

# Impossible Births: Childbirth Beyond the (M)other in Jacques Lacan and Mina Loy

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## ABSTRACT:

In its analysis of Mina Loy's 1914 poem "Parturition" alongside Jacques Lacan's theory of the Real, this article considers how childbirth problematises dominant notions of subjectivity, gender, and temporality. Beyond the identity category of 'mother,' it begins by examining childbirth as an intersubjective phenomenon which complicates the distinctions between inside and outside, self and (m)other, and man and woman. It then explores how childbirth disrupts linear notions of temporality in Loy and Lacan. Far from the ultimate 'beginning,' childbirth is portrayed as a psychological substratum which rises from the subconscious throughout one's lifetime, and as the goal of the death drive. Finally, it explicates the ways in which Loy and Lacan centre childbirth in theories of artistic and cosmic creation. In both writers, parturition is regarded as a phenomenon which is able to challenge, and therefore reconfigure, the dominant logics which underpin our sense of the 'possible.'

**Keywords:** The Real; das Ding; "Parturition"; subjectivity; temporality; the Uncanny.

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## Impossible Births: Childbirth Beyond the (M)other in Jacques Lacan and Mina Loy

“I oppose to poetry the experience of the possible. It is less a matter of contemplation than of rupture.” – George Bataille, *Inner Experience* (1988 [1954], 40)

It is no longer the case that there is a “vast hush,” as there once was, over the topic of childbirth in critical scholarship (Mossman 1993, 96). The 1980s trend towards ‘representing reproduction’ has since cumulated in a proliferation of studies which position childbirth as a site of female experience and maternal identity (c.f. Marçal 2005; Balsam 2013). A handful of literary and psychoanalytic critics, however, have begun to challenge these identity-centric analyses by defining parturition not as an event which the mother enacts and from which the infant is produced, but as an intersubjective matrix wherein the discrete distinctions of infant and mother break down. Rather than the epitome of temporal ‘beginnings,’ parturition is seen as a lost experience which nonetheless rises from the unconscious in reverberation throughout one’s lifetime (c.f. Lucas 2006; Marder 2012). In a unique contribution to this growing corpus, this paper explores how psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and modernist poet Mina Loy allow for a re-imagining of childbirth beyond atomised notions of self and (m)other, linear understandings of temporality, and the synonymising of birth with female gender identity. Such a study is necessary in order to move beyond the figure of the mother and fully account for birth’s universal psychological impact on all who are born. Indeed, a re-conceptualisation of birth beyond rigidly gendered accounts is arguably crucial in light of the increasing awareness given to the posthuman repercussions

of assisted reproductive technologies (c.f. Squier 1995), and to trans and intersex births (Stritzke and Scaramuzza 2016). By explicating Loy and Lacan's intersubjective approach to parturition, moreover, this study aims to illuminate the ways in which birth can offer a radical critique to the atomised notions of selfhood which underpin dominant Western individualist ideologies.

Thus far, critical scholarship on Lacan and parturition remains sparse. There have been some fruitful studies, however, of Lacan's presentation of the maternal, with particular emphasis given to the womb. This paper is indebted to the path-breaking work of Shuli Barzilai who, in 1999, wrote one of the only existing book-length studies of Lacan and maternal-infant intersubjectivity. In this work, Barzilai argues that for Lacan we are always psychologically organised in a dialectical relationship to a primordial maternal matrix, forever weaning from this original intersubjectivity (1999, 36). Following this, Deborah Luepnitz (2003) has explored how in Lacan's work the infant's leaving of the womb contradicts linear understandings of progression (224). More recently, Calum Neill's (2008) analysis of Lacan and Bracha Ettinger has provided a theory of womb intersubjectivity which, he argues, is able to counter the self-other dualism of mainstream psychology. This paper accordingly builds on the increasing emphasis given to intersubjectivity in Lacan studies, whilst offering a novel and necessary explication of the critically underexplored ways in which childbirth permeates Lacan's theorisations of the Real: from *das Ding*, to the *corps morcelé*, to castration.

In contrast to the under-exploration of the maternal in the Lacanian field, a recent “Loy boom” (Lyon 1998, 6) in literary criticism has primarily focussed on Loy’s speaking for, or speaking as, mother. Loy is often heralded as a “feminist voice for women’s bodily experiences” (Goody 2007, 2) who outlines “new ways to speak as a woman” (Burke 1980, 137). Loy’s 1914 poem “Parturition,” in particular, is deemed an elaboration of Loy’s “becoming-woman” (Goody 2007, 45), in an age-old correlation of becoming-woman and becoming-mother. If Loy, conversely, is not made exemplary mother, she is often criticised for her lack of maternity (c.f. Barnet 57); Loy’s apparent “frequently appalling irresponsibility toward her children” renders her “an uneasy heroine” (Vendler 1996, 59, 57). Departing from the notion that a writer should be anyone’s “heroine,” more recent scholarship has begun to illuminate Loy’s very aversion to the illusory constructs of identity, and the ways in which Loy’s writing is able to “imagine possibilities beyond categorical definitions of gender altogether” (Twitchell-Waas 1998, 112-113; see also Nicholls 2009, 218; Wilkinson 2010, 153). What has been critically neglected thus far, however, is how in Loy it is parturition itself which is elucidated as the very strategy by which identity can become dismantled rather than substantiated.

In its pairing of the psychoanalytic theories of Lacan and literary work of Loy, this paper does not intend to contribute to a form of psychoanalytic literary criticism which applies psychoanalysis to literature. As Shoshana Felman has elucidated, such a method cannot help but position psychoanalysis as the scientific truth, and literature as the disorganised patient in need of decoding. In line with Felman’s notion of implication, this paper therefore aims to “bring to light and articulate the various (indirect) ways in which the two domains do indeed implicate each other” in order to produce a study wherein the literary and

psychoanalytic find themselves “enlightened, informed, but also affected, displaced, by the other” (1982, 8-9). This work, however, does not see the literary as devoid of theory and the theoretic as devoid of the literary, a statement which is particularly evident in the case of Loy and Lacan. Lacan’s writing style is notoriously poetic and resistant to singular interpretation, a statement which is especially true of his writings on birth. Rarely explicitly mentioned, birth weaves itself through Lacan’s texts in frequent poetic allusions, a form which is perhaps fitting for a phenomenon which Lacan describes as resistant to representation. The poetic and theoretic divide is also challenged by Loy, whose poetry makes frequent allusion to philosophical and psychoanalytic concepts. These psychoanalytic allusions are perhaps unsurprising given the central role psychoanalysis played in Loy’s life. Loy received psychoanalytic treatment from Roberto Assagioli (Burke 1996, 146-7), discussed her work with Sigmund Freud (Burke 1980, 313), wrote poetry infused with psychoanalytic ideas, and wrote prose both for and against components of Freudian psychoanalysis (c.f. Loy “Conversion”). Like Lacan, Loy presents parturition as resistant to linguistic representation, thereby utilising a poetic mode in which conventional language breaks down and in which meanings are not concrete but polyphonic. By bringing these two thinkers together, this paper aims to elucidate the ways in which Loy and Lacan’s elaborations on birth may implicate, illuminate, and further one another.

