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Modernism and the Obscene

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Against “the Censor’s Scythe”: Mina Loy, Djuna Barnes, and Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven

Yasna Bozhkova

My bawdy spirit is innate—
A legacy from my Dada—
His crude jest bestowed on me
This sparkle of obscenity
[...]

Whether you love it or turn up your nose
Whether it pleases you or not
It grows—develops—pops off the tree
Circling ball—nude in stockings¹

- ¹ The obscene is unquestionably at the very heart of the modernist project. As it relates to modernism, this notion may be defined both in the more specific sense of using images that are explicitly sexual, filthy or otherwise offensive to bourgeois morality and good taste, and in the broader sense of bringing to the fore everything that had previously been kept “off stage,” i.e. had been seen as not being fit subject matter for literature and art. Yet, historically, and particularly in the trajectory of provocation spanning from the Marquis de Sade to the avant-garde experiments of the Surrealists, the obscene female body often remains a prerogative of male authors, a body objectified and subjugated to a paradigm of male fantasy. Thus, unsurprisingly, critics tend to more often examine the obscene strategies of male modernists—most prominently in the case of two iconic novels from the 1920s, James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) and D.H. Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* (1928)—focusing less often on the equally groundbreaking work of their female contemporaries. For instance, in her book *Modernism, Mass Culture, and the Aesthetics of Obscenity*, Allison Pease traces the emergence of explicit sexual representation from the *fin de siècle* aesthetics of Decadence to the zenith of modernist experimentation in the 1920s, but most of the writers and artists that she discusses are male—from Swinburne and Beardsley to the

canonic modernist examples of Joyce and Lawrence. Rachel Potter's more recent study *Obscene Modernism: Literary Censorship and Experiment* pays more attention to female figures, but without raising the important question of how female writers' use of the obscene differed from or engaged with that of their male contemporaries.² This article aims to explore the textual and visual strategies of representing the obscene in the work of three female modernists—Mina Loy, Djuna Barnes, and Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven.³ It delves into the use of sexually explicit, as well as deliberately repulsive, carnivalesque or scatological imagery in their work, paying attention to possible mutual influences as well as to their shared reaction to the most canonic case of modernist engagement with the obscene—the trial over the publication of Joyce's *Ulysses* on the pages of *The Little Review*. By choosing these three lesser-known and previously marginalized⁴ female figures as case studies, it seeks to examine how the modernist focus on the obscene ambivalently intersects with gender. I argue that these three female writers' engagement with the obscene around 1915 was precocious, extremely radical, and stylistically groundbreaking and idiosyncratic, arising independently from any male modernist experimentation along such lines. In turn, this raises the question of how they later responded to the growing prominence of obscene poetics in the work of male modernists, and how they engaged with cases of censorship given wide coverage in modernist magazines. I take the example of Joyce's *Ulysses* in order to show that while they defended modernist works in equally uncompromising terms, praising their groundbreaking aesthetic searches and denouncing the censorship that threatened them, at times they also suggested that the male fantasies concerning female sexuality in particular did not sufficiently reflect the reality of female bodily experience. Although the three women knew each other well and their transatlantic paths intersected often,⁵ I read the stylistic similarities and echoes between their works not so much as direct influences but rather as common resonances: together, they articulate a modernist female subjectivity working against the clichés of prudish, virginal femininity and other restrictive norms of bourgeois morality. They also seek to dismantle the paradigm of the eroticized female body as an object of male fantasy; Loy also suggests that male modernists did not know how to properly express female sexuality and bodily experience. The first part of this article examines how Loy reacted against the norms of social and literary propriety of her Victorian education and created a strikingly original poetics of the obscene in her early poems and manifestoes. In the second part, I move on to explore some correspondences between the works of Barnes and Baroness Elsa, which bring to the fore a repulsive obscene female corporeality at odds not only with the norms of propriety of bourgeois culture, but also with modernist constructions of the female as an object of male desire. Finally, I explore how all three writers engaged with the question of censorship in the wake of the obscenity trial of Joyce's *Ulysses*.

Mina Loy: "Shedding [...] petty pruderies"

- 2 Loy's lifelong engagement with the obscene was goaded on and directed against the Victorian ideal of sexless female purity, often personified and represented by the repressive influence of her mother, a coercive maternal censor who often appears in her autobiographic writings. As Carolyn Burke suggests in her biography of Loy, she internalized this censoring voice in her youth, and her later poetic experiments went hand in hand with her liberation from this censorship. A direct attack against this

culture of prudery and censorship, spanning everything from everyday family lives to literature, appears in her semi-autobiographical satire *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose* (1923-25), where Loy stages her own family narrative, the courtship and marriage of "Exodus" (a figure for her Hungarian Jewish father) and "English Rose," her prudish British mother, representing the ideal of Victorian purity:

Maiden emotions
breed
on leaves of novels
where anatomical man
has no notion
of offering other than the bended knee
to femininity

and purity
passes in pleasant ways
as the cows graze

for in those days
when Exodus courted the rose
literature was supposed to elevate us (Loy 1982, 124)

- 3 In these lines, Loy parodies the conventions of chivalric romance and the pastoral in order to denounce literary censorship, which in Victorian culture sought to create a literature completely expurgated from any form of bodily experience.⁶ As the parodic, deliberately infantile rhyme in "knee," "femininity," and "purity," and then in "ways," "graze," and "days" suggests, literary censorship is bound to make for bad poetry.
- 4 From her earliest manifestoes and poems, Loy set out to develop a daring, radically embodied poetics, motivated not so much by a desire to shock, but rather by a thoroughgoing endeavor to dismantle the very concept of the obscene which was, to her, imbricated in an ideology of middle-class morality becoming increasingly obsolete and stifling to any form of artistic creativity. "Aphorisms on Futurism," her first published text, written in Florence and published in *Camera Work* in New York in 1914, is characteristic of her stance:

TO your blushing we shout the obscenities, we scream the blasphemies, that you,
being weak, whisper alone in the dark.

THEY are empty except for your shame.

