Hacettepe Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi
Hacettepe University Journal of Faculty of Letters
Erken Erişim – Early Access
doi:10.32600/huefd.1544770

Araştırma Makalesi – Research Article
Geliş Tarihi / Received:06.09.2024 Kabul Tarihi / Accepted: 05.12.2024

Reinterpreting the Dynamics Between the Surrealist Artist and the Muse in Mina Loy's *Insel*[1]

Mina Loy'un *Insel* Adlı Romanında Sürrealist Sanatçı ve İlham Perisi Arasındaki Dinamiklerin Yeniden Yorumlanması

Fahriye Selvi DANACI GÜRLER[*]

Abstract

Mina Loy's *Insel* recounts the friendship between Mrs. Jones, an art dealer, and Insel, an idiosyncratic surrealist painter, in 1930s Paris, based on Loy's friendship with the surrealist painter Richard Oelze. The novel is often compared to André Breton's surrealist piece, *Nadja* in which Breton employs a mad and beautiful young woman as his muse in his journey of self-search. However, in contrast to Nadja's idealised, passive, and silenced presence in Breton's creative process, Loy prefers to portray a rather dynamic relationship between a female artist in constant self-doubt about her creativity and a male muse, who is depicted as a physically repulsive, derelict figure. By undermining the generally acknowledged roles of the surrealist artist and the muse, the male artist being the centre of the surrealist experience while the female muse serving as a divine, mad, and beautiful source of inspiration, Loy explores the potentials of a scenario where the surrealist muse is not a silent bystander, but a central agent in the creative process, functioning as an equal part of the artist's creating mind. Therefore, this article argues that through Jones's connection with Insel, Loy introduces a fresh discussion on the nature of selfhood not as a singular entity, but as the outcome of a continuous dialogue among multiplicity of selves, as well as questioning and reimagining the relationship between the surrealist artist and the muse.
Keywords: Mina Loy, *Insel*, surrealism, surrealist muse, selfhood.

Öz

Mina Loy'un *Insel* adlı romanı, 1930'ların Paris'inde bir sanat simsarı olan Mrs. Jones ile tuhaf bir sürrealist ressam olan Insel arasındaki dostluğu anlatır ve Loy'un sürrealist ressam Richard Oelze ile olan dostluğuna dayanmaktadır. Roman sık sık André Breton'un benlik arayışı için çıktığı yolculukta deli ve güzel bir kadını ilham perisi olarak kullandığı sürrealist eseri *Nadja* ile karşılaştırılır. Fakat Breton'un yaratıcı sürecinde idealize edilmiş, pasif ve susturulmuş bir varlık olarak tasvir edilen Nadja'nın aksine, Loy, sürekli olarak yaratıcılığı hakkında kendinden şüphe duyan bir kadın sanatçı ile fiziksel olarak itici, avare bir erkek ilham perisi arasındaki dinamik bir ilişkiyi resmetmeyi tercih eder. Sürrealist sanatçı ile ilham perisinin genel olarak kabul gören, erkek sanatçının sürrealist deneyimin merkezinde olduğu, kadın ilham perisinin ise görkemli, deli ve güzel bir ilham kaynağı olarak hizmet ettiği rollerini

[1] This article is a revised version of the first chapter of my PhD dissertation titled "A Surrealist Quest for Artistic Individuality: A Critical Study of the Works of Mina Loy, Leonora Carrington, and Ithell Colquhoun."

[*] Dr., Independent Researcher-Literary Translator. E-mail: selvidanaci@gmail.com, ORCID: 0000-0002-0889-5713

◊ Alan Editörü / Field Editor: Alev KARADUMAN

tersine çeviren Loy, sürrealist ilham perisinin sessiz bir seyirci olmadığı, sanatçının düşünen zihninin eşit bir parçası olarak yaratıcı süreçte merkezi bir unsur olduğu bir senaryonun potansiyellerini keşfeder. Bu makale, Jones'un Insel ile olan bağı üzerinden Loy'un benliğin tekil bir öz değil, birden çok benlik arasındaki aralıksız diyaloğun bir sonucu olduğu fikriyle benliğin doğasına dair yeni bir tartışma ortaya koyduğunu ve sürrealist sanatçı ile ilham perisi arasındaki ilişkiyi sorgulayıp yeniden tasavvur ettiğini ileri sürer.
Anahtar sözcükler: Mina Loy, *Insel*, sürrealizm, sürrealist ilham perisi, benlik.

Introduction

Mina Loy's surrealist novel *Insel* (1992) explores the uncanny relationship between an artist, Mrs. Jones and her muse, Insel in 1930s' surrealist Paris and their reversing roles in each other's lives as the guide and the guided, the healer and the healed, the inspirer and the inspired. As can be understood from the given roles, the uncanny dynamics between the artist and her muse poses a sharp contrast with the generally acknowledged relationship between the surrealist artist and the muse, which is often characterised by a fixed, one-sided affiliation, the artist being the active participant and the central agent throughout the surrealist experience and its account while the muse being the passive and silent source of inspiration. Often compared to Breton's *Nadja* (1928), Loy's *Insel* can be considered as a reinterpretation or a rewrite of the former. However, Loy's novel is more than a mere adaptation of Breton's in the way it reverses the gender roles by casting a middle-aged woman as the artist and a physically deformed man as the muse. What Loy does is both to invert conventional gender roles in surrealist imagination and to defy the static positions that the surrealist artist and the muse assume in the same imagination by employing Insel, the muse, as an equal to Mrs. Jones, the artist, and depicting him as an embodiment of the artist's creative self, hence, putting forth a discussion about the duality of the selfhood through the artist's search for individual and artistic autonomy. Therefore, this article argues that Loy's portrayal of the nature of the artist-muse relationship's reciprocity not only challenges the strict principles and formulas of the surrealist expression, but also opens a critical discussion on the very nature of the creative process with respect to the dual state of the creating mind and the dialogic selves that constitute it.

