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“To See Where Her Strength Resides”

Being Here Is Everything: The Life of Paula Modersohn-Becker by Marie Darrieussecq.

Translated by Penny Hueston. 2017; semiotext(e)/MIT Press; Cambridge, MA; 160 pp; \$17.95 paperback

By Jonathan Shirland¹

“Monsters, dressed in period costume, so kitsch”; “a pair of wax mannequins, a two-headed grotesquerie”; “a village pickled in tourism”; “and her grave is horrible”, all within the first page and a half. Marie Darrieussecq cautions that, “let us not forget the horror that accompanies the wonder; the horror of this story, if a life is a story” (p.12) early in her short, disorientating exploration of the German painter Paula Modersohn-Becker. Darrieussecq need not worry, for her account is haunting as well as haunted. Yet, the sense that Modersohn-Becker was real, as palpable as her own richly textured paintings, is just as strong. For a novelist like Darrieussecq, ensuring that the real lived subject in this particular study remains visible and is not only or even overly imagined is paramount. The clipped first lines of the book signal this: “she was here. On Earth and in her house” (p.11). Darrieussecq also returns to this emphasis in her final lines, “Paula is here, with her pictures. We are going to see her” (p.151). The intensity with which the Darrieussecq strives to get us to “see” the painter is unsettling; we are repeatedly instructed to “look” especially at a kaleidoscope of moments evoking her friendship with the sculptor Clara Westhoff: “see them speeding home on a sled from their classes. See them later in Paris, preparing five bottles of punch and two cakes, one almond, the other strawberry, for a student party. See them canoeing on the Marne...see them in Montmartre, laughing as they resist a marauding nun who wants to convert them...see them again in Worpswede” (p.16). These snapshots also ensure that the gothic-tinged horror that casts a shadow over the book (as much about the fate of Germany as Modersohn-Becker’s own demise) never overwhelms the celebration of life’s triumphs and joys however circumscribed by tragic circumstance. This intermingling is encapsulated in the terrifying history Darrieussecq uncovers beneath the bucolic artist’s colony of Worpswede in Northern Germany: “in Roman times adulterous women were buried in the peat with their breasts facing up. Their intact bodies can be found in the marshes today. For a thousand years, their mouths have been open to the horror of the peat...to the dust gathering in the church” (p.38). The same church where “Paula and Clara”, clad in white ankle-length dresses, scaled the tower and rang the bells in one of their most scandalous escapades one Sunday evening in August 1900.

The vivid descriptions encompassing the mundane and monumental make the book feel more like a funeral eulogy for a departed friend than a biography of an artist who died in 1907. Darrieussecq is acutely aware of this: “I have written this little biography...because I miss this woman I never knew...I want to do her more than justice: I want to bring her *being-there*, splendor” (p.142). The disarming directness of the writing also feels in-keeping with the painter’s

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own search for pictorial intimacy through formal simplicity.² Yet the tricks of the novelist persist throughout the book – phrases are often repeated for emphasis, whilst sudden temporal and spatial shifts add to the enigmatic, fragmentary and elliptical style of the writing. These dialectical tensions – between haunted imaginings and an insistence of life really lived; gothic horror and joyful rebellion; and between the novel and the biography – presage other balanced dualities in this rewarding book and are particularly appropriate given the liminal position of Modersohn-Becker (art) historically, for she is exemplary of the fate of so many female artists, and at the same time an invigorating exception.

