From Transmissions of Madness to Machines of Writing: Mina Loy's "Insel" as Clinical Fantasy
Author(s): Andrew Gaetke
Published by: Indiana University Press
Stable URL: http://www.jstor.org/stable/25511796
Accessed: 24/01/2014 19:19

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

*Indiana University Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Journal of Modern Literature*. 

http://www.jstor.org
From Transmissions of Madness to Machines of Writing: Mina Loy’s Insel as Clinical Fantasy

Andrew Gaedtke
University of Pennsylvania

This article argues that Mina Loy’s forgotten novel Insel may be read as a valuable resource for understanding modernism’s relation to madness. I argue that it is the story of a “lay analysis” of a psychotic conducted by an avant-garde writer. Through this novelistic case study, Loy engages with a long history of psychotherapies in an effort to synthesize a more ethical way of relating to madness. As a result, the writings and delusions of psychotics emerge as rich cultural resources that may teach us about not only their private delusions but also the anxieties specific to their historical moment. Formally, Insel evokes the very modernist genre of the psychoanalytic case study in order to subject it to a radical ethical critique. The novel asks whether such writing constitutes a form of exploitation of and violence to the subjects that it describes. Through these formal and ethical interventions, Insel multiplies the ways in which madness might be written.

Keywords: Mina Loy / Insel / madness / technology / case study / psychoanalysis

In 1937, Mina Loy was sent by her son-in-law Julien Levy to consider the work of Richard Oelze for his New York art gallery. Oelze was a reclusive German surrealist painter who cultivated a mysterious persona, even by the standards of an aging avant-garde Paris. The stories of drug use and suspected madness that surrounded this marginal figure piqued Loy’s curiosity. When she finally met him, she was struck by the impression that the emaciated figure seemed to barely hold together, physically and psychologically. Despite or perhaps because of the warnings she had received from mutual acquaintances about his erratic behavior, Loy soon took Oelze in. The ambiguously maternal, romantic and perhaps psychotherapeutic relationship that ensued would become the material for Loy’s posthumously published novel Insel.

Although finally rescued from the archives and published by Black Sparrow Press in 1991, this strange novel has suffered the same disregard within contemporary modernist studies that it faced when Loy failed to find a sympathetic publisher.¹ Perhaps it is not entirely surprising that a late 1930s literary world
exhausted by avant-garde extravagance was not fully enamored of a “novel” that showed minimal narrative development or structure, incorporated a cast of only two characters and indulged in hallucinatory interactions that defied the neoréalist preferences of the decade. Still, I would insist that the discovery of this text remains a crucial event for our understanding of literary modernism’s fascination with and proximity to madness, along with what I will suggest are crucially related technological anxieties that defined that cultural moment. It is the rich synthesis of these two historical tendencies that distinguishes Mina Loy’s forgotten novel.

Whether it is possible or even useful to diagnose the historical Oelze as schizophrenic, it rapidly becomes clear that Loy’s title character “Insel” is the monadic island of insanity that his name suggests. The novel is launched by the strange fact that Insel is accessible only for the Loy-like narrator, Mrs. Jones. It is only Jones, herself a somewhat unstable writer and artist, who is able to achieve the bizarre, technologically-encoded communication with Insel that makes him knowable and, the novel promises, ultimately human again. To the extent that an arc of development can be plotted through the novel, it is the progress of this strange transferential relationship between an otherwise unreachable subject and the narrator—a development that appears to end in some fundamental shift in the symptoms that had defined Insel.

All of this would suggest that over the course of the novel, a kind of “lay analysis” has taken place. Indeed, while Insel refuses generic features that might be expected even of a late-modernist novel, it does exhibit many characteristics of the psychoanalytic case studies that Loy had read with great enthusiasm: the text is largely constituted by a catalogue of bizarre symptoms and a transferential dynamic that ends in some change in a character’s behavior and enjoyment. In this sense, the structure and aim of the case study are carefully embedded in the construction of Insel.

However, while it becomes clear that psychoanalytic writing was a resource for Loy’s literary production, the novel also exerts an active, transformative pressure on that tradition of case studies, many of which arguably have become more canonical works of modernism than Loy’s novel. What is most remarkable about this strange text is not simply its initial resemblance to the Freudian corpus—the ways that it might neatly fit into that canon of quasi-novelistic case writing—but rather, the several ways in which it knowingly differs and departs from that very modernist genre. In this sense, the novel invokes the case study as genre in order to measure its own critical differences. One example of this critical difference is the curiously technological or somatic form of transference that Jones achieves with Insel which bypasses the linguistic exchange that is crucial to the psychoanalytic scene of analysis. Such strange, inscrutable features of the novel resist the strong temptation to reconstruct Insel as simply a kind of lay psychoanalytic case study, as simply an amateur attempt to reproduce the Freudian scene of analysis along with the strange narratives that made that scene so popular.

Therefore the task of this essay will be twofold. First, it is clear that in order to understand these strangely technological features of Jones’s “treatment” of Insel
we will have to look beyond the Freudian doxa to a longer history of psychotherapies and theories of mind that Loy investigated. In the hallucinatory world of the novel, these materialist doctrines are subtly integrated with timely concerns about new technological influences—forces that, like these modern psychologies, threaten to evacuate the sovereignty of the mind. Secondly, I will argue that these technological remainders in the novel constitute an active critique of the Freudian clinic as a machine of text-production. Among other questions, the novel asks, “What is the relation between psychological treatment and the writing that it makes possible?” If the case study is generically distinct for the way that it is underwritten by the work of analysis, what might be its cost to the patient? Before considering the novel’s answer, we must first consider the oblique means by which it is able to pose this ethically troubling question.