With a specific focus on Mina Loy’s 1914 poem “Parturition,” and Jacques Lacan’s theory of the Real, this paper aims to explicate the ways in which Loy and Lacan can allow for a re-imagining of birth’s subjectivities and temporalities. Section 1, “Impossible Subjectivities,” asks to what extent birth is compatible with atomised notions of selfhood. This section will explore how birth, in Loy and Lacan, complicates the distinctions between inside and

outside and between self and (m)other. Birth will be examined as a phenomenon which is antithetical to identity categories including those of 'woman' and 'mother,' and which thereby challenges traditionally gendered approaches to birth. Section 2, "Impossible Temporalities," will address the ways in which Loy and Lacan present parturition as disrupting linear understandings of time. This section will analyse how the two writers depart from the traditional understanding of birth as the prototypical temporal 'beginning.' Birth, instead, is viewed as a phenomenon which continually inflects our present in its eruptions from the subconscious, and which is psychologically synonymous with death as our archetypal temporal 'ending.' Section 3, "Realms of the Impossible," will explore the structural place of the impossible in our possible world. With particular emphasis on the function of the cosmic, the spiritual, and the creative in Loy and Lacan, this section will analyse the ways in which the writers link parturition to both world creation and the creation of art. It will subsequently explore the paradox by which parturition is deemed both impossible to represent, and the source of all representation. Throughout, this paper will argue that a juxtaposition of Loy and Lacan can offer a new understanding of parturition as radically antithetical to the ontological assumptions that comprise dominant understandings of 'the possible': from self/ other distinctions, to gender binaries, to linear temporality.

A brief explanation of Lacan's concept of the Real will allow us to contextualise this study. According to Lacan's tripartite structure of the psyche, there are three distinct aspects of psychological experience: the Real, the Symbolic, and the Imaginary. The Symbolic describes the psychic register of language, law, structure and identity, whilst the Imaginary is the register of fantasy, the ego, and an illusory belief in the totality of the "I" (c.f. 1994 [1956-7],

189; 1977 [1966], 723). The Real, in contrast, is “that which resists symbolization absolutely” as “the domain of whatever subsists outside symbolisation” (1987 [1953-4], 66; 1977 [1966], 388). The individual subject, whose sense of selfhood and reality is formed through Imaginary and Symbolic constructions, cannot compute, imagine, or represent the Real. The Real, therefore, is characterised as “the impossible” (1977 [1963-4], 167). Akin to Kant’s thing-in-itself, the Real is an unknowable ‘X’ “identical with its existence” (1977 [1963-4], 167). Beyond our notions of the possible, the Real nonetheless persists as a bubbling substratum which continually threatens our Symbolic and Imaginary constructions. In an early example of the Real, Lacan theorises how our earliest infant ego-formations rely on us mistakenly believing our selfhood and body to be bounded and complete. Yet, underneath this illusory Imaginary totality is the body of the Real: a brute corporeality of blood, guts, and organs of which we are reminded in moments of injury, excretion, and ejection (c.f. 1994 [1956-7], 17). Parturition, in its bursting corporeality and in its non-differentiation of infant and mother, thus aligns with the order of the impossible Real. As Lacan writes in Seminar 15, birth is “only recognised authentically by being forgotten, or it is only sincerely recognised by being mis-recognised” (2002 [1967-8], 152). Resistant to memory and to articulation, parturition, for Lacan, is a phenomenon which sits antithetically to, and disrupts, our Imaginary and Symbolic constructions of selfhood, reality, and representation.

#### **IMPOSSIBLE SUBJECTIVITIES:**

## Self/ (m)other:

In his discussions of maternal-infant intersubjectivity and the Real, Lacan's primary reference point is Freud's early paper "Project for a Scientific Psychology" (1895). In this, Freud describes early infant individuation and argues that, in the process of the infant's differentiation from the mother and the external world, there remains a lost component of experience which cannot be assimilated into subjectivity, and which is therefore deemed impossible. For Freud, the infant's early separation of self and (m)other is confluent with its formation of reality. When the infant begins to draw distinctions between that which is 'me' and that which is 'not me,' it does so by dividing that which is known from that which is unknowable:

Thus the complex of a fellow-creature falls into two portions. One of these gives the impression of being a constant structure and remains as a self-contained thing [*Ding*]; while the other can be understood by the activity of memory—that is, can be traced back to information from the subject's own body. (1954 [1895], 393-394)

The infant is able to understand and to assimilate one part of the mother or caretaker into their subjectivity via a mirroring identification. There remains, however, a lost encounter which the infant cannot assimilate into selfhood, that which, in allusion to Kant's *Ding-an-sich* [Thing-in-itself], Freud terms *das Ding* (the Thing). In Freud's use of the term "complex," he draws on its biological denotation as the fusing of multiple elements, and its psychoanalytic association with that which is resistant to consciousness. Freud therefore lays the groundwork for an understanding of *das Ding* as a lost maternal-infant

intersubjectivity which cannot be assimilated into atomised notions of selfhood. This is an idea which Freud later expands in “On Negation” (1925), wherein he describes how infant individuation consists of a rejection of the intersubjective as impossible. Initially, “[t]he antithesis between subjective and objective does not exist” and the infant knows no separation between the boundaries of its body and its external environment, which includes the mother (1961a [1925a], 237). The development of selfhood, however, enforces these boundaries via the processes of expulsion and incorporation. Once again in mirroring identification, the infant incorporates that which is knowable, and therefore ‘good,’ into one’s self as that which is ‘me.’ That which is unassimilable and unknowable, aka *das Ding*, is ‘spat out’ as ‘bad.’ *Das Ding*, accordingly, is theorised as that which cannot be incorporated into constructions of selfhood and reality based on ‘I’/ Other distinctions, and which is therefore deemed impossible.

In Lacan’s elaboration, *das Ding* is understood as a lost intersubjective non-distinction which cannot be assimilated into our notions of reality and which therefore belongs to the Real as the realm of the impossible. As a non-differentiated pre-existence, the Lacanian *Ding* is antithetical to the categories of self and other, and to the identity category of ‘mother,’ but is nonetheless often retroactively misrecognised through these terms. Hence, in Seminar 7, Lacan describes:

[T]he whole development at the level of the mother/child intersubjectivity – and that is badly expressed in the so-called categories of frustration, satisfaction, and dependence – is nothing more than an immense development of the essential

character of the maternal thing, of the mother, insofar as she occupies the place of that thing, of *das Ding*. (1994 [1956-7], 67)

Here, Lacan explicitly links *das Ding* to the mother-child intersubjectivity prior to individuation. While it may be tempting to read *das Ding* as the lost mother, what is crucial is that Lacan does not equate the mother – an identity category – with *das Ding*. Instead, the mother “occupies the *place* of that thing” in retroactive substitution (emphasis added). This correlates with how the Real and *das Ding* sit antithetically to notions of subjectivity, identity, and self-other distinctions. The term ‘mother,’ based in language and designating an identity category, cannot correlate to a realm beyond language and identity. Moreover, as *das Ding* is an intersubjective realm prior to the infant’s recognition of the identity category of mother, this realm can never be said to have been occupied by the mother from the perspective of the infant. Therefore, when Lacan later states in the seminar that “*das Ding*, which is the mother, is also the object of incest, is a forbidden good” (70), Lacan does not equate *das Ding* with the mother, but describes how retroactively one might misrecognise *das Ding* as the mother via the Symbolic lenses of identity and language.<sup>1</sup> For, as Lacan writes, *das Ding* is a “*lost object*, but paradoxically an object that was never there in the first place to be lost” (58). What may be retroactively perceived as the lost maternal object is in actuality a non-differentiated mass beyond identity distinctions, and beyond the Symbolic and Imaginary categories which construct our sense of reality.

