. In Barnes's *Antiphon*, all the threads of her life-long narrative in verses and prose interweave to create a vibrantly patterned texture: her conflicting position towards autobiography, her attraction-repulsion to self-display, her fascination for the mask as the site of disguise as well as of remediation, merge in the ultimate construction of the stage-mask. Extensive criticism accompanies the reading of Barnes's *Antiphon* from its first edition, review by Montale (1958) as "a sponge of prussic acid;" even before publication, Edwin Muir described the manuscript

¹⁶⁸ Schmid, Julie, 1996, "Mina Loy's Futurist Theatre," in *Performing Arts Journal* 18(52), pp. 1-7.

¹⁶⁹ Cheryl J. Plumb "Djuna Barnes: *The Dove* (U.S.A.)" in Kelly, 2002, pp. 350-362.

as “one of the greatest things that have been written in our time, and it would be a disaster if it were never to be known.”¹⁷⁰ (1956: 175)

Loy’s *The Pamperers* and Barnes’s *The Antiphon* are evidently very *distant* from one another; still, they rest on aesthetic common denominators and address the tension between self-disclosing and self-constructing – resulting, in turn, from the fusion of self-portrait and autobiography – as it is re-inscribed in the (porous) frame of the stage. In both texts, an interesting overlap emerges between stage-masks and audience – once they both recognise themselves as *acting*.

3.3.1.1. Disrupting drama: Loy’s *The Pamperers*

When she approached playwriting, Loy was not new to the stage. Both beforehand, in Florence, and afterwards, in New York (1906-1920), she would be working as both a playwright and an actress. In Florence, she became acquainted with the Provincetown Players including Gordon Craig; in New York she played Mrs Lima in Alfred Kreymborg’s *Lima Beans* (1916), duetting with William Carlos Williams as Mr Lima. She also acted in Lawrence Vail’s *What D’You Want* in 1920. On the one hand, Loy’s engagement in the theatre (both acting and writing) is relatively well known by theatre scholars today; on the other hand, yet, the weight and implications of her activity as both actress and playwright in the misogynist Futurist context, and its relevance to the processes of dramatic mask-construction and self-display, remain less explored.

Her first protest against traditional men’s drama is embodied by a reversal of conventional dramatic spaces. In several plays, including *The Pamperers* (1920), staging overwhelms the character. In such cases, the city is upgraded from background to character, and as such is antagonised by individuals (who are relegated to the background) and confronted by the figure of the poet, who highlights the degeneration of humanity complementary to the rise of technology. Such reversal can be inscribed in a gendered poetic of claiming spaces (both theatrical and urban) that were historically hegemonised for men. As argued by Schmid (1996): “Dwarfed by

¹⁷⁰ Edwin Muir to T.S. Eliot, 13 January 1956. In Phillip H. Butler (ed. by), 1974, *Selected Letters of Edwin Muir* (London: Hogarth Press), pp.175-176.

scenography made up of colliding planes, lights, mountains, and city scapes, the sole character, Man, becomes incidental in both performances.” (Schmid 1996: 4)

The second polemic in Loy’s plays is the set of characters, which, as suggested by Schmid, appears newly gender-oriented.¹⁷¹ Tellingly enough, “Man” is the only character of the play in both *Cittàbapini* and *Collision*. While such subversion of traditional character-set can be read as parody, it brings the dichotomy ‘individual vs collectivity’ into Loy’s specific artistic surroundings. In such sorts of conflict, the Futurist poets Papini and Marinetti appear sometimes on the ‘individuality-front’ with Loy, while they play the role of the poet who denounces the paradoxes of urban collectivity; other times, they oppose Loy, assuming the collective identity of men’s avant-garde. This brings autobiography on stage, inscribing it in a strange play between individual self-portrait and ‘collective’ self-portrait.

The Pamperers offers a superior level (than the other plays and fiction) of negotiating portraiture, self-portraiture and auto-biography. In this play, autobiography emerges from the ramblings of the miscellaneous crowd of characters, among which Diana is Loy’s ‘autobiogradramatical’ (rather than autobiografictional) mask. While producing social prototypes and artistic stereotypes, *The Pamperers* stages potentially auto/biographical masks, triggering meta-social and meta-theatrical reflections. Such a group of masks, as is evident from the list of *dramatis personae*, is *spied* by the audience, who observes the scene “as if a camera is panning an evening in a literary salon, catching various images and bits of conversation as it moves through the room.” (Schmid 1996: 5)

THE PAMPERERS

Invisible Obvious

Picked People

Houseless Loony

*Porcelain breath – Sevres bow – Gilded crimson – Curved flutings –
Brocade – Tailored muscles – Whipped cream – Blue spirals – Salved lips
– Salon – Debussy – Azaleas – Ancestors – Armorial complacencies –
Ooze*

¹⁷¹ For instance, *Cittàbapini*’s has only one character, the Greenish Man, who is trapped in a narcissistic machine of self-glorification.

Picked People melted by a distinguished method among the upholstery.

TAG ENDS OF OVERHEARD CONVERSATION

The social fabric is a curtain...and that warm garnet fold-shadow there, for souls' hide and seek...

Decency shudders in the bare moment, taut between vestibule and auto...my crystalline lorgnette...trees...at this season all are undressed.

The earth a poignant undertaker...

I wish I had a wig darling.

...Observe the legs, the agony of the crucified...the tendons...delicate as Dresden china 15th century. ...ah yes! the troubles of the steam-heating plant...man from Milan knows his business...

Oh Prince how charming of you...and what is your opinion of the sex question?

How simple...still I can't quite agree with you...we shall never give up wearing silk stockings.

SOMEBODY Ossy you know has discovered a genius...coming from the club...wonderful chap, see his predatory eye...picking up cigar ends...the grand passion...pockets full...

(Schmid 1996: 10)

Of the traditional structure of theatrical text, only the skeleton is maintained; title, presentation of the *dramatis personae*, stage directions are still traceable, but appear ironically transfigured. Stage directions are replaced by/degraded to a heterogeneous list of objects, symbols, tools, background music, and actions. This impression persists when the play begins; no voice prevails over the others, but many conversational topics are introduced: moralism, fashion, sex, religion, art.

The characters make up a large number of masks, some of which are collective and choral. Their ranks include "Someone," "Someone else," "1st, 2nd Friend," who stand for collective masks. Other masks appear more characterised than the "pickled people," since they have a name; yet, they are not individualised characters, and remain only prototypical. "Ossy" gives voice to common prejudices and commonplaces; "Loony" profiles (ironically) the Futurist mask: although he has been identified by critics as Papini, he could stand for any of the Italian Futurists, whose positions are strongly chauvinistic. Diana, who stands for Loy herself, is the only fully fledged characters, however defined by fragmentary and rambling monologues. To mingle

such heterogeneous types of characters, syntax appears elliptical and juxtapositional: contemporary artists (Marinetti, “the man from Milan”) and fairy-tale characters (Prince Charming) coexist side by side in the same line.

A critique of “Mainstream” Futurist art is captured by highlighting its paradox of being objectified by the bourgeois consumerism of art. Meaningfully, “Somebody Else” says of Marinetti: “I don’t want to know anything about Marinetti but I respect him...he has a clean collar I am willing to accept the creed of any man who wears a clean collar.” (12) Immediately afterwards, Diana provocatively invites her tablemates to “consume” art, since “genius,” too, is “served directly to the consumer.” (12) Quite clearly, Loy’s attack to the commodification of art connects to the commodification of the feminine body, which is also understood as a ‘good’ by consumerist society. In her statement “there are only two kinds of people in society...geniuses and women,” Loy expresses more explicitly the gendered terms of contrast between her own views and Futurism. While “geniuses” might be male Futurists, in this context, who produced genial art but also made a business of their genius, Diana’s ironic statement “I am Woman,” pinpoints clearly Loy’s position. The contrast between Diana, the autobiographical mask, and Loony, the (parodistic) prototype, spokesman for Italian Futurism, highlights his chauvinistic vision, as he explains why she would not fit into Futurism, which is clearly “a *Fraternity*;” she would be “slighted,” “criticised,” “witless.”

In the face of sequences such as the one that I have just addressed, where autobiography seems to overcome dramatic fiction, the theatrical *frame* often reappears abruptly. For instance, a conversation between Diana, Loony and Somebody, is suddenly invaded by a stage-direction reference to the curtains (only later clarified as the windows curtains of the pub), which emphasise the theatricality of the space, and evoke an immediate meta-theatrical reflection:

OSSY: Oh Di, he wants a widow...James! Draw the curtains.

The curtains are drawn

The gilded shutters thrown back –)

LOONY: (*To the grand outdoors*) What an idea to muffle It up like that

Oh thou from whom all colds are caught...they're afraid of you catching cold!

Similarly, a few pages later, Loony is enraptured in one of his monologues about everything and nothing; distracted by an accidental move of Diana, who indicated an ashtray, he suddenly interrupts his monologue to (presumably) shout:

LOONY: There, there! My good people...don't ask me to say anything...but forgive me

Like the “curtains,” (unconvincingly) clarified to be part of the setting, “people” could refer to just the Picked People in the pub; yet, a posited extension of this apostrophe to the audience legitimises further reflection. Such ambiguities re-design the space of the stage, which becomes site of exchange between dramatic fiction and real life: the Picked “People” overlap with the audience, in the extension of the ‘collective mask’; if we extend such allegory of the crowd to ourselves, we may have to conclude that, *essentially*, we are all masks.

The comprehensive stage of *The Pamperers*, including both stage and hall, becomes the (aesthetic) frame in which the borders between life and performance get permeable. From such a reading of Loy's works, no substantial difference exists between *depiction* and *construction*, and none between stage *performers* and *real people*, as they both flow into the *mask*. In the wake of this suggestion, self-portraying and autobiography are re-contextualised in the dimension of the performance, a zone of transit from literature to life. From such a perspective, these reflections open gateways to the field of performativity, where the mask is no longer on stage, but stages itself in real life.

