

03

«EVERY WRITER CREATES THEIR OWN PRECURSORS»: MARIE DARRIEUSSECQ ON PAULA MODERSOHN- BECKER

«Cada escritor crea sus precursores»:
Marie Darrieussecq sobre Paula
Modersohn-Becker

ARIADNA ÁLVAREZ GAVELA

Universidad Complutense de Madrid

Fecha de recepción: 4 de abril de 2021

Fecha de aceptación: 28 de septiembre de 2021

ABSTRACT

The French novelist Marie Darrieussecq published in 2016 a biography of the German painter Paula Modersohn-Becker, known for having been the first woman to portray herself naked. This article introduces this text in an interpretive struggle that has marked the reception of Modersohn-Becker's work in feminist criticism from the 1970s to the present. Contrasting the vision that Darrieussecq offers of the German artist with that of art historians such as Linda Nochlin, Roszika Parker or Griselda Pollock, the reasons that the French author uses to present Modersohn-Becker as a pioneering artist in the development of an artistic language that is articulated in feminine are identified and analyzed. In addition, a hypothesis that runs through the article is deployed: Darrieussecq constructs Paula Modersohn-Becker as a transdisciplinary referent, a precursor who, beyond her scope of expression, the plastic, was able to expand the boundaries of female self-representation.

47

Keywords

Biography, female self-representation, nude, woman and nature, female artists.

RESUMEN

La narradora francesa Marie Darrieussecq publicó en 2016 una biografía de la pintora alemana Paula Modersohn-Becker, conocida por haber sido la primera mujer en autorretratarse desnuda. El presente artículo introduce este texto en una pugna interpreta-

tiva que ha marcado la recepción de la obra de Modersohn-Becker en la crítica feminista desde los años setenta a la actualidad. Contrastando la visión que Darrieussecq ofrece de la artista alemana con la de historiadoras del arte como Linda Nochlin, Roszika Parker o Griselda Pollock, se identifican y analizan aquellas razones que la autora francesa esgrime para presentar a Modersohn-Becker como una artista pionera en la construcción de un lenguaje artístico que se articula en femenino. Se despliega además una hipótesis que recorre el artículo: Darrieussecq construye a Paula Modersohn-Becker como un referente transdisciplinar, que más allá de su ámbito de expresión, el plástico, fue capaz de ampliar las fronteras de la autorrepresentación femenina.

Palabras clave

Biografía, autorrepresentación femenina, desnudo, mujer y naturaleza, mujeres artistas.

48

It was in 2011 that the novelist Marie Darrieussecq first encountered the art of Paula Modersohn-Becker. The painting in question was *Reclining Mother and Child II*, a later work by the German artist which depicts a lounging woman with an infant, in a physical posture which implies the act of breastfeeding. In this painting, Darrieussecq identified a form of maternal knowledge which, as she would later remark, she had not previously observed in visual art. The sharp contrast between this image and the innumerable mothers and madonnas with child which abound throughout art history reminded Darrieussecq of the impulse which had prompted her, ten years earlier, to write *Le bébé*, in an attempt to tackle the phenomenon of motherhood in its most personal and banal aspects. It is a narrative that eschews cliché and stereotype as it follows the rhythms of maternity and examines the enigmatic being of the newborn, a creature which often escapes the taxonomies we would impose upon it, and thus our ability to comprehend it. In the art of Modersohn-Becker, Darrieussecq finds «ni mièvrerie, ni sainteté, ni érotisme : une autre volupté. Immense. Une autre force»¹ (Darrieussecq, 2016a: 110). Her surprise is heightened yet further when she discovers that the painting dates to 1906 and that the name of the artist responsible was completely unknown to her. «Et plus j'ai lu, et plus j'ai vu [...], plus je me disais que je devais écrire la vie de cette artiste et contribuer à montrer son travail»² (*Ibidem*: 111). The result of this unexpected encounter is *Être ici est une splendeur. Vie de Paula Modersohn-Becker*, Darrieussecq's biography of the German painter which was published by the P.O.L. imprint in 2016, the same year in which the novelist participated in the staging of the first ever French

INTRODUCTION

1. «Not sentimental, or pious, or erotic: another sort of sensuality. Boundless. Another sort of power». (Darrieussecq, 2017: 108).

2. «The more I read, and the more I saw [...], the more I said to myself that I had to write the life of this artist and help to make her work known» (*Idem*).

exhibition of the work of the artist from Worpswede.³ Outlining the reasons behind this dual attempt to raise the profile of Modersohn-Becker's art in France, the author asserted: «Je veux montrer ses tableaux. Dire sa vie. Je veux lui rendre plus que la justice : je voudrais lui rendre l'être là, la splendeur»⁴ (*Ibidem*: 132).