AND so these sounds shall dissolve back to their innate senselessness. (Loy 1997, 152)

- 5 As Burke suggests, this manifesto-like text can be seen as a "dialogue with herself" in which Loy stages her psychic liberation, not only responding ironically to the revolutionary aesthetics and to the misogyny of the Futurist movement, but also setting her creative mind free from the "internalized censor" (Burke 160) of the restrictive social norms of her prudish upbringing. As is often the case in Loy's manifestoes and other polemic texts, this aphorism opposes the collective voice of a liberated "we," that ostensibly stands for the avant-garde artistic communities she frequented, to a "you" who seems to represent both bourgeois culture and her own self which had subconsciously internalized its censorship. In the lines quoted above it becomes clear that for Loy, the shock value of the obscene was only necessary in so far as it could expose the absurdity and the hollowness of the concept itself: the

supposedly offensive sounds ("we shout" and "we scream") paradoxically dissolve into "innate senselessness" once the shame surrounding them is dispelled. Likewise, in her "Feminist Manifesto," dated "November 1914," Loy once again attacks this mental attitude of shame:

Another great illusion that woman must use all her [...] clear-sightedness & [...] bravery to destroy—for the sake of her self-respect is [...] the realization in defiance of superstition that there is nothing impure in sex—except in the mental attitude to it. (Loy 1997, 156, emphasis hers)

- 6 She argues that if women could dismantle this obsessive association of sex with impurity and obscenity, which for her amounts to nothing more than outdated superstition, this would trigger "an incalculable & wider social regeneration than it is possible for our generation to imagine" (Loy 1997, 156). Likewise, in "The History of Religion and Eros," she writes: "Sex! This word [...] overflows with misassociations. To clarify its future significance, sex must be renamed" (Loy 2011, 247), and decides that the term "Eros" must be used instead.
- 7 This desire to dismantle the oppressive ideology of social propriety that created a mental attitude of shame around sexual experience and the body as a whole, which proved particularly stifling for women writers, accounts for the obscene imagery omnipresent in her early poetry. It creates a dialectic tension between explicit naming of what had previously been taboo, and its strategic renaming or refiguring through striking and often grotesque images in order to subvert or debunk its associative charge of shame. In 1915, Loy famously caused outrage with the publication of her "Love Songs": also written in Florence, they appeared in the inaugural issue of the little magazine *Others* in New York, and were later integrated into the longer sequence *Songs to Joannes*, published as a separate issue of the journal in 1917. The first section of the sequence opens with a surprising and often discussed image of sexual intercourse and female orgasmic experience, which almost reads like a manifesto of Loy's approach towards the obscene:

Spawn of Fantasies
[...]
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

I would an eye in a Bengal light
Eternity in a sky-rocket
Constellations in an ocean
Whose rivers run no fresher
Than a trickle of saliva (Loy 1997, 53)

- 8 Alfred Kreymborg, the editor of *Others*, eloquently summed up the reaction of shock and stupefaction upon the poems' publication, even among members of the New York avant-garde: "[t]o reduce eroticism to the sty was an outrage, and to do so without verbs, sentence structure, punctuation, even more offensive" (Kreymborg 1929, 489). As Laura Scuriatti points out, Loy's poems were deemed scandalous "not only because of their explicit sexual content, the unembellished descriptions of the corporeal and fleshly aspects of sexual encounters [...], but also because these were told from the point of view of a female speaking voice" (Scuriatti 2005, 73). Interestingly, some of

those who were most outraged by Loy's subversive take on love poetry were women, including Harriet Monroe and particularly Amy Lowell, who threatened to withdraw her financial support to the magazine. Loy's obscene imagery is both daringly explicit and lewd, ironically thriving in its shock value, and utterly defamiliarizing, to the extent that this shock value paradoxically ends up losing its charge. In particular, this is caused by the ironic use of scientific terms, jarring in the lexicon of love poetry ("spawn," "snout," "mucous membrane," "saliva," and later even "spermatozoa"). The prominent figure of the grotesque, ribald "Pig Cupid" with his phallic "rosy snout" becomes the personification of Loy's aim to do away with the boundaries between romantic love, the erotic and the obscene: Cupid, the other name of the Greek god of love Eros, encapsulates a whole tradition of clichéd love imagery, but on another level, it stands as a substitute for "Sex," as Loy suggests in "History of Religion and Eros" (Loy 2011, 247). Inscribed in a tradition of decadent bawdy iconography such as in Félicien Rops's painting *Pornocratès. La femme au cochon*, this figure also hinges on a multilingual pun, since *cochon*, the French for "pig," also means dirty-minded, lusty or obscene. It is well established in Loy scholarship that the imagery of this poem responded both to the misogyny of the Futurists F.T. Marinetti and Giovanni Papini, with whom Loy had ephemeral extramarital affairs at the time of the composition of the poem, and to Valentine de Saint-Point's "Futurist Manifesto of Lust" (1913), in which she repudiates romantic sensibility, eulogizing instead a liberating sense of desire:

We must stop despising Desire, disguising it in the pitiful clothes of old and sterile sentimentality. [...] WE MUST GET RID OF ALL THE ILL-OMENED DEBRIS OF ROMANTICISM, counting daisy petals, moonlight duets, heavy endearments, false hypocritical modesty. When beings are drawn together by a physical attraction, let them—instead of talking only of the fragility of their hearts—dare to express their desires, the inclinations of their bodies, and to anticipate [...] their future carnal union. (De Saint-Point 168, emphasis hers)

- 9 In Loy's "Love Songs," in a striking, ironic literalization of De Saint-Point's rhetoric, the debris of romanticism become "erotic garbage," while the quotation marks around "Once upon a time" conjure up and sweep away the entire tradition of desexualized, fairy tale, love. Loy both explores the shock value of naming the male anatomy with unprecedented license, and pinpoints the need to invent an entirely new, uncensored language for the body, rewriting the male body as a "skin-sack" and "clock-work mechanism":

The skin-sack
In which a wanton duality
Packed
All the completion of my infructuous impulses
Something the shape of a man
To the casual vulgarity of the merely observant
More of a clock-work mechanism
Running down against time
To which I am not paced
My fingertips are numb from fretting your hair (Loy 1997, 53-54)

- 10 At times, Loy does not hesitate to use outright blasphemy, for instance when weaving the Christian symbolism of the Eucharist into her imagery of sexual intercourse: "[breaking] flesh [...] / At the profane communion table / Where wine is spill'd on promiscuous lips" (Loy 1997, 54). However, the poem's imagery quickly moves beyond such cultural symbolism, redefining what would have been perceived as obscene by her

contemporaries as something utterly natural, by interweaving it into a series of surprising organic images:

When we lifted
Our eye-lids on Love
A cosmos
Of coloured voices
And laughing honey

And spermatozoa
At the core of Nothing
In the milk of the Moon (Loy 1997, 56)

- 11 Thus, the poem ironically brings to the fore the "pornograph [y]" of nature, suggesting that in the natural world, unencumbered with "petty pruderies" and other social inhibitions and taboos, the socially created category of the obscene becomes absurd:

Shedding our petty pruderies
From slit eyes

We sidle up
to Nature
— — — that irate pornographist (Loy 1997, 63)

- 12 The poem abounds with such ironic images of an absurd natural "pornography," picturing swarming fireflies "Bouncing/Off one another/Again conjoining/In recaptured pulses" (Loy 1997, 61) and then comparing the lover and addressee of the poem to one of these copulating beings: "You too/Had something/At that time/Of a green-lit glow-worm" (Loy 1997, 61). As they appeared in New York avant-garde magazines like *Others*, Loy's "Love Songs" and other early texts worked for the liberation of the female body from the corset of bourgeois conventions and morality, making her reputation as the perfect embodiment of the liberated "modern woman."⁷ Yet, together with the myth of her dazzling physical beauty, these poems created her aura as a sexualized body and as a dazzling object of male desire. Thus, while with her internal focus Loy depicted the sexualized female body as an experiencing subject rather than a passive object of desire, she did not fully do away with the paradigm of female seductiveness.