The novel unfolds with a catalogue of observations and symptoms that arise over the course of Mrs. Jones’s interactions with Insel. Initial descriptions fixate on his uncanny physiology, locating him somewhere between human and machine, but a machine that seems to be in an entropic state of decay and dissolution. “A wound up automaton running down, Insel ceased among the clatter of our amusement” (31). “Again, as I watched, I had the sensation of a ‘breaking point,’ an expectation [sic] of a spring flying loose to whirr insanely” (115). While this precarious, lifeless condition has an alienating effect on others, Jones experiences a magnetic pull toward Insel, a strange attraction that is coded in the discourses of modern mechanization and new media. Insel’s social isolation is further compounded by a peculiar linguistic ineptitude: not only does he not speak French or English, but he seems at times congenitally incapable of any speech. At one moment he explains to Jones, “As a child I would remain absolutely silent for six months at a time” (32).²

Despite this symptomatic failure of language, Jones is capable of a mysterious, direct access to Insel’s psychic interiority, such as it is. This ambiguous communication is accomplished through the bizarre Strahlen or “rays” that Insel seems to transmit from his body, rays that only she is capable of detecting, receiving and perhaps reciprocating. “Some infrared or invisible rays he gave off, were immediately transferred on one’s neural current to some dark room in the brain for instantaneous development in all its brilliancy. So one saw him as a gray man and an electrified organism at one and the same time” (96). Upon reception of these rays, Jones gains access to Insel’s hallucinatory world, an experience that she describes as “the telepathic, televisionary machinery of our reciprocity” (167).

If these mysterious rays seem to function as channels of communication, they also appear to operate as material instantiations of the dynamic libidinal flows and cathexes that pass between Insel and Jones. When Insel’s rays are transmitted or invested in Jones, she is overwhelmed in a sublime and terrifying wave of jous- sance. “I was overcome by a rush of nervous sublimity carried by the air. / ‘If this is madness,’ I said to myself, breathing his atmosphere exquisite almost to sanctification, ‘madness is something very beautiful’” (139). In keeping with the libidinal economy that Loy had studied in the work of Freud, the result of this cathexis on Mrs. Jones is that Insel’s own fragile ego loses its being—it is decathected. In the
libidinal geography of the novel, the word “Insel” paradoxically comes to name a densely empty space.

The flat seemed emptier for his being there, until I found that further off it was filled to a weird expansion with emanations drifting away from Insel asleep. . . . In the room at the end of the corridor their force of vitalized nothingness was pushing back the walls. . . . Why should Insel, less ponderable than other men, impart perceptible properties in the air? Was he leaking out of himself, residuum of that ominous honey he stored behind his eyes into which it was his constant, his distraught concern to withdraw? (102)

For Jones, Insel’s singular quality is his unstable ontological status. Her account suggests that he is forever in danger of disseminating and dissolving into nothingness. A dialectic emerges over the course of the transferential relationship in which his Strahlen move between investment in her and a narcissistic reinvestment in his own tenuous ego—all of which Jones and Insel can somehow visually observe in the form of auriatic, electro-magnetic rays.

Insel, intently keeping watch, had moved his stool some distance away as if to find his range for an inverted “Aim of Withdrawal.” Spinning himself into a shimmering cocoon of his magnetic rays, introvert, incomparably aloof, “They’re mine,” he exulted as clearly as if he were crying aloud.

Too simple to fully imagine the effect of these rays, he had, it would seem, only an instinctive mesmeric use for them. He might even feel them as a sort of bodily loss compensated perhaps by rare encounters with one able to tune in. (144 emphasis added)

Feeling threatened by the rare psychic investment in Jones, Insel withdraws into a monadic carapace of his own libidinal construction. Insel jealously guards his Strahlen as if they were constitutive of his very precarious being. Jones, implicitly positioned as his analyst, seems to understand the status and nature of these Strahlen more than Insel himself, who only unconsciously distributes and redistributes this hallucinated energy. Jones recognizes that the “transmission” of these rays compromises Insel, but that this corporeal or psychic loss is somehow repaid by the connection he is finally able to achieve with the rare interlocutor able to “tune in.”

In the language of the novel, then, Jones is at once analyst and radio receiver to Insel’s compulsive transmissions. Elsewhere, her role is described in cinematic terms as she offers something like the mute, blank surface onto which Insel is able to project his fantasy. However, such a transferential rapport is only possible facing a neurotic, not a psychotic. Freud famously confessed to a particular dislike for psychotics who—like Insel—were generally unreachable through that protocol so essential to the linguistic analytic exchange: transference. As in the famous chess scene in Beckett’s Murphy, a dialectical exchange via the symbolic (whether in the form of language or chess moves) cannot be achieved with these patients who have withdrawn into their own delusional world of hallucinations. Indeed, we might say that if the goal of transference is to activate the neurotic’s repressed unconscious drives toward a more livable libidinal experience, such an operation is not only
impossible but even undesirable in the case of the psychotic, for whom repression of the drives is already impossible. Such a failure of language and consequently of transference is the key diagnostic feature of psychosis for Lacan, who argued that the hallucinatory and often paranoid world of the psychotic was the result of an effort to reconstitute a meaningful environment from the bottom up (the problem being that such psychotics are without a reliable foundation from which to start).

In the case of Insel, then, it is all too easy to recognize the Freudian transferential relationship, and yet, at the same time, the strangeness of the novel refuses such a reading. Indeed, there is something resolutely illegible about the oddly material connections that occur in the novel—an inscrutability that may be overcome through a more complete sense of the psychological discourses with which Mina Loy was familiar. In looking beyond the psychoanalytic clinic, we will recall that Freud was not the first to develop a transferential rapport as a means to therapeutic progress. While Loy read Freud’s work closely and was even read by him (he once declared her work “analytical”), she was also drawn to a longer history of psychological therapies and theories that preceded and contributed to the psychoanalytic discovery of the unconscious. The description of Insel’s rays as “mesmeric” sends us back to earlier, materialist treatments of the mind whose vestigial traces can be read in popular and even clinical writing of the twentieth century.

Historians of psychoanalysis and psychiatry have long demonstrated the important role mesmerism and hypnotism played in early dynamic psychology. It was in part the bizarre, altered states which these techniques induced in their patients that made theories of the unconscious a necessity. What may be especially illuminating about these earlier movements in relation to Loy’s novel are their distinctly materialist and often technological understandings of psychological behavior and its treatment.