3.3.1.2. Appropriating autobiography: Barnes's *The Antiphon*

Djuna Barnes's *The Antiphon* seems to build, almost forty years later, on Loy's delusional masks, on the similar suggestion that ‘persons’ and *personae* overlap. Drama as a literary genre also suits her experiments of mixing together life and

performance, both in the sense of practicing as an actress, and in her practice of writing for the theatre; in this respect, her double-edged involvement in theatre paves the way for interesting dialogues between stage-masks and audience.¹⁷²

Barnes's dramatic (auto)biographical masks are inscribed in openly meta-theatrical poetics, through which Barnes discloses to the audience the dynamics of character-construction. While Loy's meta-theatrical *subtext* sends signals to the audience/readership, Barnes's explicit meta-theatrical frame has clearer effects; primarily, it discloses theatrical practices of wearing, changing, and taking off masks, thus revealing the fictional margin of theatre. More significantly, since the drama has (twisted) (auto)biographical traits, meta-theatre triggers speculation on the potential nature of the mask as a *consciously* 'performing self-portrait'. Ultimately, the process of character-construction appears managed by both the playwright and masks themselves, involved in a strange 'powerplay'.

In this light, Barnes's alter ego in *The Antiphon*, Miranda, shows awareness of being a mask, a performing self-construction. Yet, her autobiographical traits pledge no starring role or privileged point of view. The autobiographical mask is no narrator, as it has instead been in *Nightwood* – even then, as we saw, Nora's position of authority *was* usurped by other characters. In the play, Miranda is only one of the many masks bringing onto stage the twisted adaptation of Barnes's family life, a miscellaneous (self-)story where elements of theatrical tradition, life-writing and fabrication merge together.

After a page full of meticulous stage directions, the play opens on Miranda and Jack as they are busy in a strange 'dialogue':

MIRANDA

Here's a trip in nature; here's gross quiet,

¹⁷² In her early career, Barnes was involved as an actress and writer in the Provincetown Playhouse and the Theatre Guild, and was a columnist for the *Theatre Guild Magazine*. After the launch of such playwrights as O'Neill and Odets, the Provincetown Playhouse ironically evolved from its original form of niche experimental theatre for an audience of Greenwich Village bohemians to a commercially successful Broadway company; but Barnes preserved the original avant-garde *élan* of the group, re-proposing similar experimental techniques in both language and forms in *The Antiphon*. In terms of contents too, *The Antiphon* recalls typical themes of Barnes's aesthetics: original sin and sexual violence, disguise, puppets, frames and mirrors come back in a circus of literary quotations, intertextuality with the classics and references to her other works.

Part II

Here's cloistered waste;
Here's rudeness once was home.

JACK
There's no circulation in the theme...
The very fad of being's stopped...

MIRANDA
The wall is chapped where once the altar stood,
The basin dry, the music-stands in dust.
Horn and fiddle...

JACK
Mute as *Missae pro Defunctis*
[...]
(Barnes 1958: 7-8)

The conversation – which is more a succession of fragmented thoughts – is centred on Miranda's exploration of the (patriarchal) spaces of her family home. In her pondering back-and-forth walks, Miranda visits again the domestic walls, a site of physical and metaphorical enclosure. We immediately discover that Titus, one of the most 'encumbering' presences in the play, has died long ago.

The intertextuality of Barnes's text immediately raises the issue of Barnes's constantly ambiguous position towards dramatic tradition. The substrate of Shakespearian quotations is more pervasive than other sporadic references to the classics. Undoubtedly, the names of Miranda and Titus can hardly be read as neutral, while employed in drama. In a way, Barnes's middle-aged Miranda counterfeits Shakespeare's maiden, protected and beloved by her father. *The Antiphon's* Miranda is instead cynical and disenchanted, for having been abused by a Calibanesque version of Prospero, her father Titus. While the name of Titus evokes explicitly Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus*, Barnes's homicidal Miranda assumes some tones of vindictive Lavinia, craving revenge for the violence endured. *King Lear* is also a strong presence; when Jack calls himself "juggler" or "Fool," he claims a role similar to that of Kent in *King Lear*, bringing forth the truth on the past "under cover [...] of a bizarre

behaviour”¹⁷³ (Altman 1991: 279). This Shakespearian farrago, which makes tragedy and comedy come to interesting compromises, is not the only term of Barnes’s dramatic intertextuality; in fact, Shakespeare is not the only interlocutor of Barnes’s conversation with men’s theatre. Themes and forms from Barnes’s contemporaries are explicit enough. O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, Ibsen’s *Doll’s House*, Strindberg’s *The Father and Miss Julie*, and T.S. Eliot’s *The Family Reunion* are all evoked to not only confront traditional drama, but men’s drama in general.

The masks involved in the play, most of which find (various) matching in Barnes’s family life, are miscellaneous for role and nature. The basic set of *acting* characters is made up of Miranda, Augusta, Miranda’s mother, Jonathan, one of Miranda’s brothers and a coachman, and Jack; according to Dianne Warren,¹⁷⁴ “Jack/Jeremy is pivotal to *The Antiphon*’s action, as the builder of the Ark” (Warren 2008: 144). Yet, the presence of other ‘absent’ characters is considerable: Titus, Miranda’s abusive father – an ironic reversed/perverted version of Prospero – is constantly evoked, and so are her two other brothers, Elisha and Dudley, who conspire with Jonathan against Augusta. Besides the three members of Hobbs family, there are other absent characters, including Victoria, Elvira, Kappelmeister Stack, and Titus’s various lovers, who all “provide (contrasting) stories” (Caselli 2009: 225) Moreover, the characters’ projections range through ancient myth and history, through fairy-tale and urban reality: they *wish they were* Helen of Troy, Napoleon, “bloody Cinderella” and police. They also try to steal the mask of other characters, like Augusta, who attempts to strip her daughter Miranda of her *costume*.

The plot remediates, or rather, “counterfeits” (Caselli 2009: 215) Barnes’s history of domestic abuse¹⁷⁵ in the form of – parodistic – “revenge tragedy.” (Herring 1991: 281) Augusta is the silently aware mother (unlike Barnes’s mother, as far as I can judge)¹⁷⁶ of the sexual violence her husband perpetrated against Miranda and her

¹⁷³ Meryl Altman, 1991, “No Audience at All?” in Broe (1991), pp. 271-285.

¹⁷⁴ Diane Warren, 2008, *Djuna Barnes’s Consuming Fiction* (Aldershot: Ashgate).

¹⁷⁵ As suggested by Ann B. Dalton, Barnes history of sexual abuse is textured over and over in Barnes’s corpus. While hints are spread everywhere, more definite remediation of the story (besides *The Antiphon*) are evidenced in *The Doves*, Barnes’s 1923 play, and *Ryder*, her 1928 experimental novel. Ann B. Dalton, 1993, “‘This is obscene’: Female Voyeurism, Sexual Abuse, and Maternal Power in *The Dove*,” in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, (Fall 1993), pp. 117-139.

¹⁷⁶ Barnes dedicated *The Book of Repulsive Women* to her mother, writing: “TO MOTHER, who was more or less like all mothers, – and so – She excelled.”

brothers, and she is psychologically and physically abusive towards her children too. The conflictual relationship between Miranda and her brothers, mirrors partly the tension between Djuna and her brothers – although none of them ever attempted to murder their mother like Elisha and Dudley. Instead, Miranda’s hatred towards her polygamous and rapist father, Titus – a reversed/perverted Prospero – more closely mirrors the relationship between Djuna and her own father.¹⁷⁷

Upon evaluation of the autobiographical material of *The Antiphon*, Barnes’s biographer Phillip Herring argues that the play is an actual (rather than parodistic as I suggested) “revenge tragedy” where she poured her frustration and pain for the domestic violence she had endured as a young girl: “Art was Djuna Barnes’s only refuge and her only means of striking back, whether out of the desire for justice or for vengeance.” (Herring 1995: 281) However, Barnes’s declared position towards self-disclosure, and her advocacy of liberating feminine writing from confession and self-commiseration, warn us, perhaps, from reading *The Antiphon* as a site of “refuge.” Rather, I focus on what Herring argues about Barnes’s art as her means for “striking back” – in a broader sense. Barnes’s *Antiphon* can be legitimately read as a site of “vengeance” for the endured violence,¹⁷⁸ and also appears as a site for other colliding “anatomies of revenge” (Caselli 2009:191-256) – the most evident of which, perhaps, is the problematic relationship with literary tradition.

While clinging to the pieces of autobiography (which remind us of the identity-giving function of the “home” understood as the architecture of memories in

¹⁷⁷ As one of Barnes’s many ‘intertextual characters’, Titus appears a more definite figure and a stronger presence than the others, thanks to an intertextual reference to Barnes’s first novel, *Ryder*. Like Wendell, Titus is polygamous and uncaring of the pain he causes to his legal wife, who (like Amelia) is not in a financial position to leave him. In addition to his polygamy, though, Titus is incestuous and is convinced that, like his wife, his children are his property.

¹⁷⁸ As also argued by Louise DeSalvo, in her 1991 “To Make Her Mutton at Sixteen”: Rape, Incest, and Child Abuse in *The Antiphon*.” There, she defines *The Antiphon* as an “utterly realistic, and highly accurate portrayal of the psychodynamics and sexual pathology that operate within a family,” where children are victims of routinised abuses (DeSalvo 1991: 300). According to her, Barnes’s drama is a therapeutic strategy used by Barnes to deal with the trauma. However, as psychoanalysis is constantly teased across Barnes’s texts (see the logorrheic self-appointed psychoanalyst Dr O’Connor), other scholars are more sceptical towards defining the masks of the drama as “accurate portrayal,” exploring instead the ways in which autobiography is “counterfeited.” (Caselli 2009: 215-256) In this respect, Augusta’s words to Miranda sound telling: “May God protect us! I wonder what you’ll write / when I am dead and gone” (Barnes 1958: 113)

Louise A. DeSalvo, 1991, “To Make Her Mutton at Sixteen”: Rape, Incest, and Child Abuse in *The Antiphon*,” in Broe, 1991, pp. 300-339.

