

Sarah Hayden, *Curious Disciplines: Mina Loy and Avant-Garde Artishood* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018), 358 pp.

Reviewed by **Linda Kinnahan**, Duquesne University

Mina Loy's recovery as a modernist and avant-garde writer and artist began in the 1980s with Roger Conover's selection of her writings, Virginia Kouidis' critical biography, and key articles by feminist scholars like Melita Schaum, Carolyn Burke, and Rachel Blau DuPlessis. Bolstered in the mid-1990s by Burke's monumental biography, *Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy*; Conover's edited *Lost Lunar Baedeker: Selected Poems of Mina Loy*; and the Poetry Foundation's inclusion of a Loy volume in their *Woman/Man and Poet* series, Loy scholarship proliferated into the new century. Just in the past two years, four monographs devoted to Loy have appeared or are forthcoming.

Indeed, greater access to Loy's papers is now possible through Yale's Beinecke Library's recent digitalization of their Loy holdings and the acquisition of Burke's papers. Sara Crangle's edition, *Stories and Essays by Mina Loy*, brings a generous collection of prose into print, with critical annotations; Sandeep Parmar's study of Loy's autobiographies draws deeply upon archival research. Loy's novel *Insel*, set in the Surreal scene of 1930s Paris, was recently republished, including an "alternative ending" discovered in the archives and presented with perceptive commentary by Sarah Hayden. Seeking to bring Loy to a broader audience, the digital scholarly project *Mina Loy: Navigating the Avant-garde* (mina-loy.com) is inspired by Loy's own spirit of experimentation and multimedia production. Within a field encouraging diverse approaches to Loy's work and the artistic, cultural, political, socioeconomic contexts it inhabits, there is still plenty of room for close attention to underexamined texts and further possibilities stimulated by cross-disciplinary energies of visual culture studies, poetics, feminism, digital humanities, and other methods.

Loy's movements among European and American cities intersected with important avant-garde activities, and her interactions with Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism have long fascinated critics. Hayden's *Curious Disciplines: Mina Loy and Avant-Garde Artishood* positions Loy as a theorizer of the avant-garde. The book's expansive size (8 ½ by 9 ½ inches) allows for double columns on each page, and therefore, a much longer study than its 284 pages (with another 48 pages of double-columned notes) would suggest. This length directly relates to other qualities: densely packed with detailed information, its nested structure of chapters within five sectional parts allows room for Hayden's close readings and her in-depth discussions of each avant-garde movement.

The structure is an important part of Hayden's argument and approach. Tracing avant-garde models of artishood developed within Futurism, Dada, Surrealism, and the Nazi attack on so-called degenerate art, Hayden's attention to the historic avant-garde unfolds across four parts, with each part focused upon one movement and further divided into three chapters. The first chapter of each part presents a "portrait" of each movement, drawn from texts by authors and artists "produced *by*, rather than *about*, those movements," to discern how they constructed ideas about artishood, or how they "reconceptualized avant-garde artistry for modernity" (3). Two sequential chapters on Loy follow each portrait. Through this systematic pattern, Hayden argues that Loy's response to these movements should be understood as the theorizing of an "interlocutor" who "intervenes" upon "how these movements wrote themselves, collectively, into being" (3).

Following these discussions of the historic avant-garde, the book concludes with a fifth part dedicated to "Loy's Legacies," short chapters on contemporary poets—Susana Gardner, Laura Moriarty, and Judith Goldman—that "examine three different aspects of Loy's legacy for twenty-first-century American poetics" (227). This approach reflects the impact that Loy's recovery in the 1980s and 1990s had on writers, especially poets exploring feminist experimentalisms—almost as though they were discovering a contemporary rather than a predecessor.