Mesmer and his followers famously hypothesized the existence of a “neuric fluid,” a vaguely material component of the body which resembled electromagnetic energy and was said to emanate from various orifices. Many symptoms that could not otherwise be treated by conventional medical techniques were attributed to an imbalance of this “neuric fluid.” Mesmer’s solution was the application of large magnets to affected parts of the body. This mesmerism often resulted in remarkable recoveries, and Mesmer’s practice grew into a large, cult-like following. Many guides to proper mesmeric procedures were published in the early nineteenth century, some recommending ideal physical orientations between doctor and patient for the proper, corrective flow or transfer of the “neuric fluid” between the two. It was often recommended that the mesmerist sit facing the patient with her knees between his, their eyes locked into a deep stare as he passes his hands over her face and torso in order to effect the corrective transfer of neuric fluid from his body to hers. In light of this highly influential yet forgotten doctrine, Insel’s bizarre neurological transmissions come into focus.

Once properly magnetized, patients would enter into an altered state in which they often claimed to see the “neuric fluid” emitted from the bodies of those around them in the form of rays of light. The mesmerists also found that subjects in this
condition were especially susceptible to suggestion, something that was at once useful for therapeutic purposes and extremely controversial. Patients often seemed to fall under a peculiar spell cast by their mesmerists, and those suspicious of the practice recommended that husbands be present when their wives were magnetized.

The medical community, such as it was in late eighteenth-century Paris, regarded Mesmer and his followers as charlatans, and the technique was soon discredited by an investigative committee headed by Benjamin Franklin. Still, treatment by magnetism continued into the nineteenth century when it became evident that the source of its success was the force of authoritative suggestion rather than any material influence. In spite of this explanatory shift, fascination with these altered states only continued into the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Publications on hypnotism and efforts to theorize these altered states of consciousness, or the “unconscious,” followed at a rapid pace. While the materialist explanation of the mesmeric or hypnotic state lost favor among many of these researchers, its vestigial traces can be found in psychological writings around the turn of the twentieth century. The variety of unconscious automatisms that were catalogued and “explained” by researchers such as Charcot, Janet, Ribot, and Frederic Myers provoked both excitement and anxiety. The possibility of unconscious mental processes that left one susceptible to the manipulation of another person through obscure means challenged many assumptions about the integrity, unity, and sovereignty of the human mind.

While this mesmerist influence on popular and clinical culture constitutes a likely source for the bizarre Strahlen that pass between Insel and Jones, the narrator invokes more contemporary technological innovations to describe and explain her non-verbal communion with her “patient.” She is able to “tune in” to rays transmitted by him to “some dark room in the brain for instantaneous development in all its brilliancy” (96). The effect of this reception is a kind of auditory and visual hallucination that she compares to more common experiences of media technology that had been widely adopted by the 1930s. Remarkably, Loy was not alone in recognizing the disturbing similarities between the altered states of madness (often explained through materialist discourses) and the flood of new, quasi-hallucinatory experiences that these media technologies could produce, often at a distance.

Media such as the radio, film, and the telephone were embraced and adopted at a pace that outstripped a thorough, popular understanding of precisely how they functioned. As Friedrich Kittler and Pamela Thurschwell have argued, new discoveries in experimental and paranormal psychology sometimes merged in the popular imagination with half-understood theories about these new communication technologies. For those less spiritually oriented, the radio offered a materialist, technological explanation for the strange communications that were taking place during this “neo-mesmeric renaissance.” At the same time, if the thrill of communication with the “beyond” was a source of great excitement, the possibility that the machinery of one’s own body was somehow more accessible to others than to oneself was also a cause of great anxiety. Even before Freud, the asymmetrical relations of knowledge and influence that were wielded by the mesmerist or hypnotist...
during “suggestion therapy” were quite evident to all, particularly when Hyppolite Bernheim’s techniques for hypnotism became a popular stage show for the general public.10

The structural similarity between these two anxieties of influence—clinical and technological—was made explicit in the delusions of many paranoid psychotics in ways that closely resemble the surreal world of Insel. Viennese psychoanalyst Victor Tausk recounts these delusions in his 1919 article, “On the Origin of the ‘Influencing Machine’ in Schizophrenia.”11 In this case study, Tausk describes a delusion common among psychotics who fear that their thoughts have been transmitted to them or stolen over some distance via a mysterious machine. Tausk writes that this is supposedly achieved:

by means of waves or rays or mysterious forces, which the patient’s knowledge of physics is inadequate to explain. In such cases, the machine is often called a “suggestion apparatus.” Its construction cannot be explained, but its function consists in the transmission or “draining off” of thoughts and feelings by one or several persecutors. (544)

This “suggestion apparatus” used to persecute the patients is generally operated by “physicians by whom the patient has been treated” (544). The anxiety of influence that these paranoiacs experience is exacerbated by the power of suggestion that the psychiatric community had developed. Further, this mysterious influence is explained by these troubled patients through the new media technologies that made a kind of visual and auditory “hallucination” a mass-cultural experience: in many cases, this transmission results in the experience of hallucinations that appear as two-dimensional, cinematic projections on a nearby wall.

What is perhaps most troubling to these patients—and what also becomes a central concern in Mina Loy’s Insel—is the sense that their thoughts are no longer their own. This suspicion that one’s perceptions, emotions, and thoughts can be directly manipulated results in the evacuation of the patient’s sovereignty and integrity.

This symptom is the complaint that “everyone” knows the patient’s thoughts, that his thoughts are not enclosed in his own head, but are spread throughout the world and occur simultaneously in the heads of all persons. The patient seems no longer to realize that he is a separate psychic entity, an ego with individual boundaries. (Tausk 553)

The discourses of psychotherapy and emergent technology are synthesized by these psychotics in order to explain these feelings of manipulation and ultimate indiscernition. In this case study, we find a remarkable homology between the experience of the psychotic—marked by a sense of thought-manipulation and ego-loss—and more common experiences of emergent technology in the early twentieth century. This suggests that Tausk’s patients might be understood as not simply testifying to the conditions of their private psychic formations. Through the specific metaphors they invoke to explain their condition, we can see a convergence of conditions for a more widespread cultural and historical paranoia in which the distinction and integrity of one’s own psychic life are no longer secure.
Indeed, the threats to such psychic integrity and sovereignty—whether in the form of psychotherapy or media technologies—seem to multiply at this precise moment. Each threat is overcoded and synthesized with the other, not only in the language of psychotics’ delusions, but also, as we find in Insel, in the experimental writing of the time. As I have argued, these discourses were often conflated through the resurgence of mesmerism and other materialist psychologies that would investigate and treat the mind as simply another machine. The Tausk study suggests that radio and film constituted another form of “transference” and suggestion. They operated as influences that had the potential to induce a kind of hypnotic fascination in their audiences, an observation that Mina Loy’s novel also makes.