Challenging the Surrealist Discourse of Inspiration from the Outside

Born Mina Gertrude Lowy in London, Mina Loy was many things before she was a novelist: a trained painter, poet, essayist, designer famous for the hats and lampshades she made, feminist activist, and a short-time gallery agent. This prolific and interdisciplinary career is partly owed to her lifestyle as a global citizen in some of the liveliest cities of the pre- and post-war world in terms of cultural and artistic mobility. Over the course of her eighty-four-year lifetime, as Hayden recounts comprehensively, Loy lived and became an active member of the artistic scenes in "*Jugendstil* Munich (1900), Futurist Florence (1907-1916), Dada-enfevered New York (1916-1917) and Surrealist Paris (1923-1936)" often visiting "Weimar Berlin (1922) and Freud's Vienna (1922)," and eventually moving back to New York permanently as "the unofficial artist-in-residence on the Bowery when New York was inaugurated as capital city of the postwar art world" (2014, p. ix). It is, thus, safe to say that Loy's artistic and literary oeuvre, its poetics and politics, and also its aesthetic trajectory were shaped, to a great extent, by her encounters, interactions, and affiliations with the cultural milieu of the time, that is, the zeitgeist of the modernist era. Indeed, she was at the centre of the lively artistic and literary circles of the time, and despite not being an official follower of any artistic trend, Loy's works from different periods were characterised by the distinguishing aspects of such movements as futurism and dadaism. However, she insistently kept her distance from these -isms and avoided committing her artistic agenda to one. As Burstein aptly puts it, "Loy's reaction against artistic affiliation is one form of her devotion to the idea of originality" (2012, p. 156). Indeed, preserving her peripheral position around the orbits of the movements without compromising her own artistic individuality allowed Loy to enjoy freely the new horizons that these movements offered in terms of literary and artistic expression.

Among these sources of influences, Surrealism, with its particular take on the nature of creative process based on the concept of the surrealist muse, finds resonance in Loy's several works, most

particularly, *Insel*. Although she did not define herself as a surrealist, just as she did not define herself as a futurist or a dadaist, Loy was highly influenced by the surrealist spirit, which is quite understandable considering the fact that she was living in Paris in 1930s when Surrealism was in its heyday. Of course, by the time Surrealism became an influential movement, Loy was already an acknowledged artist and poet among the avant-garde circles in Europe, hence, her attitude towards the surrealists was rather cautious, leaving her in somewhat an outsider position with respect to the movement. Interestingly enough, it was a surrealist who was also isolated from the surrealist circle of Paris that inspired the novel. As the Paris representative of her son-in-law, who was a gallery owner in New York, Loy contacted in the mid-1930s Richard Oelze, the German surrealist painter who stirred her compassion with his weak and starving physique and inspired her to take notes of their meetings and conversations, which turned out to become *Insel*. The novel can be briefly outlined as follows: Loy's fictional alter ego, Mrs. Jones, who is a gallery representative, meets Insel, a German surrealist painter whose paintings she intends to acquire; she befriends with him in order to encourage him to paint and send his paintings to the gallery in New York; in their meetings she recognises a strange energy, a mystic and elusive magnetism that Insel gives out and decides to investigate its essence by writing a book about him; while she becomes a matriarchal authority figure over this poverty-stricken, physically repulsive and pitiable derelict, she is also captivated by his psychic radiations and a strange telepathic communication between them as a result of this magnetism; what seems to be at first a healing, regenerating impact of Insel over Jones turns into a destructive, competitive, and frustrating energy; she decides to move to New York and leave him in Paris.

Oelze, or the eponymous subject matter, Insel is at the heart of this surrealist narrative. While the novel presents cameo appearances of leading surrealists, such as André Breton, Max Ernst, Salvador Dali, and Man Ray, Insel is placed at the centre of Mrs. Jones's investigation as a larger-than-life figure whom she describes as "too surrealistic for the surrealists" (Loy, 2014, p. 104). Indeed, the reason for Jones's particular interest in Insel, a perpetually starving, introvert drug addict and painter with a threatening physique and a horrifying mind, lies in the very fact that he is incapable of categorisation. Although he is considered as a surrealist in the artistic circles of Paris, he does not see himself as one, or at least, he does not do it "on purpose" (Loy, 2014, p. 108) and his isolation from the surrealist milieu due to the language barrier and his general disposition makes him an outsider compared to more distinguished figures of the movement. However, as an outsider herself, Jones sees him as "organically surreal" (Loy, 2014, p. 108) since his whole being as well as his genuine art is effortlessly of surrealist spirit. As Conover propounds, Oelze

> was more of an anti-surrealist surrealist, an artist out of place in their midst, and one whose inspiration came from outside of Surrealism's main currents. He refused to enter into easy consanguinity with his 'fellow' surrealists, who were known for their group dynamics and collaborative projects. He was an outsider, he stood apart. (1991, pp. 13-14)

Indeed, Jones's emphasis on Insel's transient and ethereal presence throughout the novel underpins his reluctance for categorisation just as her own refusal of identifying her art with a particular movement proves her determination of maintaining her artistic autonomy. According to Arnold, similar to Loy, who did not officillay participate in the avant-garde movements but preferred to preserve her critical distance toward them, "Oelze assumed the pose of the reticent mingler rather than the blind conformist in Breton's regimented inner circle, […] it may have been this shared aversion to wholehearted membership in groups that drew Loy and Oelze together" (2014, pp. 172-173). This shared attitude makes Insel an exceptional subject matter and a source of inspiration for Jones to contemplate on her own individual quest as an artist struggling in her creative process. In this respect, Loy's novel as a unique take on the relationship between the artist and the muse reminds one of Breton's *Nadja*, a pioneering surrealist work that follows the narrator author's introspection via his encounters with his muse on the streets of Paris.