Darrieussecq first came across Modersohn-Becker's work in 2010 when she received an email advertising a colloquium about psychoanalysis and motherhood which included a tiny reproduction of the painter's *Reclining Mother and Child II* from 1906. The painting is one of a number of images of maternity Paula Modersohn-Becker executed that break from the idealized sentimentality dominating Euro-American art traditions. The "knowledge" about comfortable breast-feeding encapsulated in the lying down pose with child mirroring the mother and bound symmetrically by milky drowsiness powerfully affected Darrieussecq who was breastfeeding her third child at the time. It was the realness of Modersohn-Becker's women that struck the loudest chord for they are, "neither coquettish, nor exotic, nor provocative, nor victims, nor distraught, nor fat, nor colossal, nor sculptural, nor ethereal...she shows what she sees" (p.122). In this relief, Darrieussecq is the most fitting of all Modersohn-Becker's biographers since the French writer has herself dismantled clichés about motherhood and the ongoing pursuit of artistic creativity in her work, most notably in *The Baby*, written in 2001.³ Indeed, the homology between writer and painter goes further since both have explored other threshold moments in female lives such as adolescence.⁴ Diane Radycki reminds us that this discursive category was itself largely a product of the nineteenth century, and Becker more generally "painted the female at ages outside the sexual economy: not Matisse's wife, not Picasso's whores, but the postmenopausal old woman and the premenstrual girl".⁵ Despite being primarily known for a handful of nude self-portraits (probably the first such works ever painted by a woman), Modersohn-Becker actually produced a dense 'body' of work totaling over 700 paintings and 1,700 works on paper, three-quarters of which were based on the female figure at various life stages. Even her landscapes and still-lives are marked by embodied female experience – most obviously in the way Modersohn-Becker describes the young birch trees that recur in her Worpswede works as her "delicate, slender virgins", and those with stronger, straighter trunks "my modern women".⁶ In most studies of the painter, it is her avoidance of anything "sentimental" that is most valorized and Darrieussecq continues to consider this the

² See, for example, Diane Radycki, *Paula Modersohn-Becker: The First Modern Woman Artist*, Yale University Press: New Haven and London, 2013, p.69.

³ The two most important biographies in English are by Gillian Perry, published in 1979 and by Diane Radycki in 2013. But the most influential writing about the artist remains Rainer Maria Rilke's moving poem *Requiem for a Friend*, written almost exactly a year after Modersohn-Becker's death. Although the "friend" is never explicitly named in the 271 lines, it continues to shape attempts to write about her life and art to this day, including Darrieussecq's. But it is telling that when Rilke wrote a monograph about the Worpswede art colony 6 years earlier he neglects to mention Modersohn-Becker at all.

⁴ For example, see Marie Darrieussecq's novel *Clèves (All the Way)*, published in 2011.

⁵ Diane Radycki, *First Modern Woman Artist*, p.113.

⁶ For a reading of her domestic still-lives and the ways in which the "chores of marketing and cooking interject themselves into the subject matter" and thereby reveal how time for women is constantly interrupted see Radycki, *First Modern Woman Artist*, pp.105-110.

ultimate form of abuse to level at any artist. She also stresses the self-confidence in Modersohn-Becker's bodily matter-of-factness. Modersohn-Becker was a devotee of the German naturist movement even though her paintings are less to do with narcissism than they are about the work of the artist; as Darrieussecq puts it, "in any case she always looks happy naked" (p.127).

The fact that Darrieussecq first encountered Modersohn-Becker through her paintings rather than her letters and journals is important. It underpins what for me are the most powerful sections of the book: the vivid articulations of actual artworks. It is not until page 77 that we are offered a detailed description of one of Modersohn-Becker's portraits of a young girl, but when we are, it erupts powerfully from the text, providing compelling interpretations of pose, viewpoint and use of sunlight. Paradoxically, it is here that Darrieussecq's talents as a novelist are at their most lyrical. Having described in topographic terms the chin and curving forehead in the depiction of Elspeth (Modersohn-Becker's step-daughter), we are then offered the memorable formulation that "her face is forever tilted toward childhood" (p.81). For although, as Darrieussecq declares, "the paintings exist. They are sufficient unto themselves", she also falls back on the irreducible differences between visual and verbal modes of thinking asking, "How do you write paintings? ...There is a huge gap between the words and images. Dreams and projections arise from the fault line" (p.102). Nonetheless, this "fault line" remains forged through the artworks themselves, rather than the "projections" emanating from snippets of lived experience embalmed into an artist's writings and simply read off the artworks, reducing the latter to mere illustrations. This relegation of artworks to biographical quarry (in both senses) is, of course, something female artists have been particularly subjected to. As a result, it is to Darrieussecq's great credit that she mines the voluminous archives written by Modersohn-Becker without allowing the material reality and independence of the artworks to get effaced. Darrieussecq's determination to make us 'see' the pictures made by Modersohn-Becker on their own terms is perversely made manifest by the absence of any illustrations in the book, which is unusual for a biography of a visual artist. This lack of images could be levelled as the greatest weakness of the book, but it makes the incantatory written insistences that we 'see' running throughout the text more visionary and impels readers to seek out reproductions.