The psychotics were not alone in feeling a loss of autonomy under the care of these “suggestion therapies.” Even for those who had not been subjected to the institutional regime of psychiatry, the theories and demonstrations of these new psychologies posed a challenge to one’s sense of self. The very notion of an unconscious—a psychological component that governs one’s behavior in ways that a doctor might understand and mediate more than the patient herself—located a challenge to one’s personal sovereignty and self-control at the core of one’s being. The doctor now had access to the patient’s being in a way that eluded the patient herself. In this way, the delusions of the “influencing machine” only made explicit and literal what was for many implied by new psychologies of “automatism,” the “subliminal,” or the “unconscious.” While these terms represented competing vocabularies for describing and explaining the altered states that hypnotism and dissociation had made undeniable, they also constituted similar challenges to a closely-held faith in the human mind’s capacity for conscious self-determination. As Tausk theorized, the influencing machine was not simply a metaphor for the anxious transferential relationship between doctor and patient. It also described the alienation felt by the patient when confronted with the automatic operation of her own libidinal drives—an operation independent and even defiant of any conscious control or intervention.

The evolution, by distortion of the human apparatus into a machine, is a projection that corresponds to the development of the pathological process that converts the ego into a diffuse sexual being—or, expressed in the language of the genital period, into a genital, a machine independent of the aims of the ego and subordinated to a foreign will. It is no longer subordinated to the will of the ego, but dominates it. (556, emphasis mine)

In this account, it is the unconscious and its indefatigable drives that are represented by the figure of the “influencing machine.” The same distinguishing features inhere in both the influencing machine and the unconscious as it was being theorized at this moment: a force or will that is felt to be alien, anterior and challenging to consciousness. Tausk’s psychotics appear to have interpreted the meaning of both the unconscious and what we might call the “hallucination machines” of new media. Historically understood, the psychotics’ delusions become valuable resources not only for understanding their private psychological symptoms, but also for their
cogent synthesis of the prevailing anxieties that shaped these psychotics’ cultural environment.

The many uncanny elements of Mrs. Jones’s strange rapport with Insel may now seem rather timely in light of this history of materialist treatments of the mind and their popular integration with an emergent technological ecology. One of the merits of this novel is that it makes clear the striking syncretism of clinical and technological discourses with respect to the mind—a syncretism that had been similarly suggested (though ignored) by many paranoid psychotics. The resemblances between the paranoid memoirs and Loy’s novel may therefore be read in two directions. The delusions of those psychotics help us make sense of the uncanny phenomena that occur in Insel, while Loy’s novel retroactively transforms those delusional narratives into valuable resources for understanding the cultural conditions of their time.

Still, this transformation of the psychotics’ memoirs into unexpected sources of cultural critique is not the only clinical intervention of the novel. As it becomes clear that the libidinal machine comes to loom large for so many—at once dominating from an alienating distance and at the same time located at the core of one’s being—it also becomes a source of concern that the person able to manipulate such a powerful machine is not the subject but her doctor. Indeed, the gender coding of this asymmetrical relationship is neither neutral nor innocent. A familiar narrative of the birth of psychoanalysis has it delivered by a genius male doctor from the ravaged bodies of so many female hysterics. The “delusions” of those suffering the persecutions of the “influencing machine” in fact testify in quite legible ways to the felt violence that might inhere in such an asymmetrical relationship. Tausk writes,

The machine serves to persecute the patient and is operated by enemies. To the best of my knowledge, the latter are exclusively of the male sex. They are predominantly physicians by whom the patient has been treated. (544)

Writing at a clinical remove, Tausk does not fully acknowledge his own implication in these delusional narratives as yet another perceived persecutor, but Insel makes clear the potential threat posed by the doctor for the patient. If, as I have argued, the novel locates itself within a history of psychotherapies by telling the story of a particular therapeutic relation, it also exerts a critical force on that history by ethically assessing the risks of that therapeutic relation to its subject. As we will see, Insel shares with Tausk’s psychotics an abiding suspicion of the one who would “cure” him. Unlike the case studies with which the novel maintains such an uneasy relationship, Insel takes these suspicions quite seriously in order to consider its own ethical status as the document of such an attempted “cure.” In these moments of ethical self-reflection, the novel’s uneasy generic relationship with the case study comes to reflect that fraught relationship between doctor and patient. It is therefore crucial to consider to what extent the social dynamics between Jones and Insel are reflected in the text’s generic tension between novel and case study. In these dialogic vacillations, the text asks ethical questions about the conditions of its own production.
The effect of these self-reflections is that the ethical status of the case study itself is assessed. The novel therefore asks what may be the cost of such a document to the troubled subjects that it treats if the conditions of its production are not experienced as beneficial but as instead persecutory. In short, is there a form of exploitation specific to the clinic? \footnote{12}

It is to the fraught relationship of the clinic and the ethical status of the case study that we will now turn as they are both reconfigured within Insel. In the context of these questions, the novel’s technological poetics gain added significance. As we will see, the Jones-Insel rapport becomes a machine of writing whose end product may not be the patient’s relief, but rather a document freighted with cultural and professional capital: a case study. While the history of psychiatry and psychoanalysis shows that these two goals are not always mutually exclusive, neither are they fully coterminous. To verify this distinction, we need only consider the number of case studies that have become famous (granting their authors a degree of cultural capital) without indicating any therapeutic improvement in their patients. This potential difference between the patient’s relief and the writer’s professional success as operative goals becomes a point of ethical indictment in Loy’s novel — an indictment that extends to the clinical history that shadows the novel.