Breton's automatic prose piece epitomises the general scope of the surrealist activity. It recounts his chance encounters with Nadja, a mentally abnormal girl who wanders the streets of Paris, and revolves around Breton's process of self-discovery through his contemplations on her. Nothing else much happens

in the novel aside from these encounters and Breton's self-examination as a repercussion of his interactions with madness and the marvellous via the personification of Nadja. Throughout the novel, Nadja bewilders Breton with her childish yet wise, mysterious and attractive, transient and ambiguous disposition, and her sublime presence stimulates his creative expression. This type of representation was in fact quite characteristic of most surrealist works and the surrealist imagination in general. As a movement that sought complete liberation of the mind through the rejuvenation of the imagination that was castrated by reason, Surrealism often celebrated the concept of a female muse with sublime powers as a stimulus for the artist to delve into the unknown territories of his unconscious and turn what he found there into a work of art. Therefore, the surrealist muse emerged in the general surrealist imagination as the holder of the keys to the domain of the artist's unconscious and an omnipotent guide in his creative process.

Challenging the orthodox views of ideal, chaste woman of the time, the surrealists accordingly celebrated the concepts of free love and desire as forces that were found fundamental in the process of liberating the imagination. For the surrealists, thus, it was equally crucial to recreate the image of woman as a leading agent in the artistic quest to defy logic through the curves of the unconscious. Imposing on women the power of possessing enigmatic spirit and guiding knowledge, Breton and his followers associated the image of a beautiful young woman with the personification of the concept of surrealist muse not merely as an aesthetic embellishment, but first and foremost as the omnipotent seers and guiding agents of the unconscious. However, defying the traditional connotations of the image of women, the surrealists also fell into the error of confining women into the boundaries of the magical and the mythology, ironically failing to perceive and represent them as real individuals. With respect to the characteristics that were attributed to woman as the surrealist muse, Chadwick argues that

> a vision of woman as muse, the image of man's inspiration and his salvation, is inseparable from the pain and anger that gave birth to Surrealism. As the stimulus for the convulsive, sensuous disorientation that was to resolve polarized states of experience and awareness into a new, revolutionary surreality, she existed in many guises: as virgin, child and celestial creature, on the one hand; as sorceress, erotic object, and *femme fatale*, on the other. In each of these roles she exists to complement and complete the male creative cycle. (2021, p. 19)

This ambivalent position of woman as a mythologised being in the surrealist lexicon can be said to lead to another form of idealisation in such forms as *child woman* (*femme enfant*) and *fairy woman* (*femme fée*). However, this positioning of the surrealist muse in the male artist's creative process was that of a silenced passivity. The idea was that the artist would be inspired by his muse's eccentric and mad energy intertwined with her sublime knowledge of the beyond, namely, the unconscious, and express what he found there via his artistic medium. Accordingly, Breton's Nadja stands as one of the leading examples of this image of the surrealist muse as the epitome of glorified madness and the guiding light of the unconscious. Her innocence that accompanies her madness, her elusive remarks and revelations, her out-of-this-world and fleeting presence in Breton's life place Nadja to the centre of the narrative, yet, she is not there as an active agent in the story but rather a stimulating instrument in Breton's inner journey. Caws addresses this aspect of the story to highlight a fundamental structure in the narrative as follows: "In spite of the title, the initial and indeed the principal subject of the book is not Nadja's search for self-identity, but Breton's […] She is important only as a stage in Breton's autobiography" (1996, p. 29). Indeed, Caw's point is affirmed by Breton himself right at the opening line of the novel, "Who am I?" (1960, p. 11). The question itself suggests that Nadja is present in the narrative as a means for Breton to meditate on the further questions and answers in the path to his self-discovery. Accordingly, this question is soon followed by another, "whom do I haunt?" (1960, p. 11), which automatically relates the secondary object "whom" to the contemplation on the primary subject "who." Therefore, the question of who Breton is can be answered only through a detailed examination of whom he haunts, namely, Nadja. The bond that is formed between Breton and Nadja is more of a one-sided nature than a reciprocal one throughout the novel. Since there is not a following third question of "who is this that I haunt?" one concludes that the narrator is less interested in the genuine identity of Nadja than how her presence in his life can serve in his inner quest of self-searching. In his contemplation

on Nadja's place in their relationship, Breton asks, "what was she offering me?" and his answer is: "It does not matter. Only love in the sense I understand it -mysterious, improbable, unique, bewildering, and *certain* love that can only be *foolproof*, might have permitted the fulfilment of a miracle" (1960, pp. 135-136). Thus, it is not important how Nadja functions in Breton's life as a real person, but how Breton gives meaning to this presence. As Caws further argues, Breton "undertakes the book, then, not as a testimonial to the extraordinary character whose name it bears, but as an inquiry into what is individual about himself […] and how does this personality separate him from others?" (1996, p. 30). Correspondingly, Nadja functions as *the other* against whom Breton positions and defines himself.