The danger of an artist's writings providing an apparent shortcut to meaning is acute in the case of the German painter since her letters and journals have outstripped in popularity her visual output, and have been responsible for the kinds of sentimentalized reactions to her self-portraits that she strove so hard to avoid when painting them.⁷ First appearing in 1913, her letters and journal have been printed in a range of publications, the most popular of which was reprinted 14 times with a print-run of 45,000 as early as 1936.⁸ Modersohn-Becker's deceptively cheerful writings focus on balancing the roles of daughter, wife, stepmother and artist and captivated German audiences turning her into a "domestic heroine".⁹ Modersohn-Becker herself died of an embolism 18 days after the difficult birth of her first child Mathilde on November 2 1907.¹⁰ Her reluctance to have children with her Worpswede painter husband Otto Modersohn charted in her journals adds to the pathos of her paintings that re-work the tired clichés of motherhood. This poignancy is

⁷ Although they are normally published together, Darrieussecq does explain that the letters are more humorous than the journal writing as the latter "gets bogged down in symbolism" (p.54).

⁸ See Radycki, *First Modern Woman Artist*, p.34.

⁹ See Radycki, *First Modern Woman Artist*, p.204.

¹⁰ The embolism was partly caused by her being ordered to lie-down for so long after the birth. Caren Beilin has caustically remarked that her death was a product, "of the belief that women would heal best if they were to marinate in their own passivity, at length". See the reviews section of the website *Full Stop*, November 10 2017.

heightened by her recurrent written hope that she would not die young and even more by the fact that her most famous nude self-portrait shows her with a pronounced swelling belly and carries the inscription, “I painted this at the age of thirty, on my sixth wedding anniversary, PB”. It is hard not to let the circumstances of her premature end cement the ‘meaning’ of this work; at the very least, as Whitney Chadwick has put it, “Modersohn-Becker’s death a few days after giving birth provides an ironic commentary on the gulf between idealized motherhood and the biological realities of fecundity”.¹¹ Yet, as Darrieussecq stresses, Modersohn-Becker was not actually pregnant when this piece was made, and would not be for another 10 months (the date of her sixth wedding anniversary was May 25 1906). As a result, her most famous work is more about, “imagining herself pregnant. Making a game of sticking out her belly, arching her back, her navel protruding. *Just to see*. The self-portrait as auto-fiction” (p.126). This is more significant than making more nuanced the biographical interpretation of an iconic work, for Darrieussecq is, in effect, drawing attention to the fact that the division between life experienced and life imagined is far more porous than historians often allow. Whilst the facts of Modersohn-Becker’s life are powerfully determinate, what simultaneously comes across in Darrieussecq’s account is the critical role of role-playing in her story – a performativity as integral to the projection of the image of a turn-of-the-century progressive artist as to the gendered masquerades so embedded in feminist theory. In other words, it is both as artist and as woman that Modersohn-Becker straddles the experienced and the imagined, in ways that speak to the strictures binding female artists but also the liberating possibilities role-playing offered during the processes of creative self-fashioning. Her life was certainly restricted, but not to the same degree as the peasant sitters populating her canvases.

A main axis of the biography is Modersohn-Becker’s oscillation between Worpswede and Paris – this rebounding back and forth allows Darrieussecq to generate a strong German/French dialectic, suggesting that although the painter was better known in the former, she was actually artistically rooted in the latter. Arguments have long been made for the liberating potential of Paris since it was the only European city where female students could paint nude models and learn anatomy. But Diane Radycki has recently asserted that Germany provided her and her female contemporaries with equally important “psychic freedoms” precisely because it was an art historical “elsewhere”.¹² This partial redrawing of the feminist art historical map is rich in potential, and Darrieussecq’s fragmentary account enhances this sense of a central polarity, but it does have negative consequences such as the marginalization of Modersohn-Becker’s time studying in London in 1892, which is reduced to half a sentence in the biography. Nonetheless, the sensation of movement remains an important reminder that although many readers have been moved by the suffocating claustrophobia permeating her writings, Modersohn-Becker traveled widely and often unchaperoned. She also studied in three different European countries and her artistic development is rooted in urban experiences as well as in the soils of Worpswede. She was not so ‘buried in peat’ like the Germanic adulterers of centuries past as to be immobile and the various relationships coursing throughout the biography – for this is partly a story of a close network of friendships – are formed, broken and repaired across multiple cosmopolitan locations.¹³

¹¹ Whitney Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society*, 5th edition, Thames & Hudson: New York, 2012, p.290.

¹² See Radycki, *First Modern Artist*, pp.100-102.