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<sup>1</sup> As Barzilai wittily describes, “[t]he equation of *das Ding* with a fixed and material object, say, with the maternal object of incestuous (Oedipal) desire, is comparable to putting a cover on top of what is commonly called a ‘manhole’ so that passersby will not fall in” (162).

In Mina Loy, too, parturition is a dynamic force and intersubjective realm beyond identity categories and I/(m)other distinctions. Interestingly, the poem's critical reception largely describes it in opposite terms as a poem written from the maternal "vantage point" (Conover 1997, 177; c.f. Kouidis 1980, 175) which formalises a gendered maternal identity (c.f. Goody 2007, 45; Galvin 1999, 57; Marshall 2010, 169; Lyon, 1998, 388). The poem's initial statement, "I am the centre" (1) is perhaps understandably cited as a statement of the parturient woman's assertion of selfhood and identity (c.f. Kouidis 1980, 40). However, this "I" arguably becomes complicated when accounting for the stanza in full, which reads: "I am the centre/ Of a circle of pain/ Exceeding its boundaries in every direction" (1-3). This expanding "circle of pain" arguably denotes both the parturient woman and the infant emerging from the dilating cervix, and is thus an image which renders the "I" no longer discrete. Instead, the image holds two 'vantage points' with the effect of eradicating their distinctions. Not only this, it is an "I" which expands beyond its limitations and circumscriptions, "[e]xceeding its boundaries in every direction." Placed at the negative core of a circle, this "I" is absorbed into an image of the void which marries parturient dilation with subjective dissolution. For Loy, therefore, "Parturition," is not a subjective experience of mother and infant, but is an abstracted event which reaches beyond identity categories and subjectivity. It is, as the poem later describes:

the objective

Agglomeration of activities

Of a life.

LIFE

A leap with nature

Into the essence

Of unpredicted Maternity

(81-87)

This “unpredicted Maternity,” which later becomes an “Infinite Maternity” (98), is beyond subjectivity and linear temporality and is instead an abstracted life-force. Parturition’s “essence” is distilled into a self-referential thing-in-itself, a universal and dynamic flow of “LIFE,” rather than a production of only one specific new “life.” The influence of the modernist artistic movement of Futurism becomes apparent in Loy’s use of the verb “leap,” a word frequently deployed in Futurist attempts to represent motion beyond matter: the movement of the leap, rather than the figure who is leaping (c.f. Poplawski 2003, 152). For Loy, accordingly, parturition is less concerned with matter than with a mass of “activities,” and with the collective noun of “Maternity” rather than a specific maternal point of view. Childbirth, for Loy, is a vital intersubjective force, an “objective/ Agglomeration of activities” which is incompatible with the dualisms of I/ (m)other, inside and outside.

### **Inside/outside:**

Via Loy and Lacan we can understand birth as both an event and as an unconscious reverberation which is characterised by its complication of the distinction between inside and outside. In Lacan, the lost unassimilable intersubjectivity of *das Ding* blurs the parameters of inside and outside throughout one’s life, giving rise to the Lacanian neologism “extimate” (*extimité*). *Das Ding* is simultaneously both radically exterior (*ex-*), and deeply intimate (*intimaté*) as an “intimate exteriority” or “excluded interior” that is formed

when, 'spitting' *das Ding* out, the "subject's inside" also becomes its "first outside" (1994 [1956-7], 167, 122, 65, 65):

*[D]as Ding* is at the center only in the sense that it is excluded. That is to say, in reality *das Ding* has to be posited as exterior, as the prehistoric Other that it is impossible to forget - the Other whose primacy of position Freud affirms in the form of something *entfremdet*, something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me (1994 [1956-7], 71).

Like the "centre of the circle of pain/ exceeding its boundaries" ("Parturition" 2-3), *das Ding* is simultaneously within one's deepest centre and at the furthest outside of oneself. It is both intimately known at the "heart of me," and "*entfremdet*," alien, and other. We cannot accept or assimilate this unknowable and impossible intersubjectivity, and so we attempt to 'spit it out' and view it as deriving from the alien other. Thus, in the primordial (m)other, and in others to follow, we recognise an unknowable alterity which is in truth the same unknowable kernel within one's own psyche. As Lacanian theorist Stephen Frosh writes:

The Thing within the neighbour is also the Thing within each subject, its implantation such that there is a carrying around of a disturbing alienness which troubles every subject but also links subjects together – put crudely, every one of us has to face the same Thing, the same excessive presence of the uncanny, the same destructive element. (194)

Just as there is always something in the other which we cannot understand, so too are we always alienated, *entfremdet*, from an unknowable part of ourselves when we construct our sense of self, since *das Ding* – our original intersubjectivity – cannot be assimilated into subject-object ontology. The intersubjectivity of *das Ding*, therefore, is the space in which notions of subjectivity in both self and other mutually break down. It marks the kernel of the impossible, something swallowed and yet not digested, as the unknowable void at the centre of the self and in the alterity of the other, which paradoxically links us together.

In Loy, parturition entails a similar displacement of the dividing lines of inside and outside. In the intersubjective tension of parturition, there exists a liminal space wherein the mother and infant are both simultaneously enjoined and detaching. As such, there is a blurring of the parameters of self/other and inside/outside, both corporeally and psychologically.

Stanza 3 describes:

Locate an irritation      without

It is                              within

  Within

It is without

(11-14)

Within, and without, the “It” to which Loy refers is unclear. Syntactically mirroring the poem’s opening, “I am” (1), “It is” reads as another statement of being. In one reading it is the infant who, in this transitional moment, is both within and without, both inside and outside, the mother’s body. The infant as “It” is an antagonistic “irritation” (11), bringing discomfort and pain. However, this easy differentiation of infant and mother becomes

complicated by the biological denotation of “irritation” (11) as a stimulation of motion in an organ or tissue. The “It” is now also the internal organs of the mother, and parturition gives rise to the ambiguation of in what moment the infant is no longer classed as one of these organs. Via the duplicity of these readings, Loy is able to conflate the motion of the emerging infant with the hormonally induced movements of the contracting maternal body; the “it” (12) is able to simultaneously designate the most intimate rhythms of the self and the emerging foreign other. Visually, moreover, Loy’s use of white space encourages simultaneous vertical readings of the poem so that we cannot firmly ‘locate’ the poem’s narrative movements in space. As such, Loy presents parturition as a dimension in which the boundaries between self and other, and inside and outside, are destabilised, so as to render determinative subjectification and spatial differentiation impossible.