In its general frame, then, *Insel* can be considered as a rewrite of Breton's surrealist piece in which he reflects on his own creative process through his interactions with his muse. Much like Breton's *Nadja*, *Insel* is based on the narrator's self-inquiry to understand who she is by contemplating on the other, namely her muse Insel. However, Loy employs Breton's narrative structure not only to pursue a quest for the self, but also to construct an intricate discussion on the concepts of artistic inspiration, creative process, the difference between male and female creativity, and the nature of the relationship between the artist and the muse. As Ayers aptly puts it, "Loy's text […] in part emulates and in part resists [*Nadja*] in order to generate its own meaning" (2010, p. 234). Indeed, Loy makes use of this defining work of Surrealism as a base to understand how the mind of her surrealist muse works. Unlike *Nadja* where Breton only introduces Nadja at the second third of the book, *Insel* opens with an immediate introduction of the very subject matter: "The first I heard of Insel was the story of a madman, a more or less surrealist painter, who, although he had nothing to eat, was hoping to sell a picture to buy a set of false teeth" (Loy, 2014, p. 3). From the very first sentence, Loy draws a very distinct image of Insel, which she dwells on and elaborates throughout the novel. Here is the muse in question: a madman, a surrealist who does not belong to the surrealist circle because he cannot communicate in any other languages except German, a starving artist who tries to sell his paintings not to feed himself, but to better his disfigured look because he "feared to disgust a prostitute with a mouthful of roots" (Loy, 2014, p. 3). From the very first start, then, Loy shatters the general image expected from a surrealist muse. Insel is not different from the general conception of a surrealist muse merely because he is male; he is different, first and foremost, because he is in no way capable of arousing inspiration or desire in an artist with his physical look or spiritual depth. However, what is strange is that this man actually causes sympathy and curiosity in the narrator. It is this curiosity about this eccentric man with an interesting life story that encourages Jones to write his biography. The fact that Insel only agrees to talk about his life for Jones's biography on the condition that she would take him to New York underlines the possibility that Insel might not be a conventional muse. He is not there to merely serve Jones's creative process unconditionally. There is an agreement on mutual benefit between them, which removes Insel from a passive position in the story. When Jones realises that Insel has been lying about his life by copying Kafka's *Der Prozess* (*The Trial*) in their meetings, it becomes quite clear that this muse is also quite capable of manipulating the artist by fabricating his own story and standing up to her when confronted: "'You atrocious fake – you have no life to write – you're *acting* Kafka!' 'And I,' answered Insel, as I turned him out, 'see clearly into you. Your brain is all Brontë.' Flying the colors of his victory, he sauntered off" (Loy, 2014, p. 18). Unlike Nadja, Insel's defying attitude confirms his undeniable, autonomous presence in the narrative process and foreshadows his future influence over Jones's physical and mental trajectory. While Breton makes it clear that Nadja "is at [his] mercy" (1960, p. 91) and that she sees him as a god and the sun (1960, p. 111), Insel seems to occupy a space in the novel that is independent from Jones's domain. As Ayers suggests, "the narrator is denied her autonomy as an artist not only by her fascination with Insel, but by the apparent impossibility of writing the biography of a man who has modelled his identity on Kafka" (2010, p. 233). This is where Jones abandons her idea of writing Insel's biography since it turns out that it is impossible to write about who someone really is when that person is capable of fabricating the things he chooses to tell her. In this premise, the author, who is supposed to have the control over the course and authenticity of her narrative, is stripped from her power by her own subject matter. Jones, who attempts to make sense of her muse in order to make sense of herself, suddenly comes face to face with the fact that her muse is able to manipulate the story being told. Likewise, the fact that Insel is an artist before he is a muse poses a direct contrast to the image Breton constructs in *Nadja*. In Breton's world, Nadja has a static

presence and does not impose a certain perspective on Breton's thinking process. She simply exists, and her existence itself confirms Breton's meditations on the concept of divine madness. She is a mere object to be observed and admired by Breton and then used as basis upon which he frames his narrative. Here, Insel, as an artist, directly affects the way Jones perceives him, herself, the world, and the creative process itself. Unlike Breton who abandons his muse once he finds her complexities too burdensome to bear, Jones grows more interested in Insel from the moment she discovers his deceitful disposition so as to understand this strange man who may not be as inert as she thinks he is. This revelation opens a new chapter in their relationship in which Jones is aware of Insel's manipulative disposition, yet, feels drawn to him, and decides to go down the rabbit hole.

In this new direction that the narrative follows, Insel and Jones are presented as equals despite Jones's apparent authority over Insel. This uncanny dynamic between the two is made clear when it is revealed that Jones is not only a gallery representative, but also a painter in her own right. Upon Insel's praising her paintings which were not accepted by her art dealer, leading to the cancellation of her exhibition, Jones talks about her struggles with regards to the creative process as follows:

> I felt, if I were to go back, begin a universe all over again, forget all form I am familiar with, evoking a chaos from which I could draw forth incipient form, that at last the female brain might achieve an act of creation. I did not know this as yet, but the man seated before me holding a photo in his somewhat invalid hand had done this very thing – visualized the mists of chaos curdling into shape. But with a male difference. (Loy, 2014, p. 20)

This acknowledgement of her inability to find an authentic artistic voice yet, which must be free from rules of all artistic schools and movements and is the key to a genuine artistic creation, perfectly illustrates the motivations and concerns behind Loy's/Jones's strife throughout the novel. According to Scuriatti, who compares Insel's and Jones's artistic abilities to give chaos a form, choosing the word "curdling" is quite suggestive in that the word implies a "process of coagulation and congealing, involving the transformation of liquid into semisolid substances: through separation and accruing, elements come together to form an entity [thus it is] associated with a later stage of artistic creation, following destruction and disintegration" (2019, p. 100). The way Insel is portrayed throughout the novel as a decaying, degenerating body shows parallelism with his paintings, which are filled with elusive and fragmented images, and calls attention to his creative process that feeds on this disintegration as opposed to Jones who has not figured out how to express herself intrinsically and how to visualise chaos through a female difference. Miller elucidates Insel's difference from Jones in his way of embodying his creative quintessence as follows:

> With his "intangible aural matter," thus, Insel would seem to personify an inter-transparency of word and image, which, properly "developed," would overthrow the limits of the senses and represent no less than a total revolution in artistic language […] Insel spontaneously produces, but makes no use of, the verbal-visual language that Mrs. Jones herself seeks, presumably as that which would resolve her own artistic problems, her own longings for a modernist solution to the crisis she senses. (1998, p. 351)

In line with Miller's remarks, it can be argued that Insel is one with the work he does in body and soul, that is, there is a harmonious correlation between who he is and what he expresses. This "inter-transparency of word and image" that he personifies parallels with his artistic output. That is why, his paintings look effortless and spontaneous. However, since Jones has not yet figured out the essence of her self, she does not have the full mastery of expressing that self artistically. According to Ayers, the text underscores "the difference between realised male and unrealised female creative potential" (2010, p. 244). Here, Ayers's comment can actually lead to a particular interpretation of Jones's relationship with Insel. Correspondingly, it can be argued that Insel is not merely an eccentric surrealist figure that Loy employs as an inspiring muse in Jones's writing process. He is also the epitome of the male artist who actualised himself

as an artist, who has achieved artistic fulfilment despite struggling with his ongoing projects, hence, a guiding figure for Jones to scrutinise the working of the creating mind.