The emphasis on artishood shapes the edifying but necessarily narrow narratives of the avant-garde movements, while contributing a new angle in thinking about the avant-garde and Loy's affiliations. It also motivates the choice to address a relatively small number of Loy's works. Offering new readings of better-known poems like "Three Moments in Paris" or "Virgins Plus Curtains Minus Dots," Hayden just as often lingers over underexamined works, bringing together genres of prose and poetry from published works and unpublished archives to develop generously thorough analyses. "O Maurice," an assemblage of Dada conversation, receives insightful attention, particularly in relation to archival portions of *Brontolivido* (an unfinished semi-autobiographical novel). Hayden's fascination with the novel *Insel* finds expression in multiple chapters. Indeed, I am not aware of any discussion of Loy's one published novel that approaches the textual specificity, immersive reading, and biographical and social contextualization provided here. Hayden's archival discoveries, like the manuscript she argues is an alternative ending and includes in the novel's reissue, combine with copious research in primary and secondary materials. The book, as a whole, exhibits great skill in synthesizing materials into an intriguing—if lengthy—treatment of its subject.

Curious Disciplines joins a recent critical reenvisioning of the avant-garde, particularly as white male-centered narratives of its various movements are challenged by projects

either seeking to include women and people of color or, complexly, to redraw the lines of the avant-garde entirely (or something in between). Hayden explicitly resists arguing for Loy's "inclusion" or for regarding Loy's avant-garde relations primarily as an influence upon her, tendencies she levels against Loy scholarship. Hayden's dissatisfaction with scholarship that, to her mind, restricts Loy's relationship to these movements as merely absorbing their ideas rather than actively intervening in them sets the tone for the study: she aims to "recalibrate the lens on Loy by foregrounding her critical dissection" of these movements, claiming that "Mina Loy did not merely coincide with these movements; she actively intervened upon them" (1).

I find no reason to disagree with this claim and am heartened by its commitment to discerning Loy's role in shaping avant-gardism. Still, I suspect that here and elsewhere a reliance upon misrepresenting prior scholarship—as too focused on Loy's life or coterie, as unaware of her theoretical critiques, as too accepting of standard narratives of avant-garde movements, and as naïvely assuming Loy's passive or uncritical absorption of influence—is too easily harnessed in bolstering Hayden's genuinely new claims and the originality of this monograph. In short, this straw-woman approach is scarcely necessary in this excellent, valuable study. I'm not persuaded by this large (and perhaps unintentionally dismissive) claim, given the diverse intellectual depth of Loy studies upon which Hayden herself builds and depends, but I am grateful for this impressive study and its dedicated pursuit of Loy's interventions in the avant-garde.

A vast amount of material resides in this long study. The book's divisions and chapters are organized in terms of adjacency between separate treatments of the movement "portraits" and Loy's work. This dual focus benefits the reader eager to encounter full-bodied accounts of the movements. However, it risks losing critical threads in resisting a more integrative approach that would move between the contexts and Loy's own texts. In most cases, I enjoyed the synthesis and analysis of each portrait as separate but foundational to discussions of Loy's work, even as those Loy-centric readings are forestalled by the book's organizational principles.

My one hesitation comes in "Part 4: Loy and 'Degenerate' Artishood." As a history of Nazi Germany's campaign against modern and avant-garde art as degenerate, the chapters are wonderfully informative and thick with research. Hayden places *Insel* and Loy's return to New York in 1936 in relation to the rhetoric of degeneracy flowing from Germany, introducing a previously overlooked but powerful context for the novel. Loy gets somewhat lost in the overflow of information and historical detail, and the connections become a bit stretched, although the (brief) reading of *Insel* within this context shines. Loy's presence wanes, however, as Hayden details postwar US appropriation of avant-garde art as a sign of democracy's triumph over totalitarianism.

In fascinating discussions of institutional efforts (by government, museums, print culture), Hayden relies on important studies from the 1980s despite recent and robust scholarship in this area, particularly Greg Barnhisel's *Cold War Modernism*.

Curious Disciplines is a welcome addition to studies of modernism, the avant-garde, and Mina Loy. The publisher's commitment to a longer-than-standard scholarly monograph encourages Hayden's attention to primary texts produced by avant-gardists, expansive readings of Loy's work, a full discussion of *Insel*, and a keen recognition of theoretical engagement in Loy's writing. The book brings together genres of prose, poetry, and polemical writing, and gestures toward Loy's visual art (much of which is unrecovered or unavailable to the public). A range of full- and half-page photographs enriches the textual presentations. Hayden's rich prose is synthetic, analytic, and anecdotal all at once, and many of her readings are thorough, attentive, and convincingly new. The double columns are not so daunting with a critical voice generating much energy and liveliness. Set aside time to read this book.