### **Man/ woman:**

In the polyvalence of the term “without,” moreover, Loy marries the extimate spatiality of parturition with another denotation: that of ‘absence.’ This becomes key to Loy’s depiction of parturition as gender deconstructive. Such a presentation is radically antithetical to the history of woman’s place in society – a history in which woman earns said place through her becoming mother, and a history in which the identity categories of woman and mother are conflated (c.f. Horney 1926; Holmes 2007). This notion of birth as an identity-centric experience for the woman-mother, however, contradicts Loy’s poetics and politics. This is particularly evident in Loy’s “Feminist Manifesto” (1914). Within this manifesto, Loy promotes the de(con)struction of the identity categories of ‘man’ and ‘woman.’ Recognising that within a binary one side is always deemed superior, Loy commands her readers not to

define themselves in relation to men – “Leave off looking to men to find out what you are not” (154) – but to liberate themselves through the demolishing of gender distinctions – “the only method is Absolute Demolition” (153). In “Parturition,” accordingly, childbirth is presented as dismantling of fixed notions of identity and gender. The within/without of the extimate parturient flesh builds to a deconstruction of phallic and yonic symbols, and their corresponding inscriptions of ‘man’ and ‘woman:’

It is without

The sensitized area

Is identical with the extensity

Of intension

(13-16)

The “without” of the protruding infant now also signifies a lack of phallus, wherein the body/bodies are “without/ The sensitized area” of genitalia. It is an image of simultaneous phallic “extensity” which juts visually on the page, and the yonic “intension” of dilation, thereby complicating easy differentiation.

Loy, moreover, intertwines the theories of Henri Bergson and Freud in this stanza to produce a gender deconstructive approach to parturition. Loy, who was reading Freud and Bergson simultaneously at this time, adopts Bergson’s metaphysical terminology of “extensity” and “intension” in this stanza (c.f. Burke 1996 122). In Bergson, the ‘extensive’ is that which can be quantifiably measured or divided, such as objects. The ‘intensive,’ in contrast, is that which can’t be measured or divided, such as thought or sensation (2002 [1910], 1-2). When Loy states the “sensitized area/ Is identical with the extensity/ Of

intension,” she ironically claims that the ambiguously gendered “sensitized area” is identical with the divisibility (“extensity”) of the indivisible (“intension”). Loy thereby conflates the gendering of parturition with impossibility itself. Interwoven within this is Loy’s allusion to Freud. In the simultaneous yonic and phallic imagery of birth, Loy is not far from Freud’s penis-baby equation. Freud infamously argued that women believe themselves to be castrated – without – when discovering they have no phallus. In childbirth, however, women gain a symbolic penis substitute, or “penis-baby” (1961b [1925b], 256). Freud thus presents birth as a dimension in which phallic and yonic coincide, the parturient woman being both ‘castrated’ and phallic. Marrying Bergson with Freud, as Loy often did, we can translate “the extensity/ Of intension” (the ‘divisible’ of the ‘indivisible’) in Freudian terms too, as the cuttable of the uncuttable, or the castratable of the uncastratable. Loy therefore departs from a Freudian differentiation of gender based on notion of a man’s ‘having’ and a woman’s ‘not having’ the phallus. Instead, Loy presents birth as simultaneously phallic and yonic, within and without, having and not having, and thereby renders easy gender determination incompatible with the destabilising dimension of parturition.

### **Disintegration:**

For Loy, however, parturition does not grant women a sense of completion and wholeness via penis-substitution as it did in Freud. Oppositely, Loy depicts parturition as that which disintegrates subjectivity and identity. The mother’s genitals and the infant are rendered indistinguishable within the corporeal flaying and fragmentation of parturition:

Blurring spatial contours

So aiding elusion of the circumscribed

That the gurgling of a crucified wild beast

Comes from so far away

And the foam on the stretched muscles of a mouth

Is no part of myself

(52-57)

“Blurring spatial contours,” Loy continues to depict the parturient corporeality as simultaneously within and without, and nowhere locatable. The knowable “circumscribed” boundaries of infant and mother are no longer graspable, in an “elusion” of the computable and possible. In a confluence and chaos of fragmented limbs, Loy’s “stretched muscles of a mouth” refer to both the vagina of the mother, and the “gurgling” mouth of the infant. From both, a “foam” is excreted, portraying a corporeality of waste, a bursting of the body’s sealed boundaries. Incompatible with the “I” of self/other and inside/outside distinctions, this fragmented body is therefore deemed “no part of myself.” Indeed, indefinite articles emphasise the distance between the ego and this fragmented corporeality: it is “*a* crucified wild beast,” “*a* mouth” (emphasis added). This fragmented corporeality as a “crucified wild beast,” moreover, is a bestial transgression of the known orders of reality and identity, and their notions of a sealed, intact, and discrete body.

Lacan, similarly, differentiates the body of the Real from the illusory sealed body of the “I.” Unlike the Symbolic and Imaginary body of identity and wholeness, Lacan’s body of the Real, the “*corps morcelé*,” is a corporeality of non-distinction which knows no boundaries between inside/outside or self/other (c.f. 1977 [1966], 59-60). It is this corporeality which

Lacan situates at the site of the parturient. In Seminar 11, Lacan describes how when we are born we enter into the world as little “*hommelettes*,” scrambled ‘omelette men’ whose limbs are mal-coordinated and disunified (1977 [1963-4], 197). In this corporeality, infants know no distinction between themselves and the mother. They continue to be wholly reliant on the mother for feeding and according to Lacan still contain “humoral residues of the maternal organism” (1977 [1966], 4). It is not until 6-8 months at the juncture of the mirror stage that the infant begins to develop their ego and, subsequently, formulates the distinctions of inside and outside, I and (m)other. This mirror stage identification, however, is crucially a moment of misidentification: the infant mistakenly perceives a reflected image of corporeal and psychological sealed totality as ‘me.’ Throughout one’s life, this illusory circumscribed body-image is repeatedly threatened by the *corps morcelé* it attempts to mask. In our wounds, rips, excretions, and eruptions, we are repeatedly reminded of this body of the Real. In a small passage in *Écrits*, Lacan incorporates both being born and giving birth in the same *corps morcelé* which continually haunts us through “images of castration, emasculation, mutilation, dismemberment, dislocation, evisceration, devouring, and bursting open of the body” (1977 [1966], 11). The *corps morcelé*, here, includes both our original disorganised corporeality as ‘*hommelettes*’, and the parturient “bursting open of the body” which in “evisceration” expels an infant-organ from a now unsealed and nondifferentiated corporeality.