In this context, Jones's struggle is that of the struggle of a work in progress since the novel follows the writer's insecurities and self-questionings in the midst of creating a work of art. Unlike Breton, who does not display any implications of doubt about his artistic capability or the quality of his work, Loy lays bare the harrowing, at times excruciating reality of being an artist. In Rupert's words, she "re-produces a less than picturesque view into the life of the artist" by exposing in her text "moments of ugliness, despair, vulgarity, bigotry, and even insanity" (2008, p. 329). Likewise, Jones is documenting how she is haunted by the anxiety that she will not be able to find her own voice and complete a genuine, authentic work of art while at the same time writing about Insel, another artist, a struggling surrealist painter who has gained the title "painter." Throughout the novel while Jones tries to encourage Insel to finish his paintings so that she can send them to the gallery in New York, she simultaneously strives to find the motivation to write and finish her book. This parallel struggle of both artists lays out the real reason behind Jones's interest in Insel in the first place. Insel's physical, mental, and artistic strife is the reflection of Jones's. At some point in the novel, Insel leaves a blank writing block that carries the impression of a packet of drawings, which he promised Jones that he would complete for the gallery. Upon realising that it is not the drawings but a piece of empty writing block, Jones is bewildered by Insel's intention, which is, according to Bozhkova, "a visual pun on the notion of 'writer's block'." (2022, p. 216). Indeed, the blank writing block becomes a symbol for Jones's creative anxiety. It is from this moment when Jones realises that there is a connection between them, which makes Insel understand her creative struggle, turns him "from a seedy man, dissolve[s] into a strange mirage, the only thing in the world at that time to stir [her] curiosity" (Loy, 2014, p. 27), and the novel steps into a surrealistic universe where time and place do not comply with the rules of the outer reality and the narrator is captivated by the magnetic radiation that her equal gives off.

Insel starts to occupy Jones's mind and life as a radiating energy that is visible only to her. She describes this strange magnetic force as follows: "Whenever I let him in he would halt on the threshold drawing the whole of his luminous life up into his smile. It radiated round his face and formed a halo hovering above the rod of his rigid body" (Loy, 2014, p. 31). Indeed, this sublime presence of Insel is so uncanny that he transcends time and place, as he is frequently referred to seem transparent and ghost-like and claims to control time at will, which, in the eyes of Jones, makes him look like "he possessed some mental conjury enabling him to infuse an actual detail with the magical contrariness surrealism merely portrays" (Loy, 2014, p. 33). It is this overpowering agency and the genuine surreal energy that makes Insel quite an extraordinary muse. Here, he is not a passive object, but an active agent that can speak and play an active, determinant role in shaping and controlling the way Jones thinks and feels. As the narrative moves on, the mind of the narrator oscillates between her fascination with this eccentric man and its own thinking process, focusing on how this magnetic figure takes control of her willpower in psychical and mental realms, and gradually, contemplating on Insel becomes contemplating on the working of her own mind. This reciprocity of focus leads to an essential point of discussion, that is, Loy's conceptualisation of selfhood, which is, for her, not a singular entity, but consists of a series of continuous dialogues among multiplicity of selves. According to Bozhkova, "Insel's story is to unlock hidden chambers in Jones's own psyche" (2022, p. 212). By this logic, it can be argued that Insel does not function in the novel as an external sublime force of inspiration that stimulates Jones's creativity. On the contrary, he is an equal part of Jones's thinking and questioning mind. As Jones seems to intuit this bond, she recognises Insel as her double in spirit, "a crony of my 'own class'" (Loy, 2014, p. 41). Looking into Insel's world, trying to understand his existence turns out to be the only way to shed a light on her own mind. As Scuriatti aptly puts it, "Loy's reconfiguration of selfhood, while on occasion tending toward fragmentation, is defined rather by duality and dialogism" (2019, p. 138). Accordingly, the whole novel is built upon the relational structure of the psychic communication between the two dualities, two dialogic selves, a narrative that is made possible through "the presence of another in the notion of self" (2019, p. 249). The fact that these two artists do not need to speak in order to communicate and that Jones can witness the flow of radiation from Insel towards herself reinforces the claim that Jones and Insel are two dialogic selves of Loy. Caws makes an intriguing remark on the title of the novel asserting that it may indicate "In Itself" (2022, p. 123) reminding one of Scuriatti's

words "the presence of another in the notion of self" (2019, p. 249). This remark can be furthered by arguing that the name Insel can also be a pun on "In Self," drawing attention to the encounter and dialogue of the two equal parts within this dual self. Considering how Jones's thought process, her creative struggles, her artistic concerns are inexpressible without the presence of Insel and the analysis of him, this interpretation of the title becomes quite revealing. Accordingly, Insel is no less a part of Loy than Jones herself. Just as Jones functions as Loy's alter ego in the narrative, there is also a lot of Insel to be found in Jones/Loy. In an interview, Loy admits that she never had any teeth all her life, and she suffered at the hands of the dentists from early years of her childhood (1998, p. 209). This small detail provides a significant clue about the way Loy carefully distributes certain aspects of herself to the characters who serve as the essential constituents of a whole. As mentioned above, the very first sentence of the novel that gives the first impression about Insel as the centre of the narrative describes him as a madman who is trying to buy a set of false teeth. This parallelism that is drawn from the very beginning foreshadows the true nature of the dynamics between Jones and Insel that unravels as the narrative proceeds. Considering these implications, it becomes quite inevitable to assume that Insel plays an integral role in Jones's artistic quest since he is part of Jones's/Loy's thinking mind. Through Insel, Jones gains access to her own unconscious, and through him, she discovers her own mind that is thinking and creating. According to Prescott,