Nightwood), the masks of *The Antiphon* stage the (paradoxical) tragedy of not knowing who they are.

MIRANDA Who *are* you, Jack Blow?

JACK At this very moment I haven't the faintest notion.

Miranda's ironical question sounds paradoxical too. More subtly, though, her question suggests that she is asking him who he is *beyond* the mask. Yet, masks cannot reach beyond the surface of their mask, to discover their real identity, because performance has become the space for self-knowledge and existence, of representation and construction.

As they cannot reach beyond their masks, characters engage in identity handovers and role-plays that puncture their auto/biographical foundation. While they fully disclose the mechanics of self-construction, which hinges on a literal and metaphorical change of *costume*, they also show the extents and potential of *being*, rather than *wearing*, masks. In this way, as Augusta strips Miranda of her stage clothing to wear it herself, we see echoes of the usurpation of the autobiographical legacy that we had witnessed in *Nightwood*.

Augusta, envious of her daughter's (fictional) life, invites her into a role-*play*: "So, let us play. The epilogue is over, / The boys are asleep and we are girls again." (III: 101) The meta-theatrical referentiality of "play" introduces us to the ambiguity of the upcoming masquerade. Like a consenting puppet, Miranda does not resist: "*without asking permission, AUGUSTA takes off MIRANDA's shoes, puts them on her own feet, and in exchange puts her slippers on MIRANDA.*" (III: 105) Such consensual usurpation, which takes place in meta-theatrical terms, invites reflection of the destiny of Miranda's autobiographical estate. Apparently, as we read from Miranda's reply, autobiography *can* be appropriated.¹⁷⁹

AUGUSTA Who are you become?

¹⁷⁹ In fact, the case of Jenny Petherbridge in *Nightwood* anticipated this sort of identity-kleptomania that expresses itself in the theft of personal belongings, in order to physically construct a museum of objects, the architectures of memory.

MIRANDA Have I not said it?
 One of a strolling company of players.
 Say wardrobe mistress, trying many parts.
 You see yourself, you have my rings and boots,
 My cloak and hat.
 (III: 116)

Miranda replies that she has become a sort of puppet, stripped off of her self together with her clothes. Without it, she is just *a* mask, potentially *being* anyone. Moreover, she invites Augusta to look at herself wearing her daughter's stage costume: she has *become* her daughter.

Ultimately, Miranda's reply "one of a strolling company of players," invites a final reflection on the use of meta-theatre as a site of conversation between stage-masks and audience, and thus to posit remarks on the implications of their relationship. As argued by Altman:

If actors merely dramatize the sinfulness of human pride – the desire to appear what they are not, to mock God by recreating ourselves in a fictional image – what better medium than the theatre could Barnes have found for her final anatomy of the deceptions and manipulations of women and men practice upon those close to them, and upon themselves? [...] It is in this light that we must understand the self-referentiality of *The Antiphon*, its constant allusion to role, scene, and costume, its controlling metaphor – constantly drawing attention to itself – that all the stage is a stage. (Altman 1991: 275)

Building on Altman's explanation of meta-theatre as the meeting of stage-performance and life-performance, the practices of self-construction activated by masks on stage are revealed to be the same used by people in their daily life. In support of this last hypothesis – which puts Barnes's play in a communion of intentions with Loy's *Pamperers* – several moments appear relevant. While Jack frequently calls to mind that he is orchestrating the play – he is, however, only partially in control – he apostrophises Miranda that "*We're* all at profile in this session" (emphasis mine.) In such moments as this latter, stage and audience overlap, as they both are defined by their constructions. On this note, Jack's rhetorical question "No audience at all?" assumes a new nuance; if there is no real difference between masks and the audience,

who are in turn performers in their lives, perhaps there really is no audience at all. This, in fact, would explain the characters' "fear that someone is listening and that no one is listening." (Altman 1991: 277) Characters are afraid that there is no audience because this would prove their fictional nature; but they are also afraid that there is an audience because, without their masks, they do not exist.

3.3.2. Transitions

My analysis of Mina Loy's and Djuna Barnes's works has tried to illustrate how fiction and drama become for them means of exploring several conflicting relationships and problematic partnerships: the power-play between author and mask, trading their roles of puppet and puppeteer; the position of female modernist artists, as friends and foes of men's avant-garde; and the tension between genre heteronormativity and gendered claim for authority/authorship. In this perspective, their work can be considered pioneering:

The Americans are doing what the Elizabethans did—they are coining new words. They are instinctively making the language adapt itself to their needs [...] Women writers have to meet many of the same problems that beset American [writers]. They too are the casualties of their own peculiarities as a sex; apt to suspect insolence, quick to avenge grievances, eager to shape an art of their own. In both cases, all kinds of consciousness--consciousness of self, of race, of sex, of civilization--which have nothing to do with art, have got between them and the paper, with results that are, on the surface, at least, unfortunate. (Woolf 1925: 269)

What Woolf writes about the need to create a new language in which to narrate a "new tradition" and a new history can be extended to my discourse on modernist women and their appropriation of genre. Their attempts at liberating auto-biography, emancipating it from site of secrecy, confession and submission, can be precisely interpreted as eagerness "to shape an art of their own." As argued by Woolf, contextual "kinds of consciousness" such as gender flow in the dynamics of self-construction to forge new identities and social selves. In light of the texts analysed, literature of self-construction offered an opportunity to coin new icons, forms, models, poses and languages. The

new set of icons proves dynamic and flexible, thus avoiding the prescriptive nature of old ones.

Among the (only few mentioned) sites of negotiation addressed by these two writers, their focus on the identity-trade between *personae* and persons paves the way to my approach of performativity. While Loy's and Barnes's modernist dramas appear as galleries of self-constructions, rather than portraits, they also appear as kaleidoscopic halls of mirrors, where the self *plays* at hiding and peeping from behind the frames. Ultimately, such halls are spaces of *transition*, where masks find ways to leave the text to enter (or go back to) life, which they live as just another performance.

3.4. Into performativity

So many stage-masks (which already in Barnes and Loy mingle and overlap with the audience) compel us to reflect on the ways in which the mask can exceed the space of the stage, thus entering the space of performativity. Aesthetics of performativity have been addressed by critics since the 1960s and 1970s, when “performative utterances” were identified as constructions of language that not only were describing a given reality, but also changed the social reality described in return. (Austin 1962)¹⁸⁰ However, performative idioms began to be associated with discourses of gender identity from the late 1970s and 1980s. By the 1980s, it was not news that heteronormativity was a problematic issue for literary women: to name but a few studies, Havelock Ellis's *Sexual Inversion* (1897) and Edward Carpenter's *The Intermediate Sex* (1908) show how gender was understood as separate from (and *segregated* by) biological sex since the dawn of the twentieth century. Women's modernity also explored sexual ambiguity, shown, for instance, in the terms of Joan Riviere's “masquerade” (1929) – later also taken up in psychological insights by Lacan (1986).¹⁸¹ Mid-century works such as de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* were considered as groundbreaking by later scholars such as Butler,¹⁸² who acknowledged how de

¹⁸⁰ John L. Austin, 1962, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press).

¹⁸¹ Jacques Lacan, 1986, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* (Harmondsworth: Penguin), p. 193.

¹⁸² Judith Butler, 1986, “Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*” in *Yale French Studies* 72, (Winter 1986), pp. 35-49.

Beauvoir's book proves essential in understanding that "gender is gradually acquired." (Butler 1986: 35) While after Foucault's encyclopaedic *History of Sexuality* (1976), studies of performativity proliferate, it is Judith Butler who seems pivotal in charting the territory from performance to performativity. While I have relied from the beginning on Butler's post-structuralist poetics of "undoing" (2004) as the framework of my exploration of performative *self-construction*, her studies on the practices and "politics of the performative" (1997)¹⁸³ provide further grounding for the study of *self-staging*, particularly for the case of the Baroness. Butler suggests, interestingly, that anyone's speech or actions are inescapably, consciously or not, "performed" for an audience, even if that audience is only imagined. In fact, Butler's considerations help to reframe Loy's and Barnes's deliberate overlapping between *personae* and persons as the experiments of performativity. Scholars today (e.g. Davies 2008)¹⁸⁴ put Butler's criticism into "conversation" with literary womanhood, thus showing the endless potential application of her critical works. While Jenkins's politics of "forgiving, giving over and giving away"¹⁸⁵ can perhaps be applied to the position of my chosen writers toward autobiography, I want to delve more specifically into the processes of self-constructing in extra-textual contexts, applying Butler's theory to the case of the Baroness.

In performativity, the self is considered as the quintessential theatrical mask, which crosses (and cross-fertilises) self-construction and self-staging. The upcoming analysis of Zelda Fitzgerald and (more extensively) of the Baroness as *personae* will explore the sites of transition of the performative self, and therefore the ultimate remediation of the self-portrait. Specifically, Zelda's autobiographical novel shows the *mutual* influences between fiction and performativity in the construction of the icon; the case of the Baroness shows instead how politics of *construction* can prove eventually *destructive*.

¹⁸³ Judith Butler, 1997, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London; New York, Routledge).

¹⁸⁴ Bronwyn Davies (ed. by), 2008, *Judith Butler in Conversation: Analysing the Texts and Talks of Everyday Life* (London; New York: Routledge).

¹⁸⁵ Fiona Jenkins, 2008, "Forgiving, Given Over, Given away: A Response to Judith Butler" in Davies, 2008, pp. 39-54.

3.4.1. From life-writing to self-staging: Alabama and Zelda

The case of Zelda Fitzgerald conveys an interesting and unusual example of performativity which is situated between text, reception, and performativity: alongside the activation of the ‘life influencing writing’-paradigm, which implicates discourses of genre remediation, the case of Zelda also shows the reverse process: the autobiographical characters of the stories, and the autobiographical heroine of the novel, *characterise* Zelda in return, flowing into the construction of her iconic public profile.