(Performing) Repulsive Women: Djuna Barnes's and Baroness Elsa's Queer Obscene

- 13 Around the same time in the mid-1910s, in New York, Djuna Barnes and "Baroness Elsa" created an equally radical but alternative form of obscene, which stemmed from an equally "radical, anti-bourgeois sensibility" (Goody 39). More repulsive, excessive and violently transgressive, it not only rejected the norms of propriety but also attacked the very idea of the eroticized female body as an object of male desire in order to develop a decidedly queer corporeal female poetics.⁸ While Barnes's later use of the obscene in the "gay Amazonian mythology" (Goody 167) of *Ladies Almanack* and in the famous "obscene and touching" (Barnes 1936, 179) final scene of *Nightwood* is more often examined, I want to focus here on her earliest major text, *The Book of Repulsive Women* (1915). The Beardsleyesque decadence of its imagery is less often read in relation to the obscene, perhaps because Barnes herself later dismissed it as "idiotic."

As Goody puts it, Barnes's book "draws on the decadent tradition in both its representation of abject femininity (in the poems and Beardsleyesque drawings) and its anti-bourgeois stance, proffering these repulsive women as evidence of alternatives to the clean, straight aspirations of modern America" (Goody 39). If Barnes's chapbook is as disturbing as Loy's *Songs to Joannes* in its engagement with female embodiment, nudity and bodily fluids, the key difference between the two texts is that while Loy adopts the point of view of the female subject to focus on bodily experience, Barnes adopts an external stance towards the women depicted. The voice of the speaker ambivalently oscillates between the outraged repulsion ironically recommended by the title and a complicit voyeurism that in fact revels in the grotesquerie that is described. The line "We'll know you for the woman/That you are." (Barnes 1915, 13) in the opening poem "From Fifth Avenue Up" establishes the technique through which Barnes's voice ambivalently ventriloquizes cultural attitudes about women by pretending to describe them as they truly are. The attempt to "know" the woman described (and women in general) quickly becomes the pretext for an obscene fantasy:

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.

[...]

See you sagging down with bulging
Hair to sip,
The dappled damp from some vague
Under lip.
Your soft saliva, loosed
With orgy, drip. (Barnes 1915, 14)

- ¹⁴ It is striking that the terms "saliva" and "spawn," jarringly foreign to the lexicon of poetry, appear both in Loy's "Love Songs" and in Barnes's *The Book of Repulsive Women*, both of which date back to 1915.⁹ Likewise, just as Loy blasphemously depicts the sheets of sexual intercourse as a "profane communion table," Barnes touches on the outright blasphemous use of Christianity, as the voice admits valuing the repulsive women "still a little/More than Christ" (Barnes 1915, 17). It is also useful to notice that both Loy's "Aphorisms on Futurism" and Barnes's *Book of Repulsive Women* articulate the obscene around the polarity of "we" and "you." Yet, the clear-cut opposition between the liberated "we" ("we shout, we scream") and the outraged "you" ("you whisper," "your shame") in Loy's text is rendered significantly more problematic in Barnes's chapbook: the unnamed and more ambivalent "we" seems to denounce the women ("you") as epitomes of moral degradation, "Ravelling grandly into vice" (Barnes 1915, 24), and yet to take voyeuristic pleasure in observing them ("we'd see," "we'd strain to touch"). While, through her internal point of view, aligning the female subject with the obscene,

Loy seeks to demystify and naturalize what was perceived as offensive, such as the naked body, in an inverse movement, Barnes showcases the obscene "repulsiveness" of the women, making them as ostentatiously artificial and excessively transgressive as possible. As Goody points out:

What is particularly pressing in this text is the effect of conjoining women with the grotesque so that the articulation functions in a process of stratification in which the articulation woman-body-grotesque comes to seem 'natural'. Using such a decadent aesthetic Barnes runs the risk of merely reinforcing a reductive representation of women. Her only defence against this naturalisation [...] is to make her women appear as unnatural as possible, both in the poems and in the illustrations. (Goody 166)

- 15 Indeed, the text exploits a multiplicity of stereotypes of moral and bodily degradation and vice, such as the great Whore of Babylon, the orgy, the oozing and dripping bodily fluids, and the term "lip," prominently used twice both as a verb and as a noun—an unambiguous reference to lesbian sexual practices. Yet, as the series of textual and visual depictions of repulsive femininity unravels, the obscene female body takes a variety of forms: the ribald and lewd sexuality of the opening poem is increasingly displaced by images of deformed ugliness ("With your belly bulging stately/Into space," Barnes 1915, 15), of the body abjectly wallowing in waste, of grotesque animality or of equally grotesque images of childbirth, freakish babies and mothers, such as the "Naked-female-baby/In grimace" (Barnes 1915, 15) or the "blank udders" of the "massive mother" (Barnes 1915, 27-28). For both Barnes and Loy, motherhood and babyhood are obscene, corporeal activities, not melodramatic, desexualized phenomena, as they were often represented in bourgeois culture. One may compare Barnes's images to Loy's depiction of the female body in childbirth in the poem "Parturition," which caused almost as much outrage as "Love Songs," or to her disturbing focus on the "ample sex" (Loy 1997, 24) of a sick newborn female baby in the opening lines of the poem "Babies in Hospital". The trajectory of obscene, repulsive female bodies in Barnes's chapbook culminates in the last two poems, "Corpse A" and "Corpse B," where the body wallows on the street, "shock-abbreviated," shocking in its abjection, lying "listlessly like some small mug/Of beer gone flat" (Barnes 1915, 36). Thus, while the collection is read by most critics as a "coded early lesbian manifesto [...] staging the birth of the lesbian" (Caselli 77), I argue that what is most remarkable and unique about this early text is Barnes's articulation of a repulsive femininity, which is only partially related to Barnes's lesbianism, since the female characters in *Ladies Almanack* and *Nightwood* have none of the revolting aspects of these grotesque, "repulsive" women. Rather, Barnes sets out to dismantle the very paradigm of the eroticized, seductive female body by taking its opposite to extremes.
- 16 With her pioneering Dada performance art, Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven ostensibly sought to create the living embodiment of Barnes's "repulsive women." As Daniella Caselli points out, there is a striking similarity between the poetics of Barnes's chapbook and the performance poetics developed by Baroness Elsa, in their intertwined dimensions of the repulsive, the shocking and the outlandish:

Barnes's early poetry could be described—like she does with the Baroness—as "astonishing". "Repulsive," however, would be another way to account for the kind of avant-garde performed both by Barnes's early poems and by the Baroness. (Caselli 68)
- 17 As Caselli notes, there is a striking correspondence between Barnes's poetics of obscene, "repulsive" womanhood, and the Baroness's art, for which her own body

became a canvas, as eloquently presented in William Carlos Williams's account of the Baroness, published in *Contact* in 1921:

She lived in the most unspeakably filthy tenement in the city. Romantically, mystically dirty, of grimy walls, dark, gas-lit halls and narrow stairs, it smelt of black water closets, one to a floor [...]. Waves of stench thickened on each landing as one moved up. She [...] went by the name of La Baronne. Close up, a reek stood out purple from her body, separating her forever from the clean muslin souls of Yankeedom. It was that peculiar, pungent smell of dirt and sweat, strong of the armpit. La Baronne had filled her room with [...] refuse collected from the street. There she lived with three dogs. (Williams 11)

- 18 While it is well known that Barnes used the Baroness as model for the characters of *Nightwood*,¹⁰ the eccentric poet-artist is arguably also a possible model for the repulsive women of Barnes's poetic collection. She seems to be the living incarnation of the image that appears in Barnes's "From Third Avenue On," connecting the female body with filth, stench, and waste:

And now she walks on out turned feet
Beside the litter in the street
Or rolls beneath a dirty sheet
Within the town. (Barnes 1915, 19)

- 19 The illustration of an outlandishly dressed woman walking with her peacocks that accompanies the poem "From Third Avenue On" strikingly resembles accounts of the Baroness walking the streets of New York City, dressed in her extravagant costumes, such as a bra made of tomato-cans, and surrounded by a multitude of reeking dogs. The most extreme case of the three artists examined in this article, Baroness Elsa gained notoriety in New York avant-garde circles around 1915 for her extravagant, offensive, violently transgressive body performances, which "luxuriate [d] in exhibitionism" (Gammel and Zelazo, in Freytag-Loringhoven 19). For instance, Barnes remembers in her unpublished biographical notes that the Baroness "made a great plaster cast of a penis once, & showed it to all the 'old maids' she came in contact with." (Barnes 1933, 4) Using this object as a performance prop, the Baroness symbolically appropriated a masculine identity, which may be seen both as a means to transgress the norms of propriety, a shocking act typical of Dada's *épater le bourgeois* strategies, and to acquire the status of a male artist, which Gammel sees as a "gender performance in the Butlerian sense" (Gammel 196). On another occasion, she shaved her head and dyed it vermillion, embodying "the vermillion, vibrant flow of potency, making herself a phallic erection" (Gammel and Zelazo, in Freytag-Loringhoven 20). She became a leading figure in the cluster of expatriate artists of New York Dada, featuring Marcel Duchamp, Man Ray and Francis Picabia among others, lending her body to many of their collaborative *épater le bourgeois* acts. For instance, in 1921 she starred nude in a film shot by Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray titled *The Baroness Shaves Her Pubic Hair*, and in 1922, Ray sent a letter to Tristan Tzara featuring a still from this film, showing the nude Baroness Elsa, with her legs spread provocatively to form the letter "A" for America, and punningly titled "merdelamerdelamer de l'a...merique," which reads alternately as *de la mer*, *de la merde*, and *de l'Amérique*, informing him: "Cher Tzara—dada cannot live in New York. All New York is dada and will not tolerate a rival,—will not notice dada." (in Freytag-Loringhoven 89). The offensive gesture of her nude body staged as the letter A clearly engages with the symbolism of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, in an extreme, provocative Dada attack on American puritanism. In 1917, she also created a phallic readymade sculpture made of plumbing pipes called *God*

(previously attributed to Morton Schamberg). Based on this sculpture, on her preference for scatological imagery, and on her frequent collaborations with male Dadaists, critics have speculated that she might also be the unacknowledged author or at least co-author of Duchamp's *Fountain*. Although the strikingly original nature of the Baroness's art was acknowledged and respected by male artists like Duchamp, her excessive, exhibitionist performance of female desire was nonetheless perceived as "repulsive" even among avant-garde artists, as Williams' misogynistic account demonstrates, dwelling at length on the details of her syphilis, broken teeth, and "the stale smell rising from her body" (Williams 12). Enamored of both Duchamp and Williams, whom she dubbed respectively M'ars (which stands for "my arse") and "WC," the Baroness often made her excessive and unrequited sexual appetite the subject of her performances, assemblage art and poetry. For instance, painter Louis Bouché remembered her reciting a poem, whose refrain went, "Marcel, Marcel, I love you like Hell, Marcel," "while giving her nude body a rubdown with a copy of *Nude Descending a Staircase*" (qtd. in Freytag-Loringhoven 13). The poem "Aphrodite to Mars" can be read as an obscene love song fantasizing about Marcel Duchamp ("M'Ars"):

Caesar's
Digging point
Sharp kiss
Plenishing
Snapping thirst's
Drill gash
Rimflush
Rubyblood's desire
[...]
Ejaculating silently
High
To
Stain glintedges (Freytag-Loringhoven 65)

- 20 The visual poem "Graveyard Surrounding Nunnery" begins with the lines "When I was/Young— foolish—/I loved Marcel Dushit/He behaved mulish—" (Freytag-Loringhoven 201). After a similarly failed attempt to seduce "Carlos—some husky guy," the speaker theatrically chooses to become a nun, accompanying the poem with a sketch of phalluses laid to rest behind crosses. As Gammel and Zelazo argue, "Her characteristic use of the dash here takes on the symbolic function of castration, cutting her lines short as she cuts down the men she mocks, who, in their implied failure to please her, force her to choose the abstinence of the nunnery" (in Freytag-Loringhoven 20).
- 21 The Baroness's poetry, published on the pages of *The Little Review* starting from 1918, literally abounds with explicitly obscene, repulsive and scatological imagery. Her quasi-obsessive use of portmanteau words often features obscene wordplay, such as "phalluspistol" (Freytag-Loringhoven 153). As Gammel and Zelazo point out, "More than any other Dadaist in New York, the Baroness fanned the flames in the fight against censorship and puritanical prejudice" (in Freytag-Loringhoven 27). Like Loy's, the very mention of her name came to stand as shorthand for the doubly offensive dimensions of unabashed female desire and radical formal experimentation. In the Baroness's case, to this was added the dimension of theatricalized, excessive and exhibitionistically displayed "repulsiveness" which alienated many even among the avant-garde.¹¹ In the years 1918-1921, she became the most often printed poet on the pages of *The Little*

Review alongside Joyce's *Ulysses*, and came to represent the modernist fight against bourgeois good taste and propriety just as much as Joyce, and perhaps even more so for being a woman. As Gammel puts it, she became "a living figurehead for the journal's masthead motto, "MAKING NO COMPROMISE WITH THE PUBLIC TASTE." Of all important avant-gardist contributors—including Joyce—the Baroness challenged the conventional taste more aggressively than others" (Gammel 246). Gammel goes as far as to suggest that her poetry greatly contributed to the obscenity charges against *The Little Review*, since it was considerably more explicit than Joyce's highly veiled writing of obscenity, articulated in metaphorical, complex writing (Gammel 252-253).