However, Darrieussecq's text defies the established orthodoxies of biography.⁵ While it may be technically correct that the author does not break the 'pact of referentiality' (Lejeune 1975), *Être ici es tunc splendeur* destabilizes all the conventions of the biographical genre: the author resists the imperative to identify her sources with care and rigour; she focuses exclusively on the aspects and moments of the artist's life which interest her, feigning ignorance of other incidents that do not fit with her narrative; she does not shy from presenting herself as a partial and biased biographer, displaying the workings of her research and writing; and she inserts her own personal experiences into the text, often alongside casual digressions on Modersohn-Becker and judgements on people (or characters) who feature in her narrative. All of this in a non-academic register which ranges from the poetic to the colloquial. In the hands of Darrieussecq, biography does not belong to the terrain of history but rather to that of literature. Art criticism also features, although once again she approaches this mode of seeing in a very personal manner. The ekphrasis of numerous paintings by Modersohn-Becker, from the earliest years of her career to her death, lends a particular rhythm to Darrieussecq's biography. In conjunction, each of these discrete literary modalities combine to form a cohesive evaluation of the artistic endeavours of the German painter. Furthermore, whether voluntarily or otherwise, through her hybrid biography of Modersohn-Becker the author inserts herself in an already firmly established field of study, which from the 1970s onwards has been characterized by an interpretative conflict which has conditioned its reception amongst feminist critics.

Therefore, the aims of this article are twofold. The first consists of summarizing and articulating this hybrid Darrieussecqian interpretation of the artwork of Paula Modersohn-Becker; or more precisely the author's assessment of the place which the German artist occupies in art history. To this end, it is necessary to situate *Être ici est une splendeur. Vie de Paula M. Becker* in the ongoing debate in feminist art criticism on the originality of the painter's work, a debate which questions whether the artist does in fact achieve a break with the clichés of the masculine gaze and its associated symbolism in her (re)presentation of the female figure, or whether she perpetuates them; whether her work is a continuation of the nineteenth century sexualization of women, in the mould of Gauguin, for example, or whether she opens up new pathways of female self-representation. It is a polarized and polarizing debate, and one which obliges us to delve deeper into the complex question of

3. Entitled «*L'intensité d'un regard*», the exhibition took place in the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris from April to June of 2016.

4. «I want to show her paintings, speak about her life. I want to do her more than justice: I want to bring her being-there, splendour» (*Ibidem*: 107).

5. Here I refer to the work of Hermion Lee in her monograph *Biography. A Very Short Introduction* (2009) as an example and synthesis of the essential characteristics of biographical texts.

whether Modersohn-Becker reproduces the symbolic apparatus, established through centuries of art produced almost exclusively by men, which equates woman and nature. Or whether, in the opposing interpretation, her work produces new and positive relations between woman, fecundity and creation. The second aim of the article refers to the hypothesis which underpins this study: namely, that Darrieussecq uncovers in Modersohn-Becker a precursor in the search for new and innovative codes through which to represent the female figure and the subjects traditionally connected with her. I propose to demonstrate here that the heterodox biographical text of *Être ici est une splendeur* serves precisely to establish the German painter as a pioneer of an aesthetic language and symbolic space unique in female self-representation. In this way, I suggest, Modersohn-Becker forms, alongside Virginia Woolf, part of the artistic and literary genealogy which the French novelist attempts to construct through the female maternal line, as she makes her own the *dictum* of Luce Irigaray (1981): that we should not forget that we already possess a history, or rather, in that history some women have existed and we forget them with an all too common frequency.

50 To address both objectives I have set out, it is first necessary to briefly explore the reception of Modersohn-Becker's work throughout the twentieth century. This is also important in order to add some historical background to Darrieussecq's interpretation, with a particular emphasis on those interpretations that highlight the artistic contradictions of Modersohn-Becker. Here, I refer specifically to the criticism of Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock and Roszika Parker, explored fully in Section Three, which provides us with the means for a comparative evaluation with the interpretations of Darrieussecq; a comparison which, on the other hand, uncovers the heuristic values through which a detailed appreciation of the French novelist's position is possible. Section Four analyses Darrieussecq's position in detail, delineating the principal points of rupture which the author identifies between the work of Modersohn-Becker and that of her creative predecessor: specifically, the originality of her subjects, her representation of the immanence of her subjects and her loosening of the imperative masculine gaze. In the fifth and final section, I posit the hypothesis that *Être ici est une splendeur*, rather than a work of biography, is a narrative project on its own terms and one which seeks to construct and install the figure of Modersohn-Becker as a precursor in female self-representation. Through the genre-defying specificities of her text, Darrieussecq situates the groundbreaking work of the German painter both within and beyond the artistic discipline of portraiture, linking her with a network of other female cultural producers who wrote of, described and depicted women living outside the long shadow of established male creative orthodoxies.