In the first place, Zelda’s performativity is related to the construction of her public image as the emblematic expression of the jazz-age and heroine of the roaring-twenties derive in fact largely from her appreciation of fashion. Very early in her life, she started staging herself as a fashion icon, as soon as she, in fact, understood the importance of having a successful public image. Such process is recorded in Milford’s biography of Zelda, which defines fashion as the means of Zelda’s birth as an American icon.

Zelda had organdie dresses with great flounces and ruffles, and a glorious pair of velvet lounging pants, but very little that was appropriate for New York. Scott felt she needed the tactful guidance of Miss Hersey taste, and together they bought her a smart Patou suit. (Milford 1970: 65)

According to Zelda’s biographer Nancy Milford, the construction of Zelda’s public character began with dressing up fashionably. In order to stress Zelda’s wish to

conform to the roaring-twenties, flapper role-model,¹⁸⁶ Milford also quotes a letter by Zelda, who describes New York as a glamorous city, where “girls in short amorphous capes and long flowing skirts and hats like straw bathtubs waited for taxis in front of the Plaza Grill” and “girls in long satin coats and colored shoes and hats like straw manhole covers tapped the tune of a cataract on the dance floors of the Lorraine and the St. Regis.” (66) However, among all New York flappers and fashionable ladies, Zelda excelled. Initially, her icon benefited from the fame of Scott, and of the notoriety of herself and Scott as a couple – “they were being heralded as models in the cult of youth.” (69)

However, today’s reception of Zelda derives very little from her biographic chronicle, but more substantially from her own autobiographic novel. As a consequence, our knowledge of her is permeated by the iconicity and success of Alabama as a character. Furthermore, it is interesting to notice that, even when Zelda was still alive, her public image enjoyed an aura of success and perfection, that came from fictional characters based on her, both her own fictional heroines and Scott’s Zelda-based characters. Such models amplified her iconicity in such a way that rebounded on the same historical person who had created them.

Zelda’s stories for *College Humor*, written between 1929 and 1930, stage a gallery of women protagonists, who, despite being little developed as characters, have autobiographical traits. “The Original Follies Girl,” “The Southern Girl,” “The Girl the Prince Liked,” “The Girl with Talent,” and “A Millionaire Girl” all have blond and

¹⁸⁶ Zelda’s novel and paintings are rich in references to women’s fashion, mainly inspired by Chanel and Patou drop-waist skirts, hats, and accessories. The fashion industry and fashionable women began a relationship based on mutual exchange, in which the fashion industry dictated a new canon to which women of fashion contributed by conforming to and spreading it in verbal, visual and performative self-portraits. With their books and paintings, together with their fashionable look, Barnes and Fitzgerald contributed to the proliferation of the casual chic style of the *misérabilisme de luxe*, which suited the post-war, working but elegant woman. The discourse on fashion has a place, in my opinion, in the larger discourse on the definition of a collective identity that I have developed in the first part of my thesis. The pair individuality vs./being part of the collectivity was one of the crucial questions in the definition of women’s identity at the beginning of the twentieth century; certainly, the 1920s and 1930s dress-code contributed to the development of a transnational female community. Hanscombe and Smyers’s description of a transnational ‘network of women’ applies perfectly to my small but telling group of women intellectuals. With Barnes and Fitzgerald moving from New York to Paris, and Loy and the Baroness moving from Europe to New York, I traced a geographical directrix between the main centres of female literary and artistic avant-garde. One of the traits common to these unique profiles is certainly that they fashioned themselves to suit the new icon of the female intellectual travelling across the Atlantic.

fair fashionable women as protagonists. In this sense, the 'iconic idiom' of Zelda deriving from her own heroines, an idiom of beauty, liveliness, fashion and partying girl, was starting to affect her public profile. Before 1936, when *Save Me The Waltz* was completed, such an icon, which we identify with a sort of anticipation of Alabama, existed already as the set of superlative characteristics defining Zelda's public profile. All these features, and other, more complex traits converged in the construction of Alabama, an *ideal* self-portrait of herself.

The main difference between the novel's character and the real Zelda is that Alabama could take the place she was offered at Naples Ballet, which Zelda had declined. By attributing the success of becoming prima ballerina to Alabama, which she herself was denied, Zelda enhanced of her already iconic public profile. Strangely enough, after Alabama was created as an idealised autobiographical character, a sort of Alabama-epitome exceeded the text to apply back to Zelda and boast her public image, turning her into the legend we know today. In respect to our Alabama-mediated reception of the historical Zelda Fitzgerald, we think of her as a successful character, problematic and complex, but glowing with fame. We do not recall Zelda's defeat in having to turn down the offer; we recall instead Zelda's success as a ballerina (which was quite modest, in fact), which mainly comes from our readings of Alabama's success.

In terms of performativity, then, Zelda's appears to be a most interesting case, which involves the action of two main forces mutually influencing one another in a singular hermeneutic process. The former concerns the textualisation of autobiography into the iconic characters of the stories. The latter includes the process for which such masks rebound, thus influencing the public icon of the historical narrator while she was still alive. Indeed, such resonance converges back again to the shaping of a more complex idealised autobiographical character, Alabama. As a paragon, Alabama's influence eventually outsizes the text and feeds the already iconic profile of Zelda – which has survived with heroic traits until today.

While we perfectly know, today, that the stories for *College Humor* were in fact written by Zelda, at the time they were attributed to Scott, or to Scott and Zelda joint-writing. In fact, there is an additional set of role-models, beside Zelda's stories heroines and Alabama, which influenced the shaping of her performative person.

Zelda's icon also owned its resonance to Scott's writings, which largely contributed to add definition to Zelda's model with a series of blond, beautiful, rich and successful characters. As a matter of fact, in 1921 he was interviewed for the *Shadowland* magazine, where he declared "I married the heroine of my stories." Indeed, Rosalind and Daisy, from Scott's *This Side of Paradise* and *The Great Gatsby* respectively, and Gloria and Nicole from *The Beautiful and The Damned* and *Tender Is The Night*, are to different extents shaped after Zelda's kaleidoscopic but mesmerising personality.

As I conclude my very brief thoughts on Zelda's performativity, which broadcasted a monumental profile constructed as she was still alive by her own fictional and non-fictional mask, I want to say a few words on the effects that the reception of the heroic traits Zelda's profile has had on today's forms of creativity. While the 2010s have been proving extremely productive in terms of remediating the story of Zelda and Scott as a couple in both fiction and movies,¹⁸⁷ I would like to explore a specific form of remediation of Zelda's autobiography, which finds itself between criticism and literature.

In 2011, Tiziana Lo Porto and Daniele Marotta produced a graphic biography of Zelda Fitzgerald, *Superzelda*, that fits in a trend of international rekindled interest in the Fitzgeralds, which has seen regular peaks since Scott's death – the latest peak has been in the years 2011-2013. The original 2011 Italian version was immediately translated into English by Antony Shugaar, thus gaining international critical attention for its double value as a biography of the artist Zelda Fitzgerald and as a work of art in itself. *Superzelda* is a noteworthy example of when criticism moves towards and merges with art, to eventually generate new art. In *Superzelda*, the majority of the dialogue is real, extracted from diaries, letters, interviews and short stories. In its vignettes and witty speech bubbles, this graphic novel critically explores Zelda's consuming artistic genius to explore the stunning personality of Zelda Fitzgerald as a

¹⁸⁷ In this respect, 2013 has been Scott and Zelda's year: alongside 2013 Hollywood film version of *The Great Gatsby*, featuring an Oscar-nomination-worthy Leonardo DiCaprio as Gatsby, three new novels reimagine Zelda and Scott's love story in different terms. Therese Anne Fowler's *Z: A Novel of Zelda Fitzgerald* (2013), narrated by Zelda in Montgomery shortly before Scott's death in 1940, addresses a double-edged Zelda as naive girl and muse. Instead, Erika Robuck's *Call Me Zelda* (2013) sees a nurse, Anna, who meets Zelda at the Phipps Psychiatric Clinic in Baltimore. Shortly afterwards, Anna agrees to leave the hospital and work privately for the Fitzgeralds at La Paix, their Baltimore mansion. Robuck delves into the Fitzgerald legend, and encourages Zelda to write out stories from her past. *Beautiful Fools: The Last Affair of Zelda and Scott Fitzgerald* by R. Clifton Spargo (also 2013) fictionalizes Zelda and Scott's final trip together, to Cuba, in 1939.

writer, dancer and visual artist, as well as a passionate woman. As a graphic novel, *Superzelda* also emphasises the performative traits of Zelda's life, made already iconic by the corpus of works by Scott and Zelda, and by the history of reception around Zelda's public figure.

What drew my attention to this piece of 'artistic criticism' in the first place was the title, "Super-," which echoes the heroic qualities of the author of *Save Me The Waltz*. This graphic novel, however, is designed to be a reliable autobiography, made amusing and quick to read because of the choice of genre, but as close as possible to the life of the historical Zelda. In my opinion, and as is proved by Lo Porto and Marotta's work, the identity of the wonder woman that we associate with Zelda Fitzgerald today has also been filtered by the heroic features of her own autobiographical characters. The attribution of a heroic aura to the protagonist of a graphic novel certainly also comes from a tradition of the genre itself, which usually narrates the vicissitudes of a heroic character. But *Superzelda*'s heroism might have as well been induced by the use of *Save Me The Waltz* as a source for the graphic novel – a use legitimised by the evident assonances between Alabama and Zelda.

Regardless of what exact influence Zelda's novel had on *Superzelda*, the graphic biography still corroborates today the image of a super-woman that Zelda's own fictional adaptations, above all Alabama as an 'ideal self-portrait', have contributed to create. Moreover, this example of dialogue between literature and criticism evidences a specific story of performativity and reception; Zelda's iconic masks had a large part in constructing *performative* Zelda, resulting as a modern hero, "beautiful and damned" (Scott Fitzgerald: 1922) who is ready to be objectified by new forms of biography. Rather than targeting *historical* Zelda, however, such biographies address *performative* Zelda.