> in many ways, her art and poetry demonstrate Loy's struggle to understand, create, refine, and define herself. Loy questions, reinvents, and forms her competing identities by assuming personas and critiquing social constructs through her verse. As a woman who continually renamed herself (Mina Lowry, Mina Loy, Dusie, Nima Lyo, Anim Yol, Inma Oly, Gina, Ova) and wore a series of literary and linguistic disguises, Loy has a sustained interest in identity. (2017, p. xxxiv)

Correspondingly, Loy's creating different names and identities always for the same person, that is herself, and her choice of first-person narration by a narrator as the fictional author of the text itself are directly related to her investigation of selfhood. As Parmar articulates, by employing Jones and Insel as two equal, dialogic counterparts of the same self, "Loy appears to take apart and reassemble her own psychic evolution" (2013, p. 155). Indeed, the way Jones strives to investigate Insel's mind in order to make sense of her own self reverberates the way Loy attempts to understand her own identity as an artist by exploring the thought process of her alternate, fictional selves in guise of different names.

Apart from communicating without words and sensing each other's energies, there is also another aspect in their relationship, which is beyond what is expected from a surrealist artist and her muse, and which indicates Jones and Insel's being two equal, communicating, interacting, conflicting, and even clashing parts of the same thinking mind. This is Insel's ability to affect Jones's physical and mental well-being towards better or worse. Throughout the novel, Jones recounts incidents where she is in terrible condition while Insel is in a better shape, and her condition is affected by his physical touch or mere presence. In one occasion later in the novel, she talks about a sudden tormenting pain in her integral organs. When she meets Insel she notices a change in him. He looks quite energetic and "human" (Loy, 2014, p. 56) as opposed to her apparent suffering, and as soon as he touches her, the pain vanishes: "I looked at Insel amazed. In what unheard of parasitism had I drawn this vitality out of a creature half-disintegrated?" (Loy, 2014, p. 57). In these passages, one witnesses a mutual attempt at healing one another. While Jones, in order to better Insel's decaying health, makes him eat steaks, stay at her place, washes his clothes, and takes care of him when he is weak, Insel seems to mysteriously heal Jones's inexplicable physical pain. According to Ayers, in this reciprocal healing ritual, "the narrator attempts to save Insel from starvation and restore him to productive health, while his seductive rays offer to heal her" (2010, p. 227). However, there is also a curious aspect in this seemingly mutual act of healing. Although Insel is offered not only by Jones but several people around him money, food, accommodation, and protection, he does not acquiesce to these privileges permanently and eventually goes back to his life in poverty and hunger. Therefore, one may assume that Insel is not as subjected to and dependent on Jones's influential force as the other way around. This presumption gives way to an important point of contention. One understands Insel's physical condition

and Jones's motivation to help him recover to a better shape so that he can complete his paintings as well as her compassion for this man whom she feels affinity for. However, the other side of the equation seems to be a bit more complicated. Why does Jones need healing, and how does Insel function in this process?

Through most of the novel, Insel seems to serve as an ever-luminous source of light in Jones's life, yet Jones constantly refers to him as something or someone that is in constant decay and dissolution. Bozhkova states that Insel is in fact "a personification of death" (2022, p. 223). Indeed, unlike a surrealist muse, who is supposed to be the embodiment of life and regeneration, Insel is always associated by Jones with death throughout the novel. It is quite striking that initially the tentative title of the novel was "Totenkopf," meaning "death's head" in German (Parmar, 2013, p. 152). This revelation is quite telling about the course of the narrative which, according to Bozhkova, "gradually transforms a historical figure (Oelze) into a skull-like apparition (*Totenkopf*) and then into a landscape (*Insel*), a transformation that reads as a veiled allusion to Arnold Böcklin's painting *Die Toteninsel* (*The Isle of the Dead*)" (2022, p. 223). Böcklin's painting depicts a transition scene where a boatman carries a soul-like figure dressed in white to what appears to be a cemetery on an island. It can be understood from the title that it is in fact the island of the dead surrounded by high walls and tall cypress trees, and the function of the boatman is to carry the dead to their rightful place. Considering that Insel means "island" in German, Insel's affiliation with Böcklin's island of the dead can be justified. As an image that reinforces this comparison of Insel to Böcklin's depiction of death, in one of the psychic moments where Jones witnesses the powerful radiation that Insel gives off, she recounts the incident as follows:

> when Insel shut the door infinitesimal currents ran out of him into the atmosphere as if he were growing a soft invisible fur that, when reciprocal conditions were sufficiently suave, grew longer and longer as the hair of the dead, it is maintained, will leisurely fill a coffin until it seemed with its measured infiltration even to interfere with Time. The mesmeric rhythm of a film slowed down conducted the tempo of thought and sentience in response to his half-petrified tepidity, for he moved within an outer circle of partial decease – a ring of death surrounding him. (Loy, 2014, pp. 32-33)

Jones's emphasis on Insel as a literally starving artist reflects this association with death. No matter how well he is taken care of in the hands of Jones, he always carries the impression that he might fall and die any second. Commenting on this strange image of Insel as a constantly starving artist, Ayers argues that "*Insel* makes inspiration – if not art itself – the product of hunger […] As his body decays, Insel achieves more of a magnetic pull on the narrator" (2010, p. 232). Insel's presence as a mediator between Jones and death positions him not as a healer but an annihilator. Therefore, while it seems that he heals Jones's pain, it is in fact his fatal, drawing force that allures her into a momentary state of serenity along the way to death. As Bozhkova expounds, "[h]is powers ambivalently oscillate between the ability to heal […] and the suicidal temptation […] Insel seems to invite Jones to 'enter [the] mirage' of the tomb island of the dead" (2022, pp. 230-231). Thus, the answer for the aforementioned question "why does Jones need healing?" can be found in the fact that Insel is actually both the source and cure of Jones's physical and spiritual agony. As an artist that feeds on decay and death, Insel leads Jones to his way of artistic creation, which slowly destroys Jones without her yet knowing, though it also nourishes her need for creative stimulus and helps her write her book.