This presentation of parturition and castration as mutual manifestations of the *corps morcelé*, moreover, has radical repercussions for psychoanalytic understandings of gender. For, while castration and its anxieties are typically associated with gender’s *formation*, in Lacan both parturition and castration are presented as the non-gendered sites of bodily

fragmentation and identity dissolution. It should be noted that, for Lacan, maleness and femaleness are not biological essences, but are instead Symbolic positions based in language which are incompatible with the identity-dissolving realm of the Real (c.f. 1993 [1955-56], 177; 1994 [1956-7], 153). Thus, castration and parturition are paired as mutual fragmentations of the body which pose a threat to Symbolic notions of identity, and to Imaginary notions of sealed wholeness. In an early paper, “The Family Complexes,” Lacan writes:

The fantasy [of castration] is preceded by a whole series of dismemberment fantasies which go back in a regressive sequence [*qui vont en regression*] beginning with dislocation and dismemberment, through deprivation of sexual organs to disembowelling and even to the fantasy of being swallowed up or entombed. (1977 [1966], 20)

Castration, here, is presented as a regression which points towards our hidden and inconceivable ‘beginnings,’ aka, our being born. Elissa Marder, whose excellent work explores the conflation of womb and tomb in Freud, would likely highlight the image of pregnancy that entombment has often evoked in psychoanalysis, whilst we need only turn to Melanie Klein’s work on weaning to understand swallowing as a key psychoanalytic metaphor for our interconnection to the maternal body (Marder 2012, 26-32; Klein 1946, 19-46). In Lacan, moreover, the lineage of these metaphors all stem from the literary and clinical examples given in Freud’s seminal paper, “The Uncanny” (1919).

## IMPOSSIBLE TEMPORALITIES

### Risings from the Subconscious:

In “The Uncanny [*Das Unheimliche*],” Freud describes castration anxiety as stemming from a repressed knowledge of the parturient vagina as “the entrance to the former *heim* [home] of all human beings” (1955 [1919b], 244). Birth, however, is not merely situated in a linear temporality of ‘beginnings.’ Instead, as we will also see in Loy and Lacan, Freud presents the parturient as rising and erupting from the unconscious throughout one’s lifetime. The uncanny, as Freud describes it, is a process in which that which was once intimately known and was subsequently repressed, continually re-emerges in a feeling or image of something simultaneously known and unknown, familiar and unfamiliar. Hence, Freud’s term *unheimliche* [uncanny] contains both the *heim* of the homely and intimate, and the *unheim* of the concealed and alien. The images of being swallowed and entombed that we have seen in Lacan are, for Freud, examples of the *unheimlich* return of our primordial “intra-uterine existence” or “*Leben im Mutterleib*,” the infant-maternal intersubjective stage prior to the development of the “I” (1955 [1919b], 243; 1919a, 317). It is fitting, then, that the uncanny shares the basis of the Freudian and Lacanian *Ding*, as the primordial intersubjectivity which we cannot assimilate following individuation. In Freud’s “Project for a Scientific Psychology,” the “complex of a fellow-creature” was partially computable via mirroring identification and partially unassimilable as *das Ding* (1954 [1895], 393). In “The Uncanny” this becomes the “mother’s genitals or her body” which re-emerge as something both intimately familiar, *heim*, and radically unknowable, *unheim* (1955 [1919b], 244). This textual relationship is made further explicit by Lacan in his elaborations of the extimate *das*

*Ding*.<sup>2</sup> For, if we recall, Lacan describes *das Ding* as “*entfremdet*, something strange to me, although it is at the heart of me” (1994 [1956-7], 71). Lacan’s use of the untranslated German term *entfremdet* here is a clear allusion to Freud’s use of the term to describe the paradoxical intimate estrangement of the uncanny (1919b, 315). The *corps morcelé* of parturition, therefore, can be seen as a simultaneously intimately known primordial encounter, and an unknowable impossible contradiction of the binary oppositions of self and (m)other. Nonetheless, the impossible continues to rise from the unconscious, a forgotten past inflecting our present in the rips, excretions, and expulsions that resurrect the non-differentiated corporeality of our original “entrance” (1955 [1919b], 15).

“Parturition,” similarly, alludes to and expands upon Freud’s “The Uncanny,” wherein Loy depicts the rising of a repressed parturient fragmented corporeality which threatens our sense of linear temporality and the circumscription of the “I”:

Rises from the subconscious

Impression of a cat

With blind kittens

Among her legs

Same undulating life-stir

I am that cat

Rises from the sub-conscious

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<sup>2</sup> Lacanian scholar Mladen Dolar was among the first to write about Lacan’s theory of ex-timacy as a direct translation of the Freud’s uncanny. Further elaboration can be found in his 1991 paper, “‘I Shall Be with You on Your Wedding-Night’: Lacan and the Uncanny.”

Impression of small animal carcass

Covered with blue bottles

(105-203)

Here Loy produces a literary uncanny, wherein the familiar portrayal of childbirth as harmonious and within nature transposes into an alienating image of necrophiliac horror. From an image of 'natural' unity to one of dissolution, the cat becomes the "small animal carcass" and the feeding kittens become parasitic "blue bottles" engorging on her corpse. Identity itself is devoured when the statement "I am that cat" not only faces an engorging annihilation, but loses the distinct category of "cat" in becoming "animal." Even in the initial assertion of the "I" of identity, the preposition "that" undermines total identification by presenting a distance between the speaker and the image with which she identifies. The traditional presentations of parturition as a harmonious and unifying connection, therefore, are rendered misrepresentations of a phenomenon which dissolves subjectivity, contradicts linear temporality, and which cannot be fully represented. Parturition, Loy writes, can only be understood as an "impression," a vague and unclear *re*-presentation.

### **Creative Dissolution:**

In the stanza's continuation, linear temporality is again disrupted by Loy's conflating of birth and death, which are traditionally understood as the temporal 'beginnings' and 'endings' to life. For Loy, one's unconscious drive towards death is synonymous with a drive towards the parturient. In some ways, this can be seen as an adaptation of Freud's notion of the death drive. For Freud, to go beyond the limitations of the pleasure principle is to aim towards a dissolution that returns us to our original "inanimate" state prior to birth (2003

[1922], 199). In Loy, similarly, the pleasure of breast feeding transgresses into the necrophiliac “blue bottles” of decay. The stanza reads:

Covered with blue bottles

—Epicurean—

And through the insects

Waves that same undulation of living

Death

Life

I am knowing

All about

Unfolding

(203-11)

Drawing on the erotic connotations of “undulation,” Loy presents an excess of pleasure which transgresses into a “Death.” Far from Freud’s “inanimate” womb, however, there is a fluid elasticity to Loy’s parturient dimension, wherein the motion of the verb, “waves,” is synonymous with the noun, “undulation,” that it propels. Loy’s, therefore, is not a drive towards death as a finite ending, but towards the simultaneously creative and destructive realm of parturition as a “living/ Death.”<sup>3</sup> It is a site in which life is created through the psychological ‘death’ of the atomised “I.” In “—Epicurean—,” Loy’s invocation of the cultural figurehead of excessive pleasure appears between two em dashes; parturition is

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<sup>3</sup> For further examples of Loy’s views on the categories of life and death, readers may wish to turn to Loy’s 1914 poem “There is no Life or Death.”

divorced from a grammatical subject or object and any correlative notion of agency. It is a realm which cannot be experienced by a subject, because to reach it would be to no longer exist as discrete or bounded. Consequently, Loy's stanza break cleaves the "I" of "I am knowing" from the parturient "Unfolding," so that the "about" of subjective knowledge also draws on its alternate denotation of encircling and never reaching. This realm of "Unfolding," as has been noted by Pozorski, is a deathly realm in which "both mother and child are already losing life" (2005, 62). But it is also a non-individuated experience. For, "Unfolding" denotes a re-shaping of a singular matter and thus presents parturition as an abstracted process in which mother and child are indistinct. Present progressive, this "Unfolding" does not have a finite ending. To give birth and to be born is a simultaneous unravelling disintegration and a progression of events; it is to dissolve at the very moment in which we become.