3.4.2. A dramatic identity: the Baroness

Instead of constructing masks for the stage, the Baroness constructed masks to stage her own self. Such masks were, as anticipated, erotically charged and provocative, her self-imaging dangerous and appealing, dramatic and tragic. In these last few paragraphs, I will explore how Else Plötz *became* the Baroness, an epithet she

constructed in New York, focusing particularly on how she turned herself into a work of art.

As it has emerged, the *body* is the device through which to read the Baroness's embodied and idiosyncratic poetry. It is interesting now to investigate the performative component of her poetry, to discover mutual influences between poetic performativity and her life-performativity; between how she produced Dada works, and how she *wore* Dada in clothing and manners; between how she sexualised her art and the way in which art transformed her body. Within such loose frames, gender politics are negotiated in interesting ways, even rejected and “undone” (Butler 2004). Clearly, the body is at the heart of the Baroness's dramatic identity and make Butler's considerations particularly useful. Interestingly, her formulations seem to theorise the Baroness's *persona*.

3.4.2.1. Shocking Elsa: gender matters

The Baroness excesses backfired, in the end, thus making her one of the most interesting and dramatic (tragic) – yet majorly neglected – personalities of her time. In Gammel's telling phrasing:

Like no other artist, the Baroness ultimately consumed herself in and through her art. The performance of herself as the Baroness, as both persona and real woman, left no screen for protection. (Gammel 2003: 16)

Impossible to go unnoticed by her contemporaries, the Baroness impressed those who lived around her. As Djuna Barnes described her, Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven was the most bewildering personality animating Greenwich Village artistic life in the 1910s. Among the endless definitions have been provided to try and contain her personality, none seemed able to suit her; excluding the ones that stigmatised her negatively as mentally disturbed,¹⁸⁸ even looser ones seem often inappropriate or

¹⁸⁸ The non-acquiescence with which the Baroness lived and created her work unsettled even the avant-garde and is the driving force of Jones's critical readings of Dada. Amelia Jones, 2005, *Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).

insufficient – cross-cultural, trans-sexual, anti-artist etc. Even among the Dada artists she excelled for her diversity, so that she was even defined the “New York’s first punk persona 60 years before their time” (Hughes 1997: 1).¹⁸⁹ She certainly anticipated postmodernist culture, whose “dominant characteristic [...] is that everything performs” (Auslander 2004: 99).¹⁹⁰ The Baroness chose to live at once as an artist and as a work of art herself, making of her own body a “fashioned persona” (Caselli 2009: 67). So extraordinary was her behaviour that she even stunned Margaret Anderson, founder of the avant-garde magazine *The Little Review*. When Elsa first came to the magazine offices, she presented herself as follows:

So she shaved her head. Next she laquered it a high vermillon. The she stole the crêpe from the door of a house of mourning and made a dress of it. [...] She came to see us. First she exhibited the head at all angles, amazing against our black walls. The she jerked off the crêpe with one movement. It’s better when I’m nude, she said. (Anderson 1969: 211)

A similar performance, probably the same, is described by Djuna Barnes, who focuses on Elsa’s extreme performativity and self-display, nonetheless on the hard time that her non-acquiescence caused her:

“She had a head like a Roman emperor’s, short, sometimes razored, once shellacked, red hair. She batiqued her tailored suites, made earrings from grave-flowers and Christmas tree decorations, and had a voice and constitution of iron. [...] She was very difficult to know.” (Herring 2005: 254)

Her personality was impossible not to notice; either it would shock or repel, but it certainly impressed anyone who met her. She served as source of inspiration for female characters in Barnes’s short stories and *Nightwood*; she impressed upon the artistic sensibility of Williams Carlos Williams, and was depicted in George Biddle’s *An*

¹⁸⁹ Robert Hughes, 1997, “Days od Antic Weirdness: A Look Back at Dadaism’s Brief, Outrageous Assault on the New York Scene,” *Time* 149(4), (27 January 1997), pp. 70-72.

¹⁹⁰ Philip Auslander, 2004, “Postmodernism and Performance,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Steven Connor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 99-115.

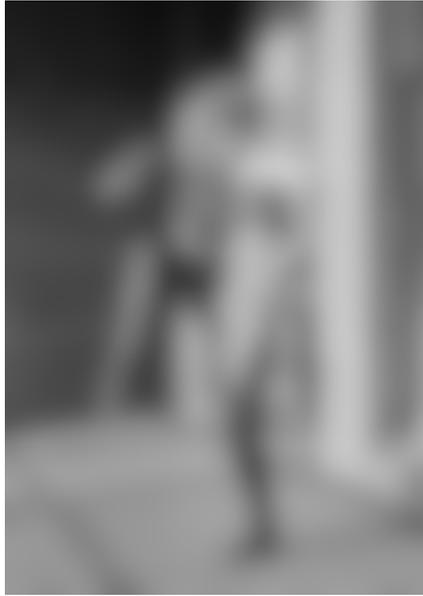
American Artist's Story and Matthew Josephson's *Life Among the Surrealists: A Memoir*.

The body used as an artistic tool by the Baroness invites the validation of Butler's practice of undoing categories. The Baroness's choice to use her own sexuality as an artistic means urges a thought on gender, and eventual gender categories which she is trying to challenge – or establish. While analysing the Baroness's embodied poems I stressed how the body was for her a cognitive tool, an experiential device that influenced and was influenced by all aspects of human experience. Now, I reiterate this aspect underlining how the body was also a social medium, which the Baroness employed to interact with others.

As to the choice of fashioning herself as a living work of art, Butler's considerations prove useful to relate the Baroness's artistic choices to gender implications:

The body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others but also to touch and to violence. The body can be the agency and instrument of all these as well, or the site where “doing” and “being done to” become equivocal. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension. (Butler 2004: 21)

As Butler points out (perhaps still in response to the body politics of Julia Kristeva), the body is the channel of communication between the self and the society in which the subject lives; as such, it can be fashioned in endless ways, each time carrying a different message. In the case of the Baroness, the conception of the body goes together with her idea of performativity: not only did she decide to make of her body a fashioned identity; not only did she construct an *alter ego*, a social model; she rather created a multitude of masks, a range of dynamic, unstable, creative icons, continually igniting herself with new, astonishing identities.



George Grantham Bain. 1910ca, *Baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven*.

The willing ambiguity with which she connoted her performances makes her an interesting case study for gender theories. Sometimes she would wear men's clothes; other times she would impersonate feminine exotic masks; other time she played androgynous roles. The transfiguration of the Baroness's body into a social device towards artistic expression, ends up validating Butler's theories on the legitimacy of undoing categories. When Butler says that "the body can be [...] the site where "doing" and "being done to become equivocal," (Butler 2004: 21) she almost seems to depict the Baroness attitude. The Baroness's deliberated confusion of gender and overt sexualisation of herself as a work of art challenged all gender aesthetics.

The many masks worn by the Baroness encourage reflections on the relationship between this fashioned persona and the human being who created them, or in other words, between the performative body and the self. If a constant element can be traced across all the fictional, visual and dramatic masks presented so far, it is that it is always impossible to look behind the mask to find out the real self. Like in Barnes's work, the subject behind the masks goes forgotten because it is corrupted and broken. In Loy's work, the subject *is* a mask, and is mostly unaware of being one, because the image is all what is given to know. Zelda was known and is remembered today like her heroic, nonetheless dramatic, icon. For the Baroness, we can draw

similar conclusions, yet her self appears more even elusive; as illustrated by Djuna Barnes, nobody really *knew* Elsa: she disappeared completely behind the mask of the Baroness. Anybody could appreciate the Baroness, the disguise, and be stunned by her eccentric costumes – still no one could say that they knew her real ‘I’. Butler seems again to provide a useful account of such an implication of the undoing process:

The “I” that finds itself at once constituted by the norms and dependent on them but also endeavours to live in ways that maintain a critical and transformative relation to them. This is not easy, because the “I” becomes, to a certain extent unknowable, threatened by unviability, with becoming undone altogether, when it no longer incorporates the norm in such a way that makes this “I” fully recognizable. (Butler 2004: 3)

A social, fashioned, artificial ‘I’ is nonetheless an ‘I’, built *instead of* the self. By doing and undoing gender identities and public icons – ‘I’s – of herself, the Baroness undoes radically, and provocatively, her own self in order to build the mask. The Baroness’s masked-‘I’ consisted, paradoxically, in the collage of her endless representations, thus embodying a post-modernist sensibility.

Her dynamic I-changes were misunderstood in her time, to the point that she was diagnosed as psychologically unstable; in the end, then, the kaleidoscopic personality that made her famous and that fascinated her fellow artists at her time was the same cause of her marginalisation. Quoting Gammel again:

Her poetry remained unpublished, for most ‘magazines are opposed to my very name’[...] Her visual art [...] became canonized under the name of another artist. The Baroness herself was shelved in cultural history under the rubric of eccentricity and madness. (Gammel 2003: 5)

Still, and indeed paradoxically, it was the same society that stigmatised her to create some of her masks. To social prescriptions, she rebelled; artistic prescriptions, she exceeded; gender prescriptions, she rejected and reassembled. As Butler says “the terms that make up one’s gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author;” (Butler 2004: 1) gender, being the result of many – conflicting – components, can only make sense when caught as a momentary, non-fixed snapshot of a self in constant evolution.

The gender that the Baroness expressed changed unpredictably and shockingly: sometimes she would parade holding giant penis sculpture in her hand, and sometimes she would mime feminine masturbation (Walser 2014),¹⁹¹ it makes little sense to retain any stable gender categorisation; it would probably lead to an even more confusing attempt to find a category for almost each performance.

Her ambivalence as androgyne allowed her to test a stunning range of erotically charged positions – young ingénue, female flâneur, erotic art worker, priapic traveller, chorus girl cum prostitute, actress, cross-dresser, lesbian, and syphilitic patient – all in a span of just a few years. None of these identities ultimately defined her, however; she impersonated each but always moved on in her journey through roles and identities. (Gammel 2003: 58).