Insel’s ethical intervention therefore has two objects of critique: (1) the violence that might inhere in the asymmetrical relation between doctor and patient and (2) the subordination of the patient’s interests to the clinical writing that is then produced. The first critique, as we shall see, manifests through the novel’s unorthodox rearrangement of the therapeutic roles of doctor and patient. The novel integrates the complaint of the psychotic during the anxious scenes of “treatment” and accordingly restructures that relationship in radical ways. Such reorganization involves a shared psychological risk and burden for both “patient” and “doctor” such that these roles begin to lose their distinction. Finally, this restructured relationship will require an alternative understanding of authorship of the document that will record the progress of that relationship.

Jones’s singular rapport with Insel — her capacity to “tune in” to his hallucinated Strahlen and observe his dynamic investment and dissolution — is itself a kind of impossible fantasy of every analyst. She claims to have achieved precisely that which endlessly frustrated the father of psychoanalysis, and at one point she even declares that she has “superceded Freud” (166). We might tarry with this notion of the analyst’s fantasy or delusion as staged in Insel, for what further distinguishes the unorthodox lay analysis that Jones conducts is its failure, or perhaps refusal, to definitively establish and maintain the asymmetrical relationship between analyst and analysand.

Narrated in the first person, the novel offers only Jones’s vision of these hallucinations — hallucinations that Insel seems not to apprehend fully. It therefore becomes necessary to ask whether, at bottom, Insel has become Jones’s own hallucination, a suspicion that the text often supports: “By then, all that remained of Insel was a vague impression of trompe l’œil” (157); “Had I recalled the earlier
iridescent Insel, it could only have been as a figment of my insanity” (170). Elsewhere, the characters’ positions appear unexpectedly to reverse, relocating Insel in the role of doctor: “I had become for him a strange specimen, to whose slightest gesture he pinned an attention like that of a vindictive psychiatrist” (166). Jones’s exposure to Insel’s Strablen seems to have adverse effects on her own mental stability. Showing signs of paranoia herself, she begins to suspect that her thoughts have been compromised—that her words are now transmitted to her via Insel’s rays: “But I was beginning, myself, to feel unnatural. I distinctly detected my voice in ventriloquial emulation echo the wistful, surf-like swooning singing of his—‘Sterben — Man mu-u-us — Man mu-u-us’ ‘one — must — die’ (149). The suspicion is realized when she describes the experience of a complete loss of being that follows an extended visit with him:

The painless buoyancy lasted well into the night when, as I sat calmly at work in my hotel bedroom, I unexpectedly disintegrated. My body, which had hitherto made upon itself the impression of a compact mass, springing a multiplicity of rifts, changed to a fractional covering I can only compare to the spines of a porcupine; or rather vibrant streamers on which my density in plastic undulation was being carried away—perhaps into infinity. A greater dynamism than my own rushed in to fill the interstices. Looking down at myself I could see my sensation. The life-force blasting me apart instead of holding me together. It set up a harrowing excitement in my brain. An atomic despair—so awful—my confines broke down. I lost contour. Once more I found myself in the “impossible situation” in which one cannot remain—from which there is no issue. 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… (151)

By some effort of empathy, Jones has assumed Insel’s precarious way of being in the world, suffering complete ego-loss. As in the case of Insel, this loss is visually observed by Jones as a material, corporeal disintegration. An imaginary identification with Insel has occurred such that his pain has become her own. The price of this mimetic dissolution is that Jones is now also unable to achieve any rapport with the outside world.

I had found myself without any instrument with which to contact the universe.… But now I was at the mercy of an imperfect instrument. The antennae of the contact with the world in some way crippled for their function seemed—like the umbilical cord in abnormal birth—to be wound round my brain in a fearful constriction, implacable as iron barriers. (154–55)

Jones’s only channel of communion with the outside world is her reception of the erratic hallucinatory transmission from Insel, embodied in her own “imperfect antennae.” This is the solipsistic world of the psychotic for whom the capacity to distinguish self and other, inside and outside has been compromised. It is the troubled link to any outside or other that crushes Jones, figured appropriately here
as an umbilical cord wrapped around her brain. If Jones’s early care of Insel seemed strangely maternal, this image might suggest that she is now being reborn into Insel’s care, nurtured and at the same time crushed by his “life force.” The condition of psychosis is frequently described as an overwhelming and painful proximity to the other—where the separation of birth that would engender a distinct subject has not fully been achieved and what had been the source of nourishment and sustenance threatens to engulf.

Yet, Jones’s hope is that, in a kind of messianic logic, her moment of crisis will somehow become the condition of possibility for Insel’s reconstitution: “my dematerialization alone could bring him together again” (151). Having herself experienced radical subjective destitution and the uncanny sense of non-being/excessive-being that she had identified in Insel from the start, Jones begins to work back toward some more conventional form of what she calls “sociability,” hoping to bringing Insel with her. If this relationship can be described as a kind of therapy, it is one in which both share in the risk and suffering that are normally reserved for the patient alone.

Yet, there is reason to suspect that this therapeutic program is not the only reason for their interaction. From an early moment in their relationship, Mrs. Jones had decided to document Insel’s story for publication. This agenda repeatedly returns as a primary motive behind her care for him. These potentially competing interests make the nature of their relationship ambiguous both to Insel, who is already prone to paranoid breaks, and to us as readers. There is a fear that she is simply using him as material for a novel that will redeem her failing literary career, a fear which qualifies the altruistic motives that she seems to present.

Yet, these two agendas—the therapeutic and the literary—often seem consonant in their mutual determination of Jones’s behavior. In the interest of collecting material for her literary work, Jones prompts Insel to read from autobiographical notes he has kept, a request that inadvertently advances her apparent effort to bring him back to a more functional “sociability.” The return from the miraculous, non-verbal communion via his Strahlen to some linguistic exchange precipitates a shift in Insel’s being that resembles the “talking cure”:

This communication of an actual transcription of a mental process had reinforced his sociability. His contacts ordinarily depending almost entirely on his Strahlen, for the moment our companionship was complete. (148)

Incrementally, then, Jones brings Insel back into the fold of the symbolic from the brink of psychotic dissolution. But, in a compensatory movement, Jones seems to suffer more acutely the experiences that had distinguished Insel at the same time that his social and linguistic capacities are restored. If this is a form of therapeutic exchange, it is a radical break from those techniques that Loy had investigated. It soon becomes difficult to attribute the roles of doctor and patient to either of the characters. In the process, Jones has fully entered Insel’s delusional world, and, as the novel proceeds down this path, additional symptoms of his condition become manifest for Jones.
One such symptom offers a clue as to what, for Loy, lies “beyond Freud” in her understanding of madness and its treatment. On several occasions, Insel lapses into a near mesmeric state in which he becomes preoccupied with a singular experience of time. At one point, Jones spontaneously decides to view a lengthy film with a group of friends. Upon exiting the Parisian cinema, she remembers that she had planned to meet with Insel hours earlier. When she finally arrives, he seems completely unaware that he had been waiting for hours. Through the second half of the novel, this altered relation to the passage of time becomes a central symptom of Insel’s condition. As Mrs. Jones enters deeper into Insel’s world, she also experiences the lapse of temporal orientation that had distinguished Insel.