"Re-Joyce": Female Modernists Writing the Obscene in the Wake of the *Ulysses* Scandal

- 22 This leads me to examine how Baroness Elsa, Barnes, and Loy responded to the arch example of modernist obscenity—the 1921 trial following the publication of *Ulysses* in *The Little Review*, which resulted in banning the publication of the novel in the United States. Since it is well-known that Joyce's *Ulysses* was particularly championed by women—first by the editors of *The Little Review*, Margaret Anderson and Jane Heap, and then by bookseller Sylvia Beach, who published the novel in book form in Paris, it is interesting to examine how modernist women writers responded to this case of flagrant censorship, and how their subversive strategies evolved after it. As Gammel explains, it is important to note that during the trial "the male avant-garde had retreated behind a wall of silence, leaving the public fight to the women" (Gammel 255-256). As early as 1920, in the July-August issue of *The Little Review* that also printed the notorious "Nausicaa" episode that attracted the attention of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, and in fact immediately preceding it, the Baroness published a poetic manifesto in defense of Joyce's work titled "The Modest Woman," which begins thus:

Artists are aristocrats.

[...]

Who wants us to hide our joys (Joyce?)

If I can eat I can eliminate—it is logic—it is why I eat! My machinery is built that way. Yours also—though you do not like to think of—mention it—because you are not aristocrat [sic].

Your skirts are too long—out of "modesty," not decoration—when you lift them you do not do it elegantly—proudly.

Why should I—proud engineer—be ashamed of my machinery—part of it?

[...] Joyce is engineer! one of boldest — most adventurous—globetrotter! (Freytag-Loringhoven 286)

- 23 Not only does the Baroness unabashedly defend the explicit sexuality of Joyce's novel, punningly inscribing obscene "joys" in his very name, but she also particularly champions his unprecedented, bold use of repulsive, scatological imagery, referring to the famous scene where Leopold Bloom eases his bowels after breakfast at the end of the "Calypso" episode: "If I can write—talk—about dinner—pleasure of my palate—as artist or as aristocrat—with my ease of manner—can afford also to mention my ecstasies in toilet room!" (Freytag-Loringhoven 287). The Baroness's text was in fact prompted by the essay of a certain Helen Bishop Dennis, printed in the previous issue of the journal, that had attacked Joyce's "immodesty in writing about toilet matters"

(Gammel 252). In response, the Baroness situates Joyce in an ancient literary tradition of the erotic and the carnivalesque body, only to blasphemously denounce the "great stupidity" of the Bible in the next sentence:

Goethe was grandly obscene—what do you know about it? Flaubert—Swift—Rabelais—Arabian Nights—Bible if you please! only difference—Bible is without humour—great stupidity! So: how dare you strut—step out—show yourself with your cotton-tuft in ear?

(Freytag-Loringhoven 288)

- 24 For the Baroness, as for Loy, the obscene is essentially a social construct created by a bourgeois culture negating the body. Paradoxically, when it is part of a serious aesthetic quest, the "obscene" is never truly obscene, i.e. vulgar:

The way he slings "obscurities"—handles them—never forced—never obscene—vulgar! [...] In fact—his obscenities—until now—are only thing I could taste—enjoy—with abandon—his blasphemies. Pure soul of child—wisdom of sage—genius.

(Freytag-Loringhoven 288)

- 25 The Baroness developed her engagement with Joycean corporeality in a mocking, posthumously published Dada poem called "Kindly" (ca. 1920-1924), which was, as the manuscript explicitly states, "Inspired by J.J.'s 'Ulysses'":

And God spoke kindly to mine heart —
So kindly spoke he to mine heart —
He said: "Thou art allowed to fart!"

So kindly spoke he to mine heart. (Freytag-Loringhoven 86)

- 26 The Baroness here engages not only with representations of farting in *Ulysses*—both Bloom's in "Sirens" and Molly's farting in bed in "Penelope"—but also with Joyce's obsession with his wife Nora's farts, documented in letters. The conversation between woman and God seems to be particularly inspired by the lines "give us room even to let a fart God or do the least thing better yes hold them like that a bit on my side piano quietly sweeeee theres that train far away pianissimo eeeeeeee one more song" (Joyce 763), where, due to Joyce's experimental lack of punctuation, the text may be read as though Molly is addressing God, begging for permission to give free rein to her corporeal needs. The deliberately infantile rhymes of the Baroness's poem, similar to those of Barnes's *The Book of Repulsive Women*, are particularly subversive, especially in the third stanza, where in the blasphemous lines ascribed to God "farts" rhymes with "hearts" and "arts":

"I made —
The foreparts
And the hinderparts —
I made the farts —
I made the hearts — — —

I am grand master of the arts!" (Freytag-Loringhoven 86)

- 27 This poem makes it particularly palpable that, in a sense, the Baroness's work is more radical than Joyce's and closer to Duchamp's subversive anti-art gestures. While for Joyce the obscene is enmeshed in an intertextual project of staggering complexity, which reinvents tradition without destroying it, the Baroness's mocking, ribald Dada verse sets out to dismantle the very canon of poetic tradition, just as much as Duchamp's iconoclastic gesture of making a urinal into a work of art. Like Duchamp's, her work is also strategically calculated to *provoke* censorship, rather than to eschew it: in another provocative footnote, Baroness "helpfully" provides specific instructions as to how the poem should be printed "should there arise any objection to candidness";

the offensive terms are parodically rendered more palatable by replacing letters with dashes in parentheses next to the main body of the poem: "(f—)" and "(sh—t)" (86). This also shows that the Baroness's liberal use of the "em dash," an idiosyncratic, signature stylistic feature that she shares with Loy (for example in the line "Nature/— — — that irate pornographer," Loy 1997, 63), is connected with their subversive strategies of writing the obscene. Like Joyce's *Ulysses*, the Baroness's work deliberately, persistently and "brazenly thr [ew] down the gauntlet to the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice" (Gammel and Zelazo, in Freytag-Loringhoven 42), for example in the 1919 poem "King Adam," where the female speaker excitedly addresses her lover, capturing a scene of oral sex: "Kiss me.....upon the gleaming hill.....*" (Freytag-Loringhoven 56). The asterisk is accompanied by a provocative footnote provided by the Baroness herself, which reads: "Donated to the censor". As Gammel observes, the "mocking of the censor was all the more audacious as oral sex featured as a 'degenerate' act on the list of John Sumner's vice-squad agents" (Gammel 247).