The range of the fashioned profiles which Gammel delineates mirrors the wide variety of the Baroness's – sexual – disguises; her sexual tastes were, indeed, changeable.

Among the many considerations that Djuna Barnes mentioned referring to the definition of gender categories, one is particularly relevant to this discussion. Though it refers to Barnes's own sexual tastes, it applies well to the Baroness too; having affairs with both men and women, Barnes downplayed and denigrated her own lesbianism, in response to Emily Coleman's question whether she was a lesbian: "I might be anything. If a horse loved me, I might be that."¹⁹² (Coleman to Djuna Barnes, 27 October 1935).

"Protean gender bender" and "androgynous new woman" (Gammel 2003: 4), the Baroness had – thanks indeed to her ambivalence – the possibility to embody any kind of (un)gendered characters, any mask, male or female, even unsexed, thus gaining the widest freedom of expression.

¹⁹¹ Adrienne Walser, 2014, "Living Dada. A review of 'Irrational Modernism: A Neurasthenic History of New York Dada,'" in *Jacket2*, (5 May 2014), n.p.



International New Photography, 1915, *Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven* [with aviator hat, horizontal pose].

International New Photography, 1915, *Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven* [with crown].

Like her body, her art was androgynous: “Feminine in attracting the viewer’s gaze to the female body, masculine in producing an unexpected shock effect.” (Gammel 2003: 182) And sexuality was indeed for the Baroness a means to creativity, through which she opened herself to the world.

Even though Butler did not express her opinion on her, the scholarship around the Baroness’s scholarship, including both her contemporaries – Anderson, Heap and even Pound – and her modern readers – from feminist critics to Irene Gammel – agree that sexuality is the doorway between her poetry and performativity. The transfiguration of life into art could take place through and because of her sexual body; life was one with art, and her body was the work of art; literary and visual techniques completely overlap with acting and performativity.

In the very first few pages of *Undoing Gender*, Butler points out two kinds of undoing gender, a ‘good’ one and a ‘bad’ one. For Butler, undoing gender can be destructive because it undermines the capacity of a person to live a normal – social – life. When this happens, the subject remains cut out from any accepted dimension and, as in the case of the Baroness, ends up being rejected and ostracised.

Sometimes a normative conception of gender can undo one's personhood, undermining the capacity to persevere in a livable life. Other times, the experience of a normative restriction becoming undone can undo a prior conception of who one is only to inaugurate a relatively newer one that has a greater livability as its aim. (Butler 2004: 1)

Being her masks so different, creative and paradoxical, the Baroness ended up destroyed by excesses: "she always pushed her work to the extreme edges of genres, creating hybrid genres." (Gammel 2003: 10) Caught up in extremes like male/female, erotic/grotesque, European/American, she often struggled to find her own place; her work reflected her hybrid self: Her ambiguous sexuality, provocative performances and shocking art contributed to the building of her reputation as an outsider. By living at once, as I explained, at the core and on the margins of artistic, cultural, and social life, she constantly challenges us to reflect on the cost of her bewildering artistic choices.

3.4.2.2. Psychogenesis of the Baroness as poet

As I pointed out, the most peculiar aspect of the Baroness's *dramatis persona* is that the same society that marginalised her for her eccentric and provocative behaviour also placed her under the spotlight. Whereas in the early (European) phases of the process of mask-construction there were some remnants of the person, traces of her disappear in the American Baroness. Uncaring of being discriminated and marginalised as a person, of living on the edge of poverty and in and out of prison, the Baroness as *dramatis persona* lived in the absolute centre, only caring for the spectacular sides of her life.

The "psychogenesis" of 'the Baroness's is strongly related to sexual experience, and is described with impressively accurate details in Else's auto-analytical memoirs, poetry and letters. The birth of the mask needs to be traced in Else's childhood in Swinemünde, a sad theatre of fatherly violence.¹⁹³ Despite the

¹⁹³ In this paragraphs, I use Else and Elsa accordingly to the phases of her life, respectively when she was in Germany or had moved to America – where she changed her name.

abuses Else endured from her father, and despite the fact he infected her with syphilis, she had contradictory feelings towards him; she hated him, but also described him in all accounts as a handsome man with a magnetic personality, virile, muscular and attractive. Else's poem "Coachrider" condenses the contrasting feelings she had for her father, and most importantly she confessed how such violence affected her psyche in terms of identity-definition.

Coachrider

He's Papa –

I'm his small daughter

[...]

Ter – ri – ble! Mighty – knowing – jolly – fanatic –

Cunning – cruel – possessed – despotic – detestable –

Horrid! Fi! Fi! I *hate* that Papa! Who am I?

[...]

Aaaaaa-niiiiiii – Mama – don't let him

I can't – caaaannt!No-o-o-o-o – no-o-o-o-o-o-o – [...]

Look at Papa – killer!

He beams – loveably – virile – despotic by blood –

I adore – abhor him –

[...]

(Gammel 2011: 134)

All verses are telling enough to describe the cruelty of the abuse; despite it, though, some verses show a twisted appreciation of him. Between these two contradictory feelings lies the identity issue of young Elsa, who wonders "Who am I?" While Else's letters reveal the absolute and chronic fear she and her siblings lived in, her poem(s) seems to give (yelling) voice to that silence. In addition, they show how the Baroness's existential doubts and her need to express her oppressed feelings through poetry had a common origin in (a deviated) sexuality. Since her poetry is about experiencing, and since the body was her primary experiential and artistic tool, poetry had to be sexualised.

It is clear, as Gammel has shown, that performative poetry hacks back to Elsa's biography. If the rebel sexuality that stigmatises the Baroness finds roots in Else's outraged childhood, the Baroness's hatred of the bourgeois also can be traced back to her youth. Bourgeois façades of respectability and decency prevented her mother from

confessing that her husband had infected her with syphilis and urinal infection, and she did not get treated for such diseases until it was too late. Furthermore, when her father took an iconic bourgeois woman as their step-mother while his children were still mourning their mother, Elsa felt she could not bear to live in the house anymore. Unsurprisingly, the conflict between her and her father, after which she left the house, was violent, physically and emotionally.

Once she had exited her father's house, Else started being progressively replaced by the Baroness – although she only gained this epithet after her third marriage, she started constructing the *dramatis persona* which would bear this name much earlier. The first place she went to was Berlin, where she started *acting* like the Baroness, sexually free, anti-bourgeois, rebel. As Gammel remarks, she (unlike Nietzsche's friend Lou Salomé) lacked the social standing that would make her rebel position philosophical and intellectual, or protect her from public judgement, so already in Berlin she was harshly attacked for her libertine costumes. Still, Berlin was a second birth for Else – less and less Else and progressively more the Baroness. In *Funny Essler*, the novel Felix Greve wrote about his wife and to which Else potentially contributed, the Berlin-experience is described as follows:

Fannys erster Tag in Berlin war wie eine Erwachen. [...] Jetzt merkte sie plötzlich, daß sie während all der langen Monate nur eins getan hatte: sie hatte geträumt. Von wem geträumt, wovon? Von einer unbestimmten Zukunft [...] Sie dachte an ihre letzte Vergangenheit: da hatte alles geschlafen: ihr Blut und ihre Sinne. Wie eine Nachtwanderin hatte sie gelebt. (Grieve 1905 :3)¹⁹⁴

Grieve describes this change from Else into a newer version of herself as a regression rather than a progression. He says: "Fanny hatte eine Bewegung gemacht wie etwa ein wildes Tier,"¹⁹⁵ (6) a wild animal. This remark, which obviously makes us think of Robin in *Nightwood*, encapsulates Else's metamorphosis into the Baroness-epitome,

¹⁹⁴ The translation is mine: "Fanny's first day in Berlin was like an awakening. [...] Now she realised suddenly that during the past months she only had been doing one thing: she had been dreaming. About whom, about what? About an undefined future. [...] She thought about her recent past; she everything had slept: her blood and mind. She had lived like a *somnambule* (intentionally translated into French to create an assonance with the description of Robin in *Nightwood*.) Felix P. Grieve, 1905, *Funny Essler* (Stuttgart: Axel Juncker Verlag).

¹⁹⁵ The translation is mine: "Fanny had developed a behaviour like a wild animal."

wild, unruled, undomesticated. What may sound like a regression, is in fact a process of ‘disrobing’ of social conventions, bourgeois hypocrisy and gender prescription. What the new Elsa dressed herself in, instead, was a *costume* – several costumes, in fact.

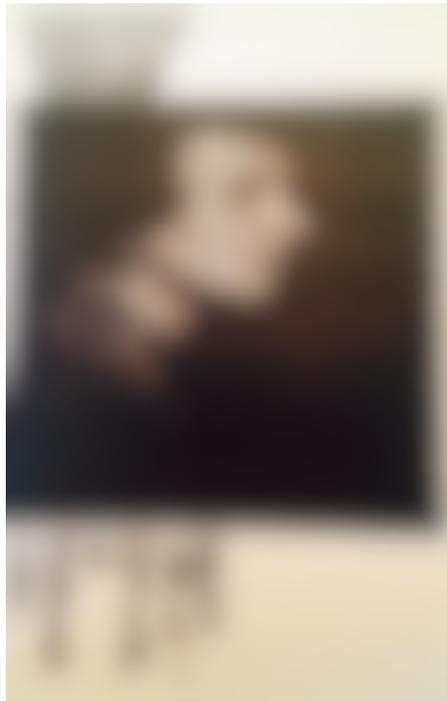
3.4.2.3. New York masks and performative poems

Elsa’s American self was even more eccentric than that of the ‘newly awakened’ Berliner Else. Upon the opening of the International Exhibition of Modern Art in New York in 1913, she had just left Cincinnati and was already famous in New York, launched by Frank Crowninshield on *Vanity Fair* as the most extreme champion of American Dada – alongside Duchamp, who exhibited his *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) at the Regiment Armory. A few months after the exhibition, she finally gave a name to the *dramatis persona* she had gradually become; she married the German expatriate, Leopold Karl Friedrich Baron von Freytag-Loringhoven.¹⁹⁶ Gammel too described this moment as Else’s “public initiation into her artistic role, similar to Mary Phelps Jacob’s metamorphosis into Caress Crosby.” (Gammel 2003: 160) Indeed, Else’s evolution into ‘the Baroness’s was an initiation, rather than a metamorphosis; the *dramatis persona* existed already, only needing to be *named*. Like Zelda, who named her fictional heroine Alabama only long after having created her as a public icon, Else constructed a personality to which she only later gave a name.