I could not make out whether the cause was a shift in the relative tempos of a cosmic and micro-cosmic “pulsation,” whether my instant — the instant of a reductive perceiver — passed through some preponderant magnifier and enlarged, or whether a concept (become gnarled in one’s brain through restriction to the brain’s capacity) unwinding at leisure, was drawing my perception — infinitely soothed — along with it. For again this novel aspect of time seemed, like light, to arrive in rays focusing on the brain at a minimum akin to images on retinas; and the further one projected one’s being to meet it, the broader one found it to be. Anyway, it was useless trying to analyze it. This alone was certain. It was absolutely engrossing to the mind, although nothing brief enough for us to cognize happened in this longer time. (174)

In her altered state, Jones is able to visualize an oceanic flow of time — an experience, it seems, that is available only to those with instruments of reception sensitive enough for its detection. If the madness that Jones has assumed on behalf of Insel entails a crisis of being, it also affords peculiar epistemological faculties. It appears that Jones has indeed moved beyond Freud. In breaking with more familiar forms of “treatment” of mental illness, the novel puts pressure on the condition’s very status as “illness.” Other theorists of the mind offered likely sources for Loy’s critique, understanding madness as not simply a state of deficiency or defect, but as perhaps something else entirely. The passage above offers clues to several sources that assisted Loy in her move “beyond Freud” in understanding this difficult way of being in the world. The emphasis on an expanded sense of “duration” must be read as a reference to Henri Bergson, whose work was a great source of inspiration to Loy. His theories of mind, along with those of Bergson’s occasional colleague Frederic Myers, constitute additional threads in the long history of psychology woven into the fabric of Insel.

While symptoms of hysteria and schizophrenia had been treated as pathological conditions by most of the psychiatric community, Frederic Myers found in these cases evidence of psychological abilities yet to come. Myers was the leader of the British Society for Psychical Research, an organization that, while somewhat marginal for the breadth of its investigations, was nevertheless well-respected by the international psychological community around the turn of the twentieth century.15 What was generally regarded as mental illness was, for Myers, evidence of new mental faculties that were the most recent products of human evolution. In his
quasi-Darwinian account, humanity had only begun to fully investigate these new epistemological faculties which were to be encouraged and fostered through proper scientific means rather than stigmatized as a failure of self-control or as "feminine weakness," as they were often described. Loy was an enthusiastic reader of Myers's studies on psychical research, and evidence of his influence can be found in Insel as well as in much of her poetry. Myers's work offers a likely source for the notion that the delusional experiences of Insel and Jones might not simply be pathological breakdowns, but signal new forms of sensitivity to questions of being and time.

Myers was not entirely alone in his fascination with these altered mental conditions. The figure of the "gifted hyster" became a familiar type in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular discourse. However, the nomination soon came to describe not only those individuals' strange ability to access an uncanny source of knowledge (whether psychological, spiritual, or metaphysical); it also indicated the highly dramatic and possibly fraudulent character of those who were all too willing to perform the part. Still, many believed that deeper truths could be learned from hysterics and psychotics. For the celebrity psychologist and philosopher Henri Bergson, these extreme cases offered singular windows into the fundamental nature of temporality in a way that agrees closely with Mrs. Jones's experiences of duration in Insel.

In Matter and Memory, Bergson argues that abnormal psychology and psychopathology may be valuable resources for developing his theory of mind as a variable capacity to experience temporality. Many pathological states are, for him, limit experiences whose most crucial aspects are the altered perception of time or duration.

Without denying to psychology, any more than to metaphysics, the right to make itself into an independent science, we believe that each of these two sciences should set problems to the other and can, in a measure, help it to solve them. How should it be otherwise, if psychology has for its object the study of the human mind working for practical utility, and if metaphysics is but this same mind striving to transcend the conditions of useful action and to come back to itself as to a pure creative energy? (15)

It is precisely such transcendence of "the conditions of useful action" and a return to some "pure creative energy" that might describe the limit experiences of Insel and Mrs. Jones. Such an exceptional attunement to some undefined "energy" appears to distinguish the two, often at the expense of more "practical utility": while Jones becomes able to directly experience something like this "duration" as a "pure creative energy," she also forfeits her capacity for action and "sociable" participation in the world. Insel tarry in this almost mystical state past the point of no return, and his ability to work and perform socially is severely compromised. We might compare Jones's ecstatic experience of duration with a similar account offered by Bergson:

That which is usually held to be a greater complexity of the psychical state appears to us, from our point of view, to be a greater dilation of the whole personality, which normally narrowed by action, expands with the unscrewing of the vice in which it has
allowed itself to be squeezed, and, always whole and undivided, spreads itself over a wider and wider surface. (15)

In both accounts, personal identity affects a constriction of this oceanic passage of time. It is crucial to note that in this instance Jones continues to witness the flow of visual rays, although they no longer seem to be identified with Insel but are now felt to be an impersonal temporal pulsation that perhaps exceeds or overwhelms personal identity. In her experience of this overwhelming duration, Mrs. Jones feels a sense of expansion to the point of diffusion or dissemination. Bergson suggests that attunement to this oceanic sense of duration is at odds with the practical operations of the brain which reduce complexity in the service of decisive action. It is the antimony between the practical relation to time and some more expanded and full sense of duration that was central to his metaphysics and psychology.