- 28 Like the Baroness, both Loy and Barnes engaged more directly and explicitly with the obscene and with censorship after the trial of *Ulysses* and their subsequent encounter with Joyce. In 1922, Barnes interviewed Joyce in Paris for *Vanity Fair*, accompanied by Loy, who made a portrait of him that was published alongside the interview. Barnes's appraisal stresses the tongue-in-cheek, humorous dimension of Joyce's bawdiness:

Because he had heard of the suppression of *The Little Review* on account of *Ulysses* and of the subsequent trial, he sat down opposite me, who was familiar with the whole story, ordering a white wine. He began to talk at once. "The pity is," he said, seeming to choose his words for their age rather than their aptness, "the public will demand and find a moral in my book—or worse they may take it in some more serious way, and on the honor of a gentleman, there is not one single serious line in it." (Barnes 1922, 66)

- 29 Barnes's most prominent response to "that great Rabelaisian flower *Ulysses*" (Barnes 1922, 66), as she called it in her article, may be found in her 1928 novel *Ryder*, which is, as Caselli puts it, "an illustrated fiction in which a Rabelaisian bawdiness pervades everything as the mark of the instability of meaning" (Caselli 197). *Ryder* was described by a contemporary reviewer as "vulgar, beautiful, defiant, witty, poetic, and a little mad; a bewildering hodge-podge of the obscene and the virginal, of satire and wistfulness, of the grossest humor and the most delicate sadness—a book that absolutely battled classification, but that surely is a most amazing thing to have come from a woman's hand" (quoted in Caselli 198). As many have pointed out, there are formal and thematic echoes between *Ryder* and *Ulysses*. Of course, the complex intertextuality, and the poetics of recycling and parody of *Ryder* cannot be reduced solely to the Joycean influence, but the novel's technique clearly hinges on the shifting of styles that Joyce experimented with in *Ulysses*, and includes other Joycean elements, such as the long, a-grammatical sentences and the use of neologisms. Yet, as Caselli argues, the book "spurns *Ulysses*'s mythological scaffolding and boldly uses a bigamous family as the threadbarest of frameworks" (Caselli 197): like the Baroness, Barnes took the outrage a step further by appropriating elements of Joyce's novel while stripping them of the mythological framework, and going even beyond Joyce's depiction of the "ordinary" sexuality of a family by adding transgressive elements like bigamy and incest. Unsurprisingly, the text was censored because of the bawdiness of its text and illustrations: the U.S. Postal Service refused to ship it, and several illustrations were suppressed, including an image in which Sophia is seen urinating into a chamber pot,

arguably inspired by Molly's urinating in "Penelope." In the foreword preceding *Ryder*, Barnes wrote sardonically:

This book, owing to censorship, which has a vogue in America as indiscriminate as all such enforcements must be, has been expurgated. Where such measures have been thought necessary, asterisks have been employed, thus making it matter for no speculation where sense, continuity, and beauty have been damaged.

That the public may, in our time, see at least a part of the face of creation (which it is not allowed to view as a whole) it has been thought the better part of valour, by both author and publisher, to make this departure, showing plainly where the war, so blindly waged on the written word, has left its mark.

Hitherto, the public has been offered literature only after it was no longer literature. (Barnes 1928, vii)

- 30 It can perhaps even be argued that Barnes used certain images deliberately in order for her work to be censored. Just as in Baroness Elsa's poem "Kindly" the dashes both obfuscate and foreground the obscene words, in Barnes's novel the asterisks prominently signal the presence of suppressed passages and denounce the barbarity of the "war, so blindly waged on the written word" which has damaged the text's "sense, continuity, and beauty." One must also note that there is often a national dimension in the modernist attacks against censorship: Barnes denounces the "vogue [for censorship] in America," and Baroness Elsa also attacks American puritanism and opposes it to a more aristocratic, cultured Europe in her defense of Joyce in "The Modest Woman": "America's comfort:—sanitation—outside machinery—has made American forget own machinery—body! [...] In Europe—when inferiors do not understand superiors—they retire modestly—[...] So society is made—in Europe—slowly —! so: culture—so: aristocratic public. [...] That attitude of the learner—the inferior—you should feel in regard to James Joyce" (Freytag-Loringhoven 287-288). Conversely, by making the prudish, desexualized "English Rose" an allegory of the whole nation in "Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose," Loy makes prudery a national characteristic, a dimension also explicitly inscribed in her poem "Joyce's Ulysses," where the obscene is referred to as "the giant reflector" that Joyce "flashes" on "the sub rosa" (Loy 1997, 89) in order to "satirize/the imperial Rose" (Loy 1997, 90).

- 31 The undated poem "Joyce's Ulysses" was most probably composed shortly after the publication of Joyce's novel in book form by Sylvia Beach in Paris in February 1922. Although she did not meet Joyce in person until 1922 in Paris, Loy followed with great attention the details of the confiscation and destruction of issues of *The Little Review* and the subsequent obscenity trial of *Ulysses*. She even appeared in court to support the editors of journal. In a letter to Mabel Dodge, she reports that "*The Little Review* has been arrested" and ironically comments on the fact that stylish intellectual women from Greenwich Village defended supposedly obscene literature, creating something of a shock: "We looked too wholesome in court representing filthy literature" (qtd. in Burke 288-289, emphasis Loy's). In the posthumously published fragment "Censors Morals Sex," Loy attacks John Sumner, the secretary of the New York Society for the Prevention of Vice and one of the main prosecutors of *Ulysses*:

The censor to whom the public defers exists only in its supposing that public to exist 'somewhere' else. The worst kind of sex maniac is the Censor (re: Sumner and Smoot). With their canine affinities—they can only sustain their sexual potentiality by sticking their noses into their neighbour's— (Loy 2011, 225)

- 32 Her remarks echo the rhetoric of Jane Heap's leading essay "Art and the Law," published in the September-December 1920 issue of *The Little Review*, which turned into a "Sumner vs. Joyce" debate:

The society for which Mr. Sumner is agent, I am told, was founded to protect the public from corruption. When asked *what public?* its defenders spring to the rock on which America was founded: the cream puff of sentimentality, and answer chivalrously "Our young girls." [...] If there is anything I really fear it is the mind of the young girl. I do not understand Obscenity [...]. To a mind somewhat used to life Mr. Joyce's chapter seems to be a record of the simplest, most unpreventable, most unfocused sex thoughts possible in a rightly constructed, unashamed human being. Mr. Joyce is not teaching early Egyptian perversions nor inventing new ones. Girls lean back everywhere, showing lace and silk stockings; [...] men think thoughts and have emotions about these things everywhere—seldom as delicately and imaginatively as Mr. Bloom—and no one is corrupted. Can merely reading about the thoughts he thinks corrupt a man when his thoughts do not? [...] It was the poet, the artist, who discovered love, created the lover, made sex everything that it is beyond a function. It is the Mr. Sumners who have made it an obscenity. (Heap 5-6, emphasis hers)

- 33 In answer to Heap's insistence that before "rush [ing] in with talk of obscenity," the public must ask the key question: "Is it a work of Art?" (Heap 7), Loy wrote "Joyce's Ulysses," making it one of the leading poems of her first poetic collection *Lunar Baedeker* [sic]¹², published in 1923. In this poem, she unequivocally praises the mastery of the novel, where:

The elderly colloquists
the Spirit and the Flesh
are out of tongue — — —

The Spirit
is impaled upon the phallus (Loy 1997, 88)

- 34 Loy's appraisal particularly celebrates the novel's carnivalesque conflation of the upper and the lower stratum of the body, of the "voice and offal/of the image of God" (Loy 1997, 88). She also uses metaphors of scientific discovery to praise Joyce's groundbreaking exploration of the uncharted regions of human sexuality and corporeal experience: the novel is compared to a "pilgrimage/to the Libido (Loy 1997, 88), while in an earlier version of the poem, titled "James Joyce," she calls it an "Atlas/of an uncensored Earth."¹³ This dimension of mapping is also intrinsically related to an enterprise of linguistic discovery, a quest for a new language for the "obscene": "The word made flesh/and feeding upon itself/with erudite fangs" (Loy 1997, 89). Loy also alludes to modernism's collective fight against censorship in her poem "Apology of Genius," often read as a modernist manifesto, which is emblematic of Loy's shift to "a more politicised understanding of obscenity and censorship" (Potter 2010, 50) in the early 1920s. She described modernist works as a "delicate crop/of criminal mystic immortelles," standing firm against "the censor's scythe" (Loy 1997, 78). Apart from the quasi-explicit reference to Sumner as the "censor," the term "immortelles" reads as a direct allusion to *Ulysses*, as Scuriatti and others have noted: "In episode VI ("Hades") of *Ulysses*, Bloom thinks of *immortelles* during Paddy Dignam's funeral" (Scuriatti 2019, 91). While *immortelles* are artificial flowers, the term in the female form chosen by Loy also means "immortal women," i.e. female writers "threatened by the censors" (Scuriatti 2019, 92) for engaging with the obscene. Thus, for Loy, and also for Barnes and the Baroness, *Ulysses*, although written by a man, triggered a brazen demonstration

of anti-bourgeois sentiment and a jubilatory¹⁴ celebration of both female corporeality and female authorship. As Gammel puts it, "The *Ulysses* battle ultimately was a gender campaign in which women [...] claimed the authority over [...] sexual subject matter" (Gammel 253).

- 35 Yet, in the posthumously published essay fragment "The Library of the Sphinx," Loy gives a considerably more ironic and even skeptical view of male literary expressions of female sexual desire, acerbically attacking the idea of literature, including the literary obscene, as a prerogative of male writers: "Your literature—let us examine it your literature—it was written by the men— [...] the whole of our psychological literature written by men might be lumped together as the unwitting analysis of the unsatisfied woman" (Loy 2011, 254-257). In this essay, Loy makes it clear that for her, modernism is no exception to the reductive idea of the female obscene as a male fantasy. She engages in a critical appraisal of many contemporary works written by men notable for their treatment of female sexuality, including, among others, Joyce's *Ulysses*, the novels of D.H. Lawrence, and the work of Frank Harris, who became famous for his sexually explicit descriptions in his memoir *My Life and Loves*. Harris is sardonically dubbed "CUN-T INKER [s]" (Loy 2011, 254), which suggests that male writers could do no more than "tinker" in writing the "obscene" female body:

Even James Joyce in the introspective finale of Mrs. Bloom to his cosmic day—writes —"would he give me' if I let him 'retire' on my 'bases'" [...] D.H. Lawrence who had come nearest to defining the psychic experiences of passion has plainly revealed that he is not cognisant of the mechanistic processes by which those psychic experiences can progress into appeasement. [...] If our erotic, romantic, and realistic literature has presented the gentle reader with an interminable procession —of ladies "possessed" in floods of delight—the instantaneous beatification of the female by the (always) condescending male—where may we ask did those authors live? In some sublime refuge from our daily life? (Loy 2011, 254-256, emphasis hers)

- 36 Loy's experiences with the macho attitudes of the Futurists had made her acutely sensitive to the outdated and simplistic impulses sometimes ruling even the most innovative male avant-garde artists. Although her feminist criticism in "The Library of the Sphinx" clearly shows her respect for Joyce and Lawrence, who broke new ground in depicting experiences previously considered obscene, she pinpoints the lingering temptation of the fantasy of "ladies 'possessed' in floods of delight" that even such modernist writers were not entirely liberated from. In order to dismantle this paradigm, she seems to suggest, one would need to free female subjectivity not only from the constraints of prudish, patriarchal society but also from the need to satisfy male desire. She also hints at the fact that the degree to which most women's sexual lives were unsatisfactory was at the time an even greater taboo, and thus even more obscene, than sexuality itself.

Conclusion

- 37 Modernist writers were uncompromisingly united in their collective fight against the norms of bourgeois propriety and the repressive forces of censorship meant to enforce it. Women writers were certainly in the vanguard of this collective struggle, both as authors in their own right and as critical voices in defense of their male contemporaries. At the same time, there were more subtle and ambivalent tensions along gender lines, particularly when it came to freeing female subjectivity from

lingering patterns of objectification and subjugation to male desire. It is also revealing that while the obscenity trials ultimately contributed to the canonization of *Ulysses* or *Lady Chatterley's Lover* as modernist masterpieces, women's engagement with the obscene, particularly when it ran counter to the fantasies of (forbidden) heterosexual desire and seduction, often contributed to their marginalization, as the case of the Baroness's "repulsive" obscene most poignantly demonstrates.