¹³ As well as instructing us to “see” Modersohn-Becker and Clara Westhoff in the biography, Darrieussecq also urges us to “look at Rilke” at various points, and, with reference to Otto Modersohn and Heinrich Vogeler, “let us look at men struggling with women” (p.74).

One extended section of the book concerns the author's trip to Essen in May 2014 to visit the Museum Folkwang, home of *Self-Portrait with a Camellia Branch*. Despite being used in publicity materials by the museum, the painting was half-hidden in the poorly-lit basement alongside other works by women whilst the Gauguin's and Picasso's occupied the upstairs. In this respect, the institutional treatment of Modersohn-Becker is depressingly typical of female artists more broadly.¹⁴ Yet, today Modersohn-Becker fits awkwardly in a 'neglected female artist' category just as she does in any of the art historical movements writers have tried to put her in over the past century. That she suffered thwarted ambition and misunderstanding on account of her gender during her lifetime and in posthumous appraisals is beyond question; but at the same time, she has been subject to repeated critical resuscitations and important celebrations that begin just a few years after her death.¹⁵ Nor should it be forgotten that the first museum in Europe ever devoted to a female artist was the Paula Becker-Modersohn Haus opened in Bremen, which opened in 1927. Modersohn-Becker's fame as a radical artist has certainly waxed and waned, but she has not been ignored and nor has she been invisible art historically, certainly relative to virtually all other female artists. Indeed, Darrieussecq's book should itself be seen as part of the latest of these periodic celebrations, and not just because it helped to inspire the Musée d'Art in Paris to hold a retrospective of her work for 5 months in 2016.¹⁶ Diane Radycki's triumphalist monograph published in 2013 mirrors and informs Darrieussecq's account and Modersohn-Becker's work has also benefitted from the close attention paid to female art students in Paris over the past decade.¹⁷ More broadly, she is the most likely female artist to be included in textbooks about German Expressionism and, indeed, the development of Modernism beyond Impressionism more broadly. It is perhaps most accurate to recognize that Modersohn-Becker has been both 'seen' and 'not-seen', rather than just the latter.

The title of this review is taken from page 93 of the biography when Darrieussecq is pondering a photograph of Modersohn-Becker from the winter of 1904 and tries "to see where her strength resides". For me, the answer lies in the painter's betwixt and between-ness in a variety of ways: rural and urban; German and French; trapped yet mobile; neglected yet celebrated; typical yet exceptional; rebellious yet "pious" ("frohm" in German, to use the term running through her and Rilke's letters to one another and that Darrieussecq highlights to convey the "bubble" that the artist lived in before the slaughterhouse of the 20th century gets underway).

Modersohn-Becker has also become a central medium through which feminist scholars have tried to re-write art history and yet she is at the same time one of the female artists most liable to be cast in the conventional patriarchal terms of "genius" and placed alongside Picasso. This liminal doubling is also the best way to make sense of her works in that they are increasingly posited as a threshold paving the way for diverse female artists ranging from Suzanne Valadon to

¹⁴ Modersohn-Becker only sold three works during her lifetime – to her close friends.

¹⁵ Radycki notes that, "over the course of World War I, Modersohn-Becker went from someone who in 1913 was lent legitimacy by association with the (capitalized) names of Worpswede artists to an artist who in 1919 had her own name recognition, which now was lending validation to the art colony". See Radycki, *First Modern Woman Artist*, p.193.

¹⁶ For example, there were two important international exhibitions of her work in 2007, as part of a wider recognition of the centenary of her death, whilst the Fall/Winter edition of *Woman's Art Journal* in 2009 was dedicated entirely to her.

¹⁷ A good example is the current exhibition *Woman Artists in Paris 1850-1900* traveling to the Denver Art Museum, Speed Art Museum in Kentucky and the Frank and Sterling Clark Art Institute in Massachusetts. 4 works by Modersohn-Becker are included alongside 90 paintings by 37 other female artists.

Francesca Woodman, Jenny Holzer and Cindy Sherman. But, at the same time, they collaborate with nineteenth-century archetypes of womanhood, and partake in the primitivist tendencies of many of her male contemporaries, albeit with a greater sense of dignity afforded to the figures. It is not that Modersohn-Becker is able to resolve all these dualities; it is that she makes them more visible. The same could be said of Darrieussecq's book, as it slips into and out of more settled biographical conventions. And the effort "to see" is at once its method, ideology and ambition.