For Bergson, complexity of consciousness is the result of a deferral of action in time, the adjudication of multiple courses of action, and the ultimate execution of that decision. By contrast, in lower organisms which lack this complexity of consciousness, sense data are immediately followed by reaction in a mechanical automatism or reflex. It is in the interval of duration when action is deferred and a "zone of indetermination" opens up that consciousness and will emerge for Bergson. Duration—the prolonged experience of time—is what distinguishes sentience.

Insel, and eventually Mrs. Jones, seems to occupy a strange place in this scale of complexity of consciousness, and this strange position suggests a radically different understanding of "madness" than that produced by the history of psychotherapies. Insel is sometimes described as an "automaton," which might suggest that his behavior is fully unconscious as in Bergson's understanding of lower organisms, which lack consciousness, or even as "subhuman," as the insane sometimes appear in clinical descriptions. However, as we have seen, the phenomenological account of the condition that Mrs. Jones finally offers from the "inside" suggests not a lack in awareness of time but rather an overwhelming experience of it. Yet, the text's affectively ambivalent description from a perspective "inside" this experience resists any easy romanticization of the painful and anxious condition. For this overwhelming experience of time entails a deferral of action that never finally ends in decision. As this deferral continues, the possible courses of actions multiply without end—a scenario that is staged in Insel's difficult relationship, as painter, to the blank canvas. Insel confesses, "I can create everything. Then what thing? A thousand directions are open to me, to take whichever I decided—I cannot decide" (174).

In tarrying over the parallel worlds that he might actualize with his brush, he dilates in duration. "It had taken so short a time for this parting of the ways to subdivide into the thousand directions. Yet even now he was rich in postponement" (176; emphasis mine). Insel has become a zone of indetermination, not simply an automatism submerged in the relays of its environment as Mrs. Jones initially described him earlier in the novel. In Bergson's implicit chain of being—predicated on complexity of consciousness and structurally similar to Frederic Myers's quasi-Darwinian claims—it would seem that Insel has become a more advanced
creature. The novel itself implies that there is something miraculous about its titular character, suggesting a potential reevaluation of the "illness" as, instead, something like a gift. However, such a gift is an ambivalent and ambiguous combination of singular abilities and painful burdens. As the novel refuses to resolve this ambiguity, it clearly departs from the tradition of clinical writing that is comparatively univocal in its diagnosis and pathologization. In this ambiguity, we find the text qua novel resisting the generic proximity to case study. If Insel does not offer a final and decisive evaluation of its title character's condition, it does demand that "madness" be written and read in many voices. We find precisely these ambivalent and polyvocal methods of writing madness over-running the generic authority of the case study in the novel's climactic breakdown.

In this final moment in their relationship, Jones shares a vision of Insel's possible worlds of paint, still only in the parallel states of his mind. Then, just as quickly, the flashing images fade in a realization that qualifies the ecstatic vision with recognition of that state's perils.

Because it was only a brain that had been spilled, the blank of orientation faded — the thousand directions withdrew, leaving us at a destination.

Nothingness.

It was not black as night nor white as day, nor gray as death — only a nonexistent irritation as to what purposed inconsequence had led us into the illusion of ever having come into being.

The haunting thing about this Nothingness was that it knew we were still there — Two unmatched arrows sprung from its meaningless center — were surrounded by a numeral halo — I had to leave Insel, it was ten to eight. (176)

A period of extreme potential agency — during which Insel becomes a center of possible actions — ends in a sense of the inconsequence that any action could have with respect to this full and overwhelming "duration." Two unequal hands of a clock, Insel and Jones are reduced to functions that simply mark time in an effort to assert their distinct being. Formally and generically, this moment of ontological insight is hardly the stuff of a clinical case study, nor do we find a clear sense of narratological stability. Rather, this moment constitutes a generic breakdown that reflects the subjective dissolution Insel and Jones experience. What emerges is an epiphanic lyricism that recalls Loy's often vatic poetry.

Finally, at this moment of crisis, Jones feels the need to depart from Insel. By marking the time, Jones seems to restore some sense of practical temporality for herself and perhaps for Insel — a final strategy for restoring his "sociability." At precisely this moment, when Jones has finally confronted the crisis of being and the expansion of time that are constitutive of Insel's condition, she draws back from the brink and the two part ways. The urgency of her decision suggests that this separation is crucial not only for Insel, but also for her.

When they next meet, she has accomplished the miracle of practical sublimation: turning these catastrophic experiences into a literary product, a document that resembles and perhaps becomes the novel that we now hold. But this is, of course,
a strange kind of “sublimation” if we insist on a clear distinction between analyst and patient, Jones and Insel, each with their own libidinal economies. Rather, through the series of breakdowns and catexes, the two have merged into a single assemblage which transforms Insel’s painful drives into a literary product.

As we have seen, Loy employs a panoply of technological metaphors to describe the connections between Insel and Jones: at times, she has been a radio receiver for his transmissions and a photographic film capturing and recording his aural rays. Now she has transposed those media into narrative. Media theorist Friedrich Kittler argues that twentieth-century discourse is best described as endless “transposition of media,” in which the mind becomes simply another technological medium (alongside print, radio, cinema) for the transfer of information. Rather than employ the psychoanalytic language of sublimation, then, we might say that a transposition of media has occurred in which Insel’s erratic and aural transmissions have become textualized through his sympathetic assemblage with Mrs. Jones. Or, more accurately, we might see how both vocabularies — the psychoanalytic and the technological — are mutually imbricated in a historical syncretism of discourses. This would suggest that patient and analyst, to the extent that these roles still obtain, become a writing machine — a libidinal and discursive collaboration that might complicate the attribution of authorship to a single, heroic analyst or avant-garde writer. If the novel proposes an alternative “clinical” relationship, it also redefines its own authorship.