In her conflation of the forces of death and creation, Loy is perhaps closer to psychoanalyst Sabina Spielrein than Freud, who in her 1912 paper "Destruction as the Cause of Coming Into Being" argued that destruction is the site of creation. Spielrein, in her analysis of clinical and biological examples, argues that reproduction entails a destruction of two entities as circumscribed (1994 [1912], 156). The "reproductive drive" Spielrein writes, thus "expresses itself psychologically in the tendency to dissolve and assimilate (transformation of the I to the We)" (1994 [1912], 174). Similarly to Spielrein, Loy, in stanza 10, describes the intersubjectivity of parturition as a dissolution of mother and infant as discrete entities:

Relaxation

Negation of myself as a unit

## Vacuum interlude

I should have been emptied of life

Giving life

(64-68)

“Giving life,” the bringing forth of life in birth is conflated with being “emptied of life” – a polyvalence which includes both the ejection of the infant, as a “life,” from the mother’s body, and a psychic ‘death’ of subjectivity. Beyond their traditional binary opposition, life and death conflate within the negating “Vacuum interlude” of the parturient. In this “transformation of the I to the We” (Spielrein 1994 [1912], 174), infant and mother as distinct entities are subsumed into dissolution, and the “unit[s]” which segment ‘I’ and ‘other’ are dissolved. Beyond subjectivity, parturition is the realm of the “Vacuum,” devoid of substance, and is – as “Vacuum” etymologically reveals – the space of the “unoccupied,” antithetical to notions of subjective experience. Like two acts of a play, “myself” and “I” sit either side of the dissolving “interlude,” as theatrical performances of subjectivity. This interlude is a “Relaxation,” a term adopted from the modernist “new physics” to denote an equilibrium of matter. As a “Negation,” this “Relaxation” can be understood as the equilibrium of positive and negative that results in the zero. For, as the Ancient Greeks first understood, the zero is not a number – since it does not express quantity, magnitude, or ratio – but is the very contradiction of numbers (c.f. Nieder 2016, 834). Loy’s parturient “Negation,” similarly, does not denote a destruction that results in absence. Instead, it is beyond the binaries of presence and absence, as a phenomenon which contradicts the logics of our ‘possible’ world.

## REALMS OF THE IMPOSSIBLE:

### The cosmic:

As we have seen in both Loy and Lacan, the parturient can be understood as an encounter which defies mainstream notions of the 'possible,' from subjectivity, to gender, to temporality. With his concept of the Real, Lacan explores how the impossible functions structurally in society: what 'beyond' of the possible do we need to define or re-create our possible? *Das Ding*, our primordial intersubjectivity, is for Lacan an "emptiness at the centre of the real" (1994 [1956-7], 121) whose gravitational pull is often compared to a black hole (c.f. Žižek 1991, 44; Hook 2018, 492). It is an apt comparison, for black holes – from which no light can metaphorically or physically escape – are the site in which our reality-forming logics of space and time collapse. *Das Ding*, similarly, is the vacuum at the centre of one's subjectivity and reality where one's Symbolic and Imaginary constructions collapse but towards which, nonetheless, the subject feels a gravitational pull:

In reality, desire through the object [...] [is only] the Thing, of which he neither has nor ever will have any representation, which is not a goal because it will never be reached, but around which all our representations, all our affects do not stop gravitating. (Cléro 2006, 144)

Desire and language perpetually gravitate towards a realm which, upon meeting it, would result in the disintegration of subjectivity and representation. Lacan's understanding of the pleasure principle, therefore, is that it "regulates the distance between the subject and *das*

*Ding*" (1994 [1956-7], 69) in order to protect the subject from this disintegration. To transgress the pleasure principle in the excessive simultaneous pain and pleasure that Lacan terms *jouissance*, is to reach towards the realm of *das Ding* as that which "abolishes the subject" (2015 [1962-3], 151). This abolishing, however, does not result in an absence. For Lacan, presence and absence, life and death, are categories of the Symbolic and not the Real (1994 [1956-7], 67-8). The Lacanian *Ding* as the object of the Real, therefore, is not the zero of absence but the zero of contradiction; it is "not nothing but not" (1994 [1956-7], 63). *Das Ding* is the kernel of the impossible at the centre of what we call the possible, and the consuming black hole of subjective dissolution which sits – paradoxically – at the centre of the self. As Lacanian theorist Gregory Bistoien describes, a confrontation with the Real occurs when that which "was valid in the symbolically constructed reality is suddenly and brutally contradicted [...] Nevertheless, the impossible did happen" (2006, 78-9). The notion of the 'miracle of birth' thus takes on new significance as an event which can only be considered via dominant ontological logics to be impossible and yet which, nonetheless, happens.

In Loy, too, birth is presented as an impossible realm beyond the known cosmic universe. Here, Loy draws on the modernist association of outer-space with the impossible which resulted from the emergence of the 'new physics.' As Marie-Laure Ryan writes, this was a time in which the once knowable Newtonian universe was suddenly rendered unstable by Einstein and Minkowski's theories of relativity, so that the world now seemed "to incorporate the logically impossible" (2012, 368). The title of the poetry collection in which "Parturition" appears, *The Last Lunar Baedeker* (1923), thus implies that the poems within will function as a Baedeker travel guide to impossible realms. "Parturition," accordingly,

presents childbirth as simultaneously belonging to the “pinpoint nucleus of being” and to the impossible cosmic beyond:

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 (4-10)

Loy’s “cosmos of agony” has no relation to the “bland sun” of normative reality. “[I]nfininitely prolonged,” Loy brings together a euphemistic term for pregnancy with an unquantifiable temporality. It is a motion of “nerve-vibrations” which, in accordance with both the modernist trend (Kennaway 2007, 142), and Loy’s many writings on the subject, draws on the belief that nerves were electric conduits which connect all life to a divine creative power.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it is via the electric vibrations of the nerves, Loy writes in “The History of Religion and Eros” (n.d), that divine creative powers, or, “THE CREATIONAL OVERTURE,” can allow “our impossible to bloom forth as *the POSSIBLE*” (243). In “Parturition,” accordingly, it is through the “infinitely prolonged nerve-vibrations” of childbirth that the subject can be absorbed into the cosmic powers which create the world anew.