Jones's struggle to understand Insel's inexpressible impact on her and her mysterious attraction to his very existence leads to her to confront Insel about the indefinable radio-activity he exudes, but realises that Insel has no idea what she is talking about and even mistakes her approach as a romantic advance, which she corrects by assuring him that she rather sees him as a "Will-o'-the-Wisp" (Loy, 2014, p. 97). From this moment on, the dynamics in their relationship changes as Jones comes to realise that Insel is not aware of his magnetism, that his adventures in the real world are quite banal, and most importantly, that he is incapable of completing a proper painting, that "he *never* paints" (Loy, 2014, p. 104), all of which causes Jones to clear her vision about him and to look at him from a new, more realistic light. This loss of interest might recall Breton's abandonment of Nadja. However, what makes the difference between the two is their

reactions to the disappointed narrators. In Breton's novel, the decision to part solely depends on Breton (1960, p. 114), and Nadja is not given the right to react, instead, she is simply removed from the narrative being committed to an asylum, as later informed by Breton. Meanwhile in Loy's narrative, Insel, the muse, takes up a rather aggressive and sadistic attitude towards Jones as a reaction to her indifference:

> a maniac sadism flaring up in his eyes, and for the first time I saw him as dangerous […] I could feel his hatred twining round my throat as he took a step towards me. But a step no longer the airy step of the hallucinated – it was the pounding tread of the infuriated male. (Loy, 2014, p. 114)

He occupies such a powerful presence in her mind that Insel, as both the source and cure of her pain, plays with Jones's mind as he wishes. When she suffers from physical or mental exhaustion, his hatred and sadism turn into love and once again heals her suffering: "Suffering, I had so gratified him, satiating his sadism – even to extinction, his gratitude refluent to me, enveloped me" (Loy, 2014, p. 126). At this point, Insel has the authority over Jones by commanding her to go to sleep, which relieves her pain and makes her "shaken with a helpless laughter – a strange mixture of extreme friendliness and, inexplicably, derision" (Loy, 2014, p. 127). Jones tries to make sense of her own mental disintegration reflected in her physical exhaustion as follows:

> I cognized this situation as Insel's. A maddening with desire for a thing I did not know – a thing that, while being the agent of his – my – dematerialization alone could bring him together again. A desire of which one was "dead" and yet still alive – radial starfish underpattern of his life, it had communicated itself to me […] Having no idea what was happening to me, I seemed to have also unsuspected reserves of will power. I put up a pretty good fight against this incredible dematerialization – it took me hours to weave myself together – but at last, exhausted yet once more intact, I fell upon my bed and slept. Next morning my face looked "destroyed" like Insel's. (Loy, 2014, p. 128)

As seen above, Jones confuses and integrates her self with that of Insel. It is no longer clear who is who, their selves are fused with one another. While the telepathic communication between the two throughout the novel and their parallel struggles in the creative process indicate a certain equality and affinity in their relationship, later in the novel, it is suggested that Insel brings Jones down mentally and physically as a result of rivalry and hatred that start to dominate the relationship. As Scuriatti propounds, "as their friendship deepens, Mrs. Jones and Insel are both physically and symbolically threatened with 'dematerialization,' loss of contour and disintegration" (2019, p. 101). This problematic bond between the two takes quite an existential nature as Insel becomes a source of psychosis, transferring to Jones his madness rather than creative inspiration. While he has the power to ease her pain, he is also capable of torturing her and making her suffer to a great extent. As Walter propounds, "When Jones begins to fear that […] her spectatorial role in her own relationship with him violates her selfhood, Loy resorts to a very different metaphor of instrumentality" (2009, p. 679). While in the beginning Insel's magnetic radiations seem to be in service of Jones's creative process, towards the end of the novel, Jones realises that the situation is reversed as it is now her energy that Insel absorbs. She finally finds out that Insel's creative impetus is not derived from life, but its opposite. As Jones faces with the threat of the disintegration of her self, she understands that Insel's parasitical attachment to Jones is the source of this disintegration. Although it is not clear whether Insel is aware of his destructive power over Jones, his presence in her life is no longer inspiring, but on the contrary, paralysing, and his attitude towards her hostile and vicious. Jones finds herself in exhaustion by the fact that "this fantastically beautiful creature should have both hands round [her] throat" (Loy, 2014, p. 22), indeed his energy, which was once so mesmerising, is now suffocating, though still fascinatingly powerful. Gradually, admiration gives its place to mutual loathing. When Jones thinks about her mutual "alliance" with Insel and how they have fallen apart, she asks herself the very question that she asks throughout the novel:

> I remembered Geronimo taunting me that I was "no psychologist." "You just walk into a man's brain, seat yourself comfortably in an armchair to take a look around – afterwards, you write down all you have found there," he had said. Then what the hell in Insel had I "walked into"? His complaint was true. Nobody saw in him what I saw in him. A kind of consciousness unconscious of its own potency. Even now he was disgusting to the point of revelation. (Loy, 2014, p. 147)

Interestingly enough, this self-questioning perfectly summarises the gist of the very novel that Jones/Loy writes. While she strives to name this inexplicable *thing* about Insel that draws her like a magnet, she accomplishes writing the book that she sets to pen at the very beginning. Jones's act of completion resolves the essential problem in the novel, that is the anxiety of artistic failure in the creative process. In one of her letters, Loy lays bare her fear as follows: "I must finish my novel [*Insel*] – it is very sad but if I don't finish it I shall be finished myself" (qtd. in Miller, 1999, p. 211). As can be seen from her own words, both artists' struggles, Insel with his paintings and Jones with her novel, are quite reflective of Loy's own artistic struggle. The distress that Jones suffers throughout the novel is the distress of an artist trying to prove herself that she is able to finish the work she has started. That is why, despite her failure in convincing the art galleries to accept her paintings, Jones strives to complete the book about Insel. Of course, it fails to be a proper biography of Insel, but still, it manages to portray Insel from the way Jones perceives him, hence by implication, the artist herself from the way she sees herself.