Since when she *became* the Baroness, her activity intensified on both the fronts of (performative) writing and performativity. Her poetic production underwent intensification, increasingly focusing on the relationship between the sexualised mask and the performative verse. In this respect, the fact of having *become* ‘the Baroness’s

¹⁹⁶ Their marriage ended soon afterwards, though, when in 1914 the Baron embarked for Europe to enrol as a volunteer in the German Army during the First World War – they never saw each other again. He was made a war prisoner and committed suicide while interned in Switzerland in 1918. As a ‘war bride,’ the Baroness started costuming herself in ways that echoed war episodes, with tones of protests.

was a turning point. The ‘signature-poem’ below¹⁹⁷ shows how the new title was for Else an alternative, artistic self. Of course, the choice of a German aristocratic title might sound inconsistent with her non-conformity and anti-German-language sentiment, but Elsa wore the title as a provocation, a “red flag to declare her cultural aristocracy in democratic America.” (Gammel 2003: 161)



Man Ray, 1920, *Else Baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven*.

While her costumes advocated that sexuality be liberated and femininity emancipated from being the commodity of men, her poems continued to be equally provocative, as denouncing sexual heteronormativity:

¹⁹⁷ It is also worth pointing out that the picture above was used as cover-picture on *The Little Review* in relation to the obscenity trial over the publication of James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in the American literary magazine, occurred in 1921. After *The Little Review* published the “Nausicaa” episode of *Ulysses* in the 1920 July–August issue of the magazine, the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice instigated obscenity charges against editors Margaret Caroline Anderson and Jane Heap. After this episode, the Baroness had aggressively promoted *Ulysses*. Gammel writes, “If Heap was the field marshal for *The Little Review*’s vanguard battle against puritan conventions and traditional sexual aesthetics, then the Baroness was to become its fighting machine.” (Gammel 2003: 240)

Holy Skirts:

Thought about holy skirts – to tune of “*Wheels are growing on rose-bushes.*” Beneath immovable – carved skirts of forbidding sexlessness – over pavement shoving – gliding – nuns have wheels.

[...]

(Gammel 2011: 121)

These few lines from “Holy Skirts” (1920 ca.) condense many themes of impassioned protest also expressed in the performances, including repressed feminine sexuality, church-imposed constriction and mechanical de-sexualisation of women’s body. The analogy of the woman’s body underneath her skirt with a sexless engine can certainly find a performative counterpart in the Baroness’s Dada miscellaneous clothing – electric battery and electric wire were used as accessories. This simple, but very telling example, is only one of many correspondences we could establish between the Baroness’s poetry and her daily performance.

In New York, Elsa’s performances became a carnival of dressing and undressing; she posed nude for art-schools in Berlin and Munich, and later in New York; for photographers like George Grantham and Man Ray; for friends and painters like Theresa Bernstein:



Man Ray, 1921. *Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven* (a & b).

Part II

In New York, she started wearing self-made clothes, and started cross-dressing.

Although we need to be cautious in defining Elsa's behaviour as 'feminist' – it only fit in a wider policy of undoing and protest – she did make her entrance into New York Fifth Avenue society dressed in a man's suit and smoking a cigarette, to protest against sexual disparities and discrimination: she was promptly arrested and an article was written about her in the *New York Times*, denouncing her indecency, "She Wore Men's Clothes." This first American episode fits well the dialectic paradigm of being ostracised and yet being made a protagonist by the same social context. But it also reveals her complete devotion to her cause; she knew that walking around in men's clothes would cause her arrest just as much as she was aware that performing naked near Central Park would cost her both prison and labels such as 'mad' or 'mentally deviated.' Yet, she would gain the front page.

When in February 1915 Britain (mainly London) was bombed, and when Britain replied in March by bombing German trains, the Baroness Elsa¹⁹⁸ paraded in an aviator costume.



International New Photography, 1915, *Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven* [with aviator hat, vertical and horizontal pose].

¹⁹⁸ In America, she made one of the most important steps that marked her irrevocable change into the *persona* she created for herself; she changed her name from the German Else to the Americanised Elsa. Certainly, such change is not just in her name, as it corresponds with her plan to translate everything she had written in German into English.

It was in these years that *costumes* started replacing clothing, since performance and daily life overlapped and merged. As Margaret Anderson recalled:

Tired of conventional dressing, she began creating costumes which resulted in her arrest whenever she appeared upon the streets. [...] Tired of official restraint, she leaped from patrol wagons¹⁹⁹ with such agility that policemen let her go in admiration.” (Anderson 1930: 179)

While promenading on Fifth Avenue, she wore black lipstick, fake eyelashes made of parrot-feathers, yellow face-powder, American stamps on her cheeks, skirts decorated with horse blanket pins and electric batteries and tomato cans as accessories; she paraded on New York streets in her self-made iconoclastic dresses that mixed natural with artificial fabrics, technological devices and industrial serial devices with fresh vegetable and fruit. (Gammel 2003: 183) As Gammel remarks, this was her way of protesting against the “commodification of an exaggerated femininity.” (Gammel 2011: 7)

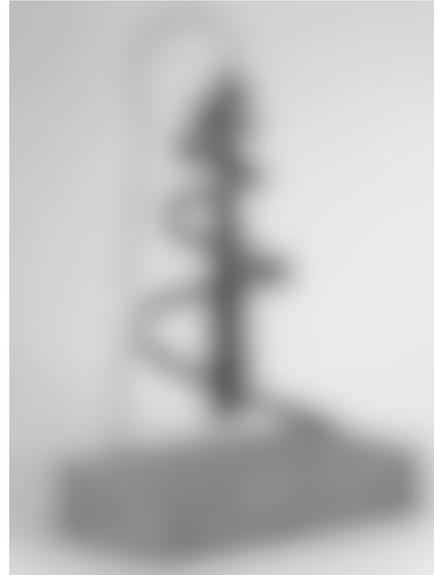
The trash that she wore, empty cans and broken cutlery, having found them as raw material and reassembled them into fashion items, represented her response to mass production and consumerism and to serialisation induced by technological progress. The accessories that she realised with all sorts of materials for her parades were sculptures of their own:

¹⁹⁹ Margaret Anderson, 1930, *My Thirty Years' War* (New York: Horizon, 1969).



EvFL, 1917-1919ca, *Earring—Object*.

EvFL, 1920ca, *Limbswish*.

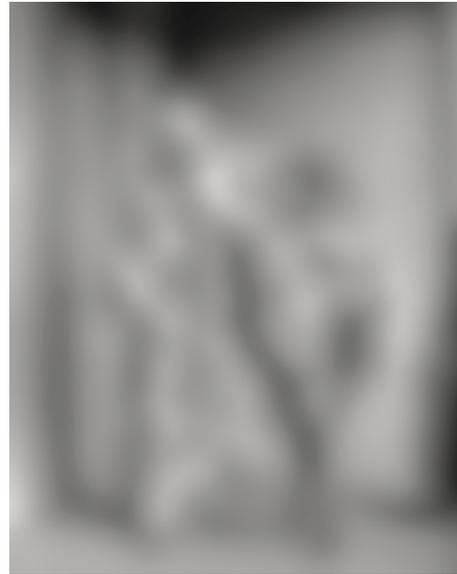
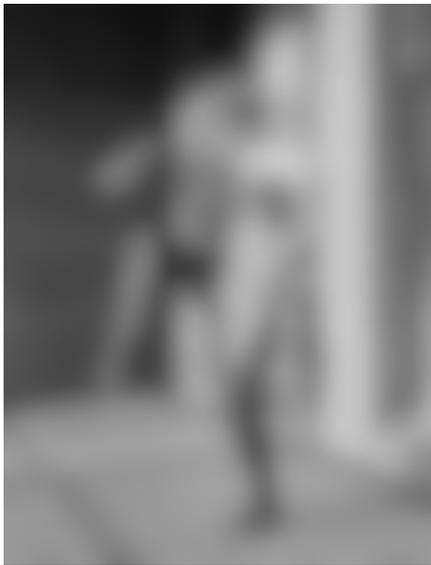


The *Earring—Object* exemplifies the complexity of the Baroness's artifacts, or *stage-costumes*; "Limbswish," – the long pendant ornament the Baroness created from a metal spring and curtain tassel which she wore at her belt – highlights an interesting correspondence with the namesake poem, thus remarking the fully accomplished osmotic nature of the relationship between her art, poetry and her body, fused in the performance. All the elements of Else's past, her biographical traumas, the Berlin awakening, the Munich sexual follies, seem to flow into New York's architectures, in a complete synergy between life and stage, body and metropolis. While studies proliferate that explore encounters of body and city, body and technology in modernism,²⁰⁰ Gammel defines an actual fusion, for the case of the Baroness, between *body* and *mask*: by "spontaneous theatrical street performance"²⁰¹ (1991: 213) Gammel explains the aesthetic-grounded overlap between *performance* and *performativity*.

²⁰⁰ See for example Tim Armstrong, 1998, *Modernism, Technology, and the Body: A Cultural Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Harold B. Segel, 1998, *Body Ascendant: Modernism and the Physical Imperative* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press).

²⁰¹ Irene Gammel, 1991, "The City's Eye of Power: Panopticism and Specular Prostitution in Dreiser's New York and Grove's Berlin," in *Canadian Review of American Studies* 22(2), (Fall 1991), pp. 213-214.

The Baroness took theatrical performance out from the theatre and dancing halls, which had become *museums* of art, cosy, static, inadequate; so she took it onto the street, the dynamic space of post-modernity.