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<sup>4</sup> For further references to mystic-electric nerves in Loy see also “The Starry Sky” of Wyndham Lewis,” “Notes on Metaphysics,” and “An Old Manuscript.”

## The spiritual:

For Loy, this parturient cosmic encounter with the impossible is a mystic and erotic transcendence which allows the subject to enter into higher intersubjective realms. In stanza 9, Loy writes:

There is a climax in sensibility  
When pain surpassing itself  
Becomes exotic  
And the ego succeeds in unifying the positive and negative poles of sensation  
Uniting the opposing and resisting forces  
In lascivious revelation (58-63)

Parturition here is presented as a simultaneous “lascivious” eroticism and an excessive “pain” which transcends subjectivity and representation. This pain, “surpassing itself,” moves beyond language and the representative capacity of the signifier “pain.” “[E]xotic,” this pain is *exo-*, outside of, and beyond the subject, yet, *extimate*, it is also found within a higher consciousness or “sensibility.” This consciousness, however, is not located in the “I” but in a “unifying [of] the positive and negative poles of sensation” which transcends the self. Here, Loy alludes to the mystic-psychoanalytic theories of Roberto Assagioli from whom she received treatment (Burke 1996, 146-7). Assagioli argued that by synthesising the internal conflicts of the ego, one can reach the ‘super-conscious.’ This super-conscious, for Assagioli, is located in the higher, or “transpersonal” region of the psyche: the intersubjective component which lies beyond individuated identity (1965 [1910], 197-201).

Via this allusion, birth's intersubjectivity is once again conflated with the impossible as the realm beyond the ontological logics which comprise 'reality.' For, as Loy writes in "Notes on Metaphysics," there is a danger in "mistaking for sole Reality, Our World; which is only one aspect among an infinity of aspects Creative Power may assume" (n.d, n.p).

In "Parturition" this Creative Power is a transcendental force or realm, an "infinite Maternity" into which subjectivity is absorbed:

Mother I am

Identical

With infinite Maternity

Indivisible

Acutely

I am absorbed

Into

The was—is—ever—shall—be

Of cosmic reproductivity

(96-104)

Despite the temptation to read "Mother I am" (96) as an assertion of "the centrality of her sense of self" (Galvin 1999, 61), when understood as the "I am" of God in Exodus 3:14 Loy's statement defies notions of selfhood and identity. In this myth, God presents Himself to Moses as a burning bush. Seeking to translate what he sees into language, Moses asks God His name and receives "*Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*" in reply. The layered meanings of this phrase in Hebrew create a set of parallax translations: "I am that I am," "I will be what I will be," "I will

cause to be what I will cause to be,” and “I will create that which I create” (Stone 2000, 625). God’s is not a statement of identity, it is an abstraction of an infinite creative force and motion presented through the impossible ‘miracle’ of the speaking bush. In Loy, similarly, the “I” is “absorbed” into the subject-less dimension of “cosmic reproductivity.” Like the God of Exodus, this “cosmic reproductivity” is “Identical” to itself, self-referential, beyond the linguistic chain where words gain meaning via their relationship to other words. Loy’s further allusion to Bergson via the “Indivisible” is thus fitting. For Bergson, there exists an indivisible *élan vital*, a creative impulse or motion which inheres in all life, and for which “all division of matter into independent bodies with absolutely determined outlines is an artificial division” (2004 [1911], 196). In Loy, concurrently, parturition belongs to a creative impulse beyond the limited perspective of our sole reality, wherein the division of subjects and the linearity of time are rendered artificial constructions.

The non-linear temporality of parturition is further emphasised by Loy’s invocation of the Gloria Patri at the stanza’s conclusion. The “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end” of the Gloria Patri becomes, in Loy, the “was—is—ever—shall—be/ Of cosmic reproductivity” (103-4). This cosmic reproductive dimension is not a quantifiable beginning, like the traditional denotation of ‘birth.’ It is a past that was never experienced, and which is only retroactively endowed meaning. It is a present disrupted by that which “rises from the subconscious” (105; 201). It is an anticipation of the future in the desire to return to the inorganic via death. Unlocatable in time, parturition is therefore infinite: a permanent, eternal structure, the persistent kernel of our estimate being. For Loy, this parturient realm beyond subjectivity belongs to the same impulse or dimension which creates the world, that

which Loy terms “cosmic reproductivity.” For, in “cosmic” we are brought to the Greek *kosmogonia* – world creation. Parturition is not just the creation of an infant, but an entrance into the absolute ‘Creative Power’ which, “Indivisible,” does not know the distinctions between self and (m)other or man and woman. Thus, Loy’s poem fittingly ends with a statement of divine creation: “Man and woman God made them” (131). As critics such as Sánchez Pilar Calle and Marisa Januzzi note, Loy undermines ideas of a male master creator by suggesting that both “Man” (131) and a “woman God” (131) create (Calle 2007, 67; Januzzi 1998, 426). The line also offers multiple interpretations: that God made man and woman distinct; that man and woman-God produce children; and, that a man-and-woman-God is the parturient creator. By creating three *simultaneous* parallax readings, Loy undermines any attempt to read parturition as an event which is quantifiably situated in one segment of linear time, or enacted by one singular subject, or indeed gender.

For Lacan, too, the creation of the subject is linked to the creation of the world. In the same seminar in which *das Ding* is described as a primordial intersubjectivity, Lacan – like Loy – analyses the burning bush of Exodus 3:

Moses the Midianite seems to pose a problem of his own – I would like to know whom or what he faced on Sinai and on Horeb. But after all, since he couldn’t bear the brilliance [*l’éclat*] of the face who said to him “I am what I am” we will simply say at this point that the burning bush was Moses’ Thing, and leave it there. (1994 [1956-7], 174; see also 1994 [1956-7], 180)

As Lacan earlier notes in *Écrits* (1977 [1966], 67), “*Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*” partially vocalises elements of the divine name, Y and H, without fully vocalising the unspeakable Tetragrammaton (YHVH)<sup>5</sup>. God as Moses’ *Ding*, here, is identical to Himself, untranslatable, and antithetical to the Symbolic order. In the confrontation with this impossible miracle, Moses “couldn’t bear the brilliance [*l’éclat*] of the face” (1994 [1956-7], 174). The simultaneous awe and terror of this “brilliance” is best expressed in the original French, with *éclat* meaning ‘to shine’ but also ‘to burst out.’ In this we again hear echoes of the *corps morcelé* and the primordial parturient “bursting open of the body” (1977 [1966], 11). The shining gravitational pull of *das Ding* becomes the route towards a simultaneous dissolution and creation. Moreover, despite the (mis-)translation dominating since the Bible’s first translation into Greek (*Ego eimi ho ôn*, “I am that I am,”), there is no present tense verb of “to be” in the Hebrew language. Hence, “*Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*” cannot be taken as a declaration of existence, or substance: it is a creative realm beyond the positive ontologies of being and beyond linear temporality. This arguably illuminates the subject’s relationship with birth. “I was” – *das Ding* was there at the beginning as the unassimilable intersubjectivity from which we emerge. “I will” – *das Ding* is the goal of *jouissance* as a “path towards death” (1991 [1969-70], 17). “I will create” – this path towards death is also a path towards creation. For, while Freud saw the death drive as a path towards the inanimate womb (2003 [1922], 199), in Lacan there is a crucial difference. The death drive, as a path towards *das Ding*, is “also a will to create from zero, a will to begin again” (1994 [1956-7], 212).