Conclusion

Taking into consideration Jones's initial aspiration to create a completed work of art, it can be concluded that despite his destructive impact on Jones, Insel ultimately fulfils his role as a surrealist muse since the inspiration he evokes in the artist leads to the eventual completion of the book, which is in fact about Jones's own process of introspection and a contemplation on her own artistic creation. At the end of the novel, Jones feels obliged to leave Insel behind so that she can close this chapter of her life once the book is finished. As Parmar points out, with her decision to leave for New York, Jones "escapes and by the end of the novel has written her own autobiography instead of Insel's; she completes and usurps any hope she initially gave to Insel of a future. According to Loy, this is the 'artist's vindication' – to survive" (2013, p. 154). Indeed, this is what she does; Jones delves into the challenging realm of artistic creation led by Insel, the personification of her imagination, and comes out of it alive and victorious. Much like Lautreamont's illustration of the chance meeting of the sewing machine and the umbrella on a dissecting table (2011, p. 210), this brief encounter, this surreal meeting of Jones and Insel, which Jones describes as "two unmatched arrows sprung from its meaningless center" (Loy, 2014, p. 152), serves as an incentive that allows the protagonist of this experience to meditate on the creative process itself by exposing the workings of her subconscious in dialogue with her muse. By the end of the novel, Jones not only fulfils her search for a unique artistic voice by completing the book, but she also sees through the true nature of her relationship with Insel, realising that by surrendering "her imagination to his, she risked sinking into the abyss of autism in which she found him, making herself the victim rather than the agent of her own creative power. Her ultimate act of compassion – release – is directed toward herself" (Conover, 1991, p. 14). By thriving on the inspiration that she finds in Insel, yet refusing to submit to this consuming and undermining side of her self, she survives the compelling, extorsive, and tricky journey of self-realisation. Jones's quest proves that the act of creation is a complicated endeavour, exciting and promising, yet, at the same time frustrating and formidable. Consequently, through her detailed examination of the surrealist muse and his influence on the journey of the female artist, Loy not only investigates the intricate communication between the surrealist artist and the source of inspiration, but also introduces an inquiry of selfhood by exploring the negotiation process between the artist's constitutive selves during the act of creation. Unlike the general idea behind the surrealist inspiration personified by the surrealist muse, Loy propounds that inspiration is not necessarily a mere regenerative force of marvellous. Instead, being a part of the artist's creating mind, it can lead the artist

to the dark realms of her mind and allows her to discover there both regenerative and destructive forces. As she lays bare in *Insel*, for Loy, the artist's self is a reflection of the constant dialogues of equal, dual selves that are simultaneously interacting and conflicting. In this respect, Loy manages to put forth a fresh discussion on the working of the creating mind and the nature of inspiration through the portrayal of Jones and Insel as two dialogic selves communicating and clashing throughout the creative process.

Conflict of interest:	The author declares no potential conflict of interest.
Financial support:	The author received no financial support for the research.
Ethics Board Approval:	The author declares no need for ethics board approval for the research.

References

Arnold, E. (2014). Afterword. *Insel*. Melville House.

Ayers, D. (2010). Mina Loy's 'Insel' and its contexts. In R. Potter and S. Hobson (Eds.), *Salt Companion to Mina Loy* (pp. 221-247). Salt Publishing.

Bozhkova, Y. (2022). *Between worlds: Mina Loy's aesthetic itineraries*. Clemson University Press.

Breton, A. (1960). *Nadja*. Grove Press.

Burstein, J. (2012). *Cold modernism: Literature, fashion, art*. Pennsylvania State University Press.

Caws, M.A. (1996). *André Breton*. Twayne Publishers.

Caws, M.A. (2022). *Mina Loy: Apology of genius*. Reaktion Books.

Chadwick, W. (2021). *Women artists and the surrealist movement*. Thames & Hudson.

Conover, R.L. (1991). Foreword. *Insel*. Black Sparrow Press.

Hayden, S. (2014). Introduction. *Insel*. Melville House Publishing.

Lautréamont, L.C.D. (2011). *The songs of Maldoror*. Solar Books.

Loy, M. (2014). *Insel*. Melville House Publishing.

Loy, M. (1998). Interview with Paul Blackburn and Robert Vas Dias. In M. Shreiber and K. Tuma (Eds.), *Mina Loy: Woman and poet* (pp. 205-244). The National Poetry Foundation.

Miller, T. (1998). 'Everyman his own fluoroscope': Mina Loy's *Insel* between aura and image machine. In M. Shreiber and K. Tuma (Eds.), *Mina Loy: Woman and poet* (pp. 341-356). The National Poetry Foundation.

Miller, T. (1999). *Late modernism: Politics, fiction, and the arts between the World Wars*. University of California Press.

Parmar, S. (2013). *Reading Mina Loy's autobiographies*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Prescott, T. (2017). *Poetic salvage: Reading Mina Loy*. Bucknell University Press.

Rupert, J.J. (2008). *Oscillating Wildly: Surrealist women and the ethics of literary modernism* (PhD Dissertation) University of Illinois. https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/oscillating-wildly-surrealist-women-ethics/docview/304325417/se-2

Scuriatti, L. (2019). *Mina Loy's critical modernism*. University Press of Florida.

Walter, C. (2009). Getting impersonal: Mina Loy's body politics from 'Feminist Manifesto' to Insel. *MFS Modern Fiction Studies, 55*(4), 663-692. https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/mfs.0.1635