And yet, while this collaborative assemblage is clearly the precondition for the text’s production, a separation between Jones and Insel does occur. Jones has retreated to complete a text which will bear her name and grant her (and only her) the cultural capital that she had perhaps been pursuing from the start. When the two meet again, a palpable sense of loss and guilt condition their exchange as he teases her about her great work, which will now restore her literary career. In reply, she makes explicit the transaction that had occurred:

I longed to get even with Insel, to say “I have absorbed all your Strahlen. Now what are you going to do?” . . . for one thing one feared as above all else menacing Insel was some climax in which his depredatory radioactivity must inevitably give out. (178)

Jones’s work has bought her a new lease on a flagging literary career, but these lines suggest that it has been paid for with Insel’s very being, transmitted to her in the form of his Strahlen. As in the inaugural moment of subjectivity in the psychoanalytic narrative, overwhelming polymorphous jouissance has been exchanged for words. Indeed, an undeniably melancholic sense of loss not only suspends the notion that Jones’s unorthodox “treatment” of Insel has been a success, but also forces the question of what the cost of such a “success” might be to its patient, who has been left behind while the writer enjoys the fruits of their encounters. As the narrator insists, the greatest fear is that the miraculous singularity of Insel’s being might finally give out — that his transmissions might stop. That she has “stolen his rays” in order to write her book suggests that a kind of violence has indeed occurred.
That such violence is figured as the condition of possibility for her book haunts its final pages, transforming the ethical status of the document that we read. Further, this ethical self-indictment sends us back to the tradition of psychiatric and psychoanalytic case studies that shadows the novel. This late moment of ethical reflection in the novel anticipates the cultural movement of antipsychiatry which, decades later, would reconsider what might be an ethical form of care and sympathy for the insane. In the 1950s and 60s, in England, France and the United States, alternative ways of understanding and relating to persons suffering from psychosis would emerge, many of which would reconfigure the asymmetrical relation between doctor and patient in ways that Insel clearly anticipates.

It is therefore tempting to find in Insel a novelistic staging of a history of psychotherapies—from the somatic treatments of mesmerism, to the talking cure of Freud, to the quasi-evolutionary optimism of Myers and Bergson, to the ethical reconsiderations and revisions that would become antipsychiatry. If such a historical narrative is the shadow that haunts Loy’s novel, it is because she invokes the moments of that long history, using the resources of the novel to make those modes of treatment co-present to one another. In doing so, she is able to consider how their “successes” might have little to do with the patients’ well-being and more to do with the writing wrung from those suffering patients. However, she also returns to those various treatments in order to rediscover their forgotten or ignored potential for sympathy and connection, perhaps finding an ethical kernel in their different strategies.

In her ambivalent vacillation toward and against these various treatments, Loy proposes a series of alternative visions of the diagnosis, treatment and writing of “madness.” These visions do not constitute a complete program or doctrine but function as thought experiments or counterfactual scenarios—operations that could be achieved only through the subjunctive resources of the novel. At the very least, these thought experiments clarify some of the unrepresented and competing aims of professionalized treatments. At most, her novelistic investigation of the clinic subjects those aims to radical ethical scrutiny, multiplying the kinds of voices in which “madness” may be written. The novel leads us to ask not whether any such treatment might be possible, but whether a treatment, however hypothetical, is finally desirable.

Notes
1. Remarkably, the novel has been the subject of exactly one critical essay, Tyrus Miller’s “More or Less Silent: Mina Loy’s Novel Insel” in his book Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts Between the World Wars. An earlier version of the chapter appears as “Everyman His Own Fluroscope: Mina Loy’s Insel Between Aura and Image Machine” in Mina Loy: Woman and Poet, Schreiber and Tuma (ed.).
2. In recent psychoanalytic theory, a fundamental failure of language is a distinguishing feature in the diagnosis of psychosis (Lacan). It is this linguistic deficiency that makes transferential relationships with psychotics and therefore the psychoanalytic treatment of them extremely difficult.
3. Attempting to engage the psychotic Endon in a chess match, Murphy comes to find that his opponent fails to acknowledge his own existence, instead playing a solipsistic game in which he moves his pieces around the board without engaging (Beckett 241–47). The scenario is not unlike the analyst who is unable to achieve with a psychotic the transferential engagement necessary for the work of analysis.

4. For a fine account of the difficulties facing the psychoanalytic treatment of psychotics, see Fink, 79–112.

5. Carolyn Burke describes this meeting with Freud in Becoming Modern, 313. For a consideration of Loy's psychoanalytic curiosity and research also see Keith Tuma, 181–204.

6. For helpful histories of psychoanalysis and its continuities with earlier forms of psychological treatment, see Ellenberger; Bynum, Porter, Shepherd; Micale.

7. For a useful study of Mesmerism's historical and cultural influence and its relation to Freudian psychoanalysis, see Crabtree.

8. Materialist traces can be found in Freud's 1895 Project for a Scientific Psychology, Henri Bergson's Matter and Memory and Bergson's collection of lectures and essays published as Mind-Energy.


10. Evidence of how transference emerged as an early subject of scrutiny, see August Forel's Hypnotism; or Suggestion and Psychotherapy (1889).

11. First published in 1919, the article was later included in The Psychoanalytic Quarterly (1933) 2: 519–56. The convergence of technophobia and clinical psychosis has since become a common theme in science fiction such as Philip K. Dick's VALIS, in which the narrator suspects that his thoughts are transmitted to him and monitored from a satellite system via colorful rays (a delusion based on Dick's own schizophrenic experiences more elaborately described in his sprawling manuscript Exegesis, excerpts of which have been published as In Pursuit of Exegesis.

12. The critique of the case study as an instrument of biopower was, of course, one of Michel Foucault's most durable contributions and was one of the products of the antipsychiatry movement with which he was affiliated. The abiding interest in the case study as an ethnically fraught genre in not only psychoanalysis and psychiatry but also legal studies, sociology and literary studies is evident in a recent issue of Critical Inquiry (Summer 2007). For other valuable meditations on the problem of the case study as genre, see Bernheimer and Kahane; Ragin and Becker; Seltzer.

13. Tyrus Miller emphasizes that Insel, rather than Mrs. Jones, assumes the role of lay or "wild" analyst (Miller 215). In my reading, Jones's primary role in rehabilitating Insel is clear, although the instability of roles is evident.

14. In the Lacanian theory of psychosis, a rapport on only the "imaginary" axis is possible, the "symbolic" being foreclosed for the psychotic.

15. In a eulogistic article, "Frederic Myers's Service to Psychology" (1901), William James pronounced that Myers's work would have the greatest influence on future psychological research. That article, along with James's own extensive contributions to psychological research, has been collected in Essays in Psychical Research.


Works Cited