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<sup>5</sup> For a full explication of Lacan and Moses, see “The Subject of Religion: Lacan and the Ten Commandments” By Kenneth M Lupton and Julia R Reinhard.

## Art:

It is this creation from dissolution that Lacan centres in his theory of sublimation. In Freud, sublimation denotes the channelling of subconscious impulses into societally acceptable objects such as work or art (1930, 79-80). For Lacan, sublimation transforms the object as a process which “elevates an object to the dignity of the Thing [*das Ding*]” (1994 [1956-7], 112). The artwork, in short, is seen to occupy the psychological position of “the most fundamental, the most archaic object,” that is, the lost primordial intersubjectivity of *das Ding* (1994 [1956-7], 106). As we recall, however, this “lost object” is an object which “was never there in the first place to be lost” (1994 [1956-7], 58). Lacanian sublimation, therefore, does not attempt to repair a lost maternal unity (c.f. Klein 1948 [1929]), but to encounter our original dissolution from which we emerged. Lacan, like Loy, conflates this dissolution with creation wherein our drive towards non-existence is also our “will to create from zero” (1994 [1956-7], 212). The artwork, correspondingly, mimics the structure of subjectivity, in that both consist of an “organisation around this emptiness” (1994 [1956-7], 121). Lacan elaborates this in his adaptation of Martin Heidegger’s metaphor of the jug as the exemplary work of art. For Heidegger, a jug’s essential quality – its “thingness” – is not its formative material, but its empty centre as the “void that holds” (Heidegger 169). Lacan links this artistic creation to world creation when he describes how the potter “creates the vase with his hand around this emptiness, creates it, just like the mythical creator, *ex nihilo*, starting with a hole” (1994 [1956-7], 121). This, Lacan states, is why paintings began inside the void of a cave, why cathedrals are built as caverns, and why courtly love poetry centres on the absence of a love object. It is perhaps even why poetry such as Loy’s centres the impossibility of representation within its attempts to represent. By its very nature the

artwork, like the subject, can only aim towards, and fail to reach, the impossible *Ding*. It is through this failure, however, that sublimation can inspire what Lacan calls “the revelation of *das Ding* beyond the object” (1994 [1956-7], 114). In the failure of the artwork, we can elucidate the failure of the subject to reach the unassimilable gravitational void at its centre. Sublimation is a forgery, but it is a forgery which points towards the structures from which we, as misidentifying forgeries, emerge.

For Loy, too, poetry is not about representation, but about reaching towards the unrepresentable in order to intuit the ‘Creative Power’ that lies beyond our ‘possible’ world. A poetic treatise on the nature of artistic creation appears in Loy’s poem “Apology of Genius” (1922; 1997, 77-79). Just as Loy opposes the parturient to the “bland sun” of normative reality, so here are artists described in cosmic terms as “Lepers of the moon/ all magically diseased” (“Parturition” 4; “Apology” 3-4). In their transgressive corporeality, there lies an impossible ‘magic’ beyond known logics and ontologies. Artists’ “wills,” Loy writes, “are formed/ by curious disciplines/ beyond your laws” (17-19). It is from an impossible cosmic void that the artists create:

In the raw caverns of the Increate  
we forge the dusk of Chaos  
to that imperious jewellery of the Universe  
—the Beautiful— (31-34)

Here, creation emerges from the wombic “raw caverns of the Increate” (31), wherein the prefix *in-* emphasises an inwardness. This cavernous space is the site of unknowable

“Chaos,” a term which is etymologically intertwined with notions of the “void,” “chasm,” and “abyss.” Loy here links artistic creation to world creation by drawing on the central role of “Chaos” in Biblical and Ancient Greek mythologies. In the Bible, God creates the world from an original non-differentiated state, whilst in Ancient Greek mythology, Chaos is at once a personified figure who gives birth and an inaccessible concealed dimension underground (Genesis 1; c.f. Kirk 1983). Via these allusions, Loy presents artistic creation as centred around a primordial void, an abyss of non-differentiation which is beyond the limits of the accessible universe, and from which all creation occurs. The artist, however, cannot fully reach or represent this dimension. Instead, the artist must “forge” an illicit, fraudulent, and inaccurate copy in an “imperious” and arrogant construction which adorns, but which cannot equate to, the primordial Chaos at which it aims. Thus, just as Lacanian sublimation consists of an illusion which brings about “the revelation of *das Ding* beyond the object” (1994 [1956-7], 114), for Loy, as she writes in “Conversion”: “The aim of the artist is to miss the Absolute — the only possible creative gesture” (2011, 228). It is through aiming and missing, Loy states, that the artwork may intuit the beyond of its own limitations.

Ultimately, this paper has elucidated how, via Loy and Lacan, birth can be understood as antithetical to the logics which underpin dominant understandings of reality: from atomised selfhood, to binary understandings of gender, to linear temporality. Birth has been shown to be an intersubjective space which disintegrates the circumscriptions of inside and outside as well as self and (m)other. It is a phenomenon which consequently counters the rigidly gendered equations of woman = mother, and mother = woman. Complicating linear understandings of time, moreover, Loy and Lacan have allowed us to see childbirth as an event which is not confined to our temporal beginning. Instead, parturition is a

phenomenon which reverberates throughout our lifetime in its eruptions from the subconscious, and which is confluent with our temporal ending of death in our gravitational pull towards creative dissolution. As a realm beyond the logics which define our 'possible' world, Loy and Lacan have illuminated the structural place of the impossible, and the means by which parturient dissolution can reformulate subjectivity and reality anew. For, as Alenka Zupančič writes in her study of the ethics of the Real, "[t]he Real happens to us (we encounter it) as impossible, as 'the impossible thing' that turns our symbolic universe upside down and leads to the reconfiguration of this universe" (2000, 234). This article, accordingly, has aimed to illuminate how the impossibility of birth can allow for a reconfiguration of the ideologies of subjectivity, gender, and temporality which have long dominated Western ontologies of the 'possible.' By examining birth beyond the maternal, this paper has explicated the ways in which birth challenges the identity category of 'mother' as a phenomenon in which all who are born are implicated. This movement beyond the rigidly gendered accounts of birth is more necessary than ever in light of the recent proliferation of assisted reproductive technologies (c.f. Squier 1995) and the increasing awareness of trans and intersex births (c.f. Stritzke and Scaramuzza 2016). In its intersubjective approach, moreover, this study has aimed to provide a critique of the atomised notion of selfhood which has long informed Western individualist ideologies, by pointing towards the ways in which the very fact of our being born signals its collapse.

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