George Grantham Bain, 1910ca, *Baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven*.

George Grantham Bain, 1910ca, *Claude McKay and Baroness von Freytag-Loringhoven*.

She contributed to the change that transformed Allen Street, Second Avenue and the Bowery from spaces traditionally defined by the trade of prostitution, to spaces for other kinds of sexual trade, a forum of hybrid sexual culture and practice. Through her bodily bricolage, graffiti-covered skin, organic-technologic accessories, clothes hand-made from newspaper-cuts and stamps, and all her other extravagances, she created a gallery of performance out of her own body, embodying a satirical cabaret star, a protesting street jester.

At this stage, though, the Baroness's identity as a performer, her urban radicality, her dissident sexuality and disrupting androgyny, all her costumes, were becoming increasingly consuming; the more her mask was consumed by her viewers, the more it consumed her in both flesh and mind. As beautifully phrased by Gammel:

For the Baroness's practice of her art from in the flesh involved the ultimate risk to body and self: hers was quite literally the daily enactment

of the *sujet en procès*, the subject of postmodernity that is simultaneously *in process* and *on trial*. (Gammel 2003: 191)

3.4.2.4. The final performance of *Mamadada*

The New York years finished in 1923, by which time she had become the star artist of *The Little Review* and a model and artist for the *New York Dada Magazine*; she was openly supported by male artists such as William Carlos Williams and Ezra Pound,²⁰² and was Man Ray's Dada muse; she was the central knot in the Dada network in New York, and a crucial profile in the transatlantic intellectual women's network.

Yet, she had to leave. She was forced to acknowledge that she had not found the support for her art that she was hoping to find in New York, and that although she had plenty of friends, many of whom generously supported her, she was poor and starved, in her in-and-out from prison life. She told Heap: "I starve without money – I can not support my art. I have no chance here none at all – I *hate* this country – I am nauseated to see the monstrous faces – send me to Paris." (1923; Gammel 2003: 23)²⁰³

When she arrived in Berlin, she found a city devastated by war, and realised that she had gone to an "deathtrap" – as she wrote to Djuna Barnes. It was not Else, anyway, that would die, it was 'the Baroness': "The Baroness in Greenwich Village, arraigned in gaudy accoutrements, was a character. Now, in German homespun, she was just a poor pitiful *frau*." (Gammel 2003: 323) Although she continued to produce art, supported as she was by Berenice Abbott and Djuna Barnes, the *dramatis persona* she had interpreted in America started deteriorating. She no longer dominated the streets parading in her costumes, but felt "at the mercy of street riffraff," as she wrote in a 1924 letter to Djuna Barnes. (*Ibid.*) Although she produced excellent art in Berlin too, because her artistic élan had not extinguished, she was no longer the Baroness-

²⁰² Pound praised the Baroness openly several times in the 1920s, but in 1955 he paid tribute to her in his Canto 95, where he wrote: "The immense cowardice of advertised literati / & Else Kassandra, "the Baroness" / von Freytag etc. sd/several true things / in the old days / driven nuts, / Well, of course, there was a certain strain / On the gal in them days in Manhattan the principle of non-acquiescence / laid a burden. / Dinklage, where art thou, / with, or without, your *von*?" Pound 1955: 646). Ezra Pound, 1955, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 646.

²⁰³ Elsa to *The Little Review*, 1923, "Since you made that appointment with me." Quoted in Gammel, 2003, p.127.

persona. She did maintain ‘Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven’ as the name on her passport, but she was no longer the Baroness-character.

The Paris that she entered in 1924 is defined by Gammel as “The Baroness’s last Dada Dance.” And such it was, the deathly dance of a maenad, at the end of which she collapsed. With her fame preceding her, she entered Gertrude Stein’s circle; she tightened her friendship with Djuna Barnes; she impressed male artists like Hemingway and Ford, who wrote beautifully Dada verses about her; she made new connections and started new projects. But the ‘Dada dance’ involved her art rather than her performative attitudes, since the Baroness-character had left little trace; her extravagance left gradually her body and flowed instead into her verses, sculptures, assemblages and paintings. By contrast, her looks had become quite ordinary.



[Anonymous], 1926ca, *Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven with Djuna Barnes on the Beach at Le Crotoy, Normandy*.

During the Parisian years, she developed a chronic form of depression and started acting suicidal, as she several times wrote to Djuna. Eventually, she started losing weight and became ill, her depression consuming her. On 14 December 1927, her body was found dead (of gas-asphyxiation) in her bed, ironically unspectacular and pathetic, considering how her life had been.

In New York, Elsa and the Baroness were the same person(a), engaged in an aesthetics of the body, in which sexuality was both an experiential tool and a communicative channel, and ultimately the public voice of an anarchic, ‘proto-punk’, non-acquiescent mind. Uncaring of what the audience might say about her, either good or evil, the New York performer wanted them to talk about her, to be constantly under the spotlight. For the time she was alive, and indeed for a while after her death, she was a living performance, a living self-portrait.

As conclusive remark, I want to address the resonance that the Baroness has on today’s audience. Although the Baroness is still not widely known, Gammel’s endeavours in the 2000s, culminating in the 2011 *Body Sweats* collection, have majorly contributed to the rekindling of critical interest in the Baroness’s life and work. Still, it is also interesting to witness how the re-discovery of this artist has not only impressed scholars, but a wider audience too. In 2013, Lily Benson and Cassandra Guan directed *The Film Ballad of Mamadada*. Only broadcasted in 2014 and still quite hard to find even via the internet, the film is a post-modernist biodrama that in rapid sequences alternates historical photos, manuscript poems and sketches, short black-and-white records, with the reconstructed life of the Baroness, portrayed by Joanna Pickering wearing reproductions of the Baroness’s clothing. Flashing sights of the Baroness’s friends – Duchamp, Man Ray, Djuna Barnes, and others – are alternated with longer fragments recounting the most meaningful moments of Elsa’s life. The soundtrack, mainly consisting in musical post-modernist arrangements and dissonant tones, intertwines moments of silence and white-noise to frantic rhythms, stressing respectively slow and fast sequences of images. The voice of Ulrike Muller reads out the Baroness’s acoustic verses, stressing with her soprano timber the span of tension created by the futurist sounds. It is worth noting that the project started on a small budget, mainly supported by donors – including myself – who contributed via online fund-raising.

To me, *Mamadada* exemplifies how the Baroness’s *dramatis persona* continues to perform today, to shock and attract, igniting others’ creative genius for the production of new art. Widening the scope, both the ‘living masks’ that I have considered, the *dramatis personae* of Zelda Fitzgerald and the Baroness, have enhanced in recent years the production of not only criticism, but art; a rekindled

interest in Zelda's icon has inspired *Superzelda* (2011) by Lo Porto and Marotta, while the re-evaluation of the Baroness has inspired *Mamadada* (2013-14). Both works, the graphic novel and the filmballad, have a biographic intention and are perhaps born as new-media-biographies. Still, as the lives of the biographees cannot be separated from their art, fused in performance, the biography also needs to be in some way artistic and performative. Ultimately, I can see a cyclical pattern in progress, where art gives way to short- and long-term criticism, which originates new art. Such 'second-generation' works of art give further creative voice to the primary works and back to their authors, but inevitably stratify meanings and forms on them, thus inspiring new criticism and launching ever-new debates and dialogues.

Conclusions

The extremely varied artistic output that I have targeted with my research is located on the threshold of intermediality, continuously moving across ink and colour, word and frame; but it is also nurtured by several tensions, such as the dialogue between popular and high forms of literature, and between diachrony and synchrony. The bewildering results of such interactions have provided an endless engine of creativity and, therefore, a fascinating field of investigation.

While the interaction between the three main paradigms pinpointed at the beginning – literature, visual art, and gender – has been the yardstick by which each work was measured, it generated further areas of intersection. Each of the comparisons that I have proposed has produced several debates, requiring a diverse range of approaches. As I aimed to identify the common rhetorical patterns in works of figurative art and literary texts by female artists, other questions arose, including the conflicting relationship between gender and genre.

Texts, images and performances reveal different forms and extents of self-disclosure and self-concealing, which chart ‘selves’ in search for new identities and in conversation with other possible communities and networks. While both the unusual and original forms of such intersections outline a rewarding field of investigation in itself, these artists’ works owe a lot to the life-giving function of the body, which is endlessly modulated throughout their verbal, visual and performative works. Body parts and bodies in pain are sites of protest and resistance; excited and sexualised bodies become the site of new experiences and sexual freedom, in spite of the traditional delineations of gender. Somehow, these bodies, which draw, paint and perform, are conceived as activating the connections between different media.

As an intrinsic component of this relationship, gender interweaves a pattern between visual and verbal specifics to create an intricate web of cross-fertilisation. Gender, life-giving and yet sometimes consuming, also provides a common ground for all the works of each artist; viewing these works with the lens of gender means that the corpus can be viewed and analysed as a compact, although extremely varied, body of works. Texts, art and performance by every writer appear connected in a sort of broadened hermeneutic circle in which each piece of art influences and enriches

readings and interpretations of the other. Verbal texts, which already have a high visual potential, reverberate the pictorial/graphic power of visual works. Likewise, canvases and sketches are enriched by a narrative dimension which derives from the literary works around them.

I have used these fascinating connections as a springboard for my comparison of texts and artworks by different writers. As I moved through temporary alliances between verbal and visual genres, only to see them dissolved and then re-assembled, I could appreciate all the more the complicated network of interferences and implications of intermediality. My comparative analysis has therefore tried to move with a similar fluidity and openness to that of the text, to enter into equally dynamic debates and potentially to trigger further critical enquiries.

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- A PRIMARY TEXTS BY DJUNA BARNES, ZELDA FITZGERALD, ELSA von FREYTAG-LORINGHOVEN, MINA LOY
- B OTHER PRIMARY TEXTS
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- E VISUAL STUDIES AND ART
- F SEXUALITY, GENDER, AND PERFORMATIVITY
- G LIFE-WRITING
- H RHETORIC

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