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NOTES

1. Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven. "Analytical Chemistry of Progeny." Trans. Irene Gammel (Freytag-Loringhoven 40). All other work by this artist quoted in this article was originally written in English.
2. Potter also focuses on Loy in her illuminating article "Obscene Modernism and The Wondering Jew: Mina Loy's 'Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose,'" where she situates Loy's work in a context of modernist experimentation with the obscene but without raising the question of gender.
3. Often referred to simply as "Baroness Elsa," Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven was an eccentric German-born poet who wrote unprecedentedly shocking poetry in English, created pioneering assemblage structure and performance art, and who was associated with the ephemeral artistic movement that came to be known *post-factum* as New York Dada. See Irene Gammel, *Baroness Elsa*, and Francis Naumann, *New York Dada*.
4. Loy, Barnes, and "Baroness Elsa" have in common that their previously marginalized work has come to increasing prominence in the past two decades, as part of the effort of recovery and re-examination of modernism along gender lines undertaken by feminist critics. The blatantly, aggressively obscene imagery of Baroness Elsa's work has arguably contributed to its marginalization: it had never appeared in book form until 2011, when Irene Gammel and Suzanne Zelazo edited a collection of her challenging poetry and art titled *Body Sweats: The Uncensored Writings of Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven*.

5. Loy and the eccentric German-born "Dada Baroness" met in New York in the 1910s and were involved in the activities of New York Dada. Loy and Barnes were lifelong friends, becoming particularly close in Paris in the 1920s and then in New York in their later lives. Barnes and Baroness Elsa were also close friends, and Barnes is credited with having ensured the survival of the Baroness's unpublished manuscripts after her death. They also wrote about each other: Loy appears in Barnes's *Ladies Almanack*, Loy wrote a play titled "Rosa" in which Barnes appears as "Bjuna Darnes," and the Baroness appears as a character in *Nightwood*.

6. Loy's mocking and cartoonish representation of the puritan aspects of Victorian culture through the allegorical figure of "English Rose" that appears in *Anglo-Mongrels* is undoubtedly reductive to some extent, since it conflates individual and national history, drawing on her lifelong antagonism with her own mother, whom she saw as an incarnation of the prudish Victorian matron. See for instance Alex Goody's article "Empire, Motherhood, and the Poetics of the Self in Mina Loy's *Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose*" on the question of her sarcastic debunking of "an ideal of English maidenhood" (Goody 2011, 63).

7. In February 1917, the *New York Evening Sun* published an article eloquently titled "Mina Loy, Painter, Poet and Playwright, Doesn't Try to Express Her Personality by Wearing Odd Looking Draperies—Her Clothes Suggest the Smartest Shops, but Her Poems Would Have Puzzled Grandma," in which she was presented as the perfect embodiment of the modern woman: "If she isn't the modern woman, who is?" (quoted in Burke 8).

8. There have been many analyses of Barnes's complex relation to lesbianism, shaped by her famous line "I am not a lesbian, I just loved Thelma," but critics agree on the queer aspect of her work. While Baroness Elsa's most decidedly obscene works revolve around heterosexual desire, she cultivated an androgynous physique, often appropriating phallic elements in text, sculpture and performance, something that Gammel and Zelazo call a "queered heterosexuality" (in Freytag-Loringhoven 17).

9. The term "spawn" appears in the opening line of Loy's "Love Songs" and in the famous line "the massive mother of/Illicit spawn" (Barnes 1915, 28) from Barnes's "Twilight of the Illicit," often read as an explicit articulation of lesbianism. Since Loy and Barnes did not know each other yet in 1915, the possibility of direct influence can be excluded.

10. Gammel suggests that the Baroness provided the prototype for Frau Mann, while Lynn de Vore argues that the character of Robin Vote is fundamentally based upon Elsa.

11. For example, Harriet Monroe reacted against the Baroness's offensiveness in an article in *Poetry*: "The trouble is the *Little Review* never knows when to stop. Just now it is headed straight for Dada; but we could forgive even that if it would drop Else von Freytag-Loringhoven on the way." (qtd. in Freytag-Loringhoven 351). In turn, Jane Heap published a defense of the Baroness on the pages of *The Little Review*.

12. As Potter notes, Loy's collection was censored in the US for its explicit sexual content (Potter 2010, 47).

13. Mina Loy, "James Joyce," Mina Loy Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, Box 5, Folder 98.

14. Both the Baroness and Loy played with the "joyful" connotations of Joyce's name: while the Baroness punned on "Joyce" and "joys" in "The Modest Woman," Loy wittily titled an unpublished note on her fellow modernist "Re-joyce," which reads as both "Re-Joyce" (a critical response) and "rejoice".

ABSTRACTS

This article examines the textual and artistic strategies used by three female modernist writers—Mina Loy, Djuna Barnes, and Elsa von Freytag Loringhoven—to probe into the specificities of the female modernist obscene. In the works of these three authors, daring sexual and corporal images abound, creating a surprisingly precocious poetics of the obscene, which emerged around 1915, independently from the experiments of their male contemporaries. On the one hand, this poetics works against the repressive grip of the norms of propriety ruling bourgeois society. But on the other, Barnes's and von Freytag-Loringhoven's works also unsettle the canonical image of the female body as an object of desire, by using grotesque, repulsive, scatological, and androgynous images. Secondly, this article raises the question of how female modernists engaged with the most iconic experiments of male authors, by taking the example of the obscenity trial of Joyce's *Ulysses*. While in their defense of Joyce's novel the three authors engaged in an uncompromising collective modernist fight against censorship, Loy in particular suggests that the obscene fantasies of Joyce, D.H. Lawrence and other male modernists did not sufficiently represent the reality of female experience.

Cet article se propose d'étudier les stratégies textuelles et artistiques que trois écrivaines modernistes, Mina Loy, Djuna Barnes et Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, emploient pour représenter l'obscène, afin de se demander quelles sont les spécificités de l'obscène moderniste féminin. Dans les œuvres de ces trois auteures, prolifèrent des images sexuelles et corporelles d'une hardiesse inouïe, qui se transforment en une véritable poétique de l'obscène ; celle-ci émerge vers 1915, indépendamment des expériences de leurs contemporains masculins. Si, d'une part, elles cherchent à se libérer de l'emprise de la société bourgeoise et des convenances qui la régissent, d'autre part Barnes et von Freytag-Loringhoven en particulier visent aussi à rompre avec l'image stéréotypée du corps de la femme en tant qu'objet de désir, en utilisant des images grotesques, répugnantes, scatologiques ou androgynes. Nous nous demanderons ensuite comment cette poétique de l'obscène féminin se situe par rapport aux expériences masculines les plus marquantes, en prenant pour exemple leurs écrits visant à défendre le roman *Ulysses* de James Joyce, lors du procès pour obscénité qui lui fut intenté après sa publication dans *The Little Review*. Si les trois auteures s'engagent dans un combat moderniste collectif sans compromis contre la censure, Loy suggère également que les phantasmes obscènes de Joyce, D.H. Lawrence et d'autres écrivains modernistes ne correspondent pas vraiment à l'expérience féminine.

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