ON THE RECEPTION OF PAULA MODERSOHN-BECKER

If we conform to the statements of Darrieussecq in *Être ici est une splendeur*, Paula Modersohn-Becker was still practically unknown in France until 2010s, despite the significance of the country in her own artistic development. The novelist is not incorrect in her assertion that something, perhaps her gender, prevented her work from penetrating the French cultural imaginary (Darrieussecq, 2016a: 141), given that in Germany the artist has historically enjoyed a considerable degree of celebrity. The reception of both her artwork and writings throughout the twentieth century, at least in German territory, belies her inclusion in the archetypal category of the great forgotten artist. It is true that her recognition was largely posthumous but her writings (primarily diaries and correspondence) were published in 1917 in a small edition which achieved certain success, a fact which led to her being better known as a writer than for her artistic output (Friedrichsmeyer, 1991: 489). Moreover, she was one of the first female artists to have a museum dedicated to her work: The House of Paula Modersohn-Becker in Bremen, founded in 1927. In the 1930s a range of her paintings could be found in the collections of German museums; during the Nazi era, these artworks were purged or destroyed and at least two paintings were exhibited as examples of 'degenerate art' or *Entartete Kunst*. In an inventory compiled by the Reich Ministry for Public Enlightenment and Propaganda in 1941-2, her name is listed alongside those of Matisse, Meidner y Moholy-Nagy as artists whose work was confiscated from the Folkwang Museum in Essen.⁶ All of this demonstrates that, in Germany at least, the painter from Worpswede was not unknown. The relative oblivion in which her work languished for some decades (Dridrichsmeyer, 1991: 489) was later breached by studies such as that by Carl Georg Heise, who in 1961 produced the monograph *Paula Modersohn-Becker. Mutter und Kind*. But it was during the 1970s and 80s that, precipitated by the emergence of gender perspectives within the field of art history, Modersohn-Becker began to be characterized as an essential figure at the dawn of artistic modernity, a claim supported today by studies such as that of Diane Radycki (2013). In the 1970s and 80s, feminist historians and art critics dedicated themselves to mining Western art history for feminine referents who had formerly been discarded,⁷ and the development of this field of scholarship facilitated a range of biographical research on the painter of Worpswede. This scholarly phenomenon would only increase in the 1990s and more recent decades, to the point that it can be seen as a clear refutation of Darrieussecq's assertion that the 'Modersohn-Beckerians' comprise no more than thirty persons on earth (2016a: 117). In recent years, her work has crossed further geographic, academic and public boundaries, even arriving on the big screen through the biopic *Paula*, directed in 2016 by Christian Schwochow.

6. The inventory can be consulted in digital form through the reproduction done by the Victoria and Albert Museum of London in January 2014.

7. For example, the groundbreaking work of Linda Nochlin in her 1974 article «Some Women Realists» (Nochlin 1994: 86-108), and her later edited volumen with Ann Sutherland Harris *Women Artists 1550-1950* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1981, New York: 273-79); Ellen C. Oppler with «Paula Modersohn-Becker: Some Facts and Legends» (*Art Journal* 35, 1976); Gillian Perry's monograph *Paula Modersohn-Becker: Her Life and Work* (London: *Women's Press*, 1979); Alessandra Comini in «Gender or Genius? The Women Artists of German Expressionism», *Feminism and Art History, Questioning the Litany*, edited by Norma Broude and Mary D. Garrard in Harper & Row (1982, New York: 271-92); and Liselotte von Reinken with her 1983 monograph *Paula Modersohn-Becker* (Reinbek b. H.: Rowohlt).

In a contemporary context, the work of Modersohn-Becker is an obligatory inclusion in any study that seeks to trace female referents within the history of art, in the same way, although for different reasons, as Artemisa Gentileschi or Suzanne Valadon. The interest which the artist awakens generally transcends her artistic production to also encompass her personal life, her friendships and her constant search for space, time, and resources to devote to her art, a struggle she records in her diaries and upon which Darrieussecq's places a considerable focus. But arguably, it is her *Self-Portrait on Her Sixth Wedding Anniversary*, an artwork seen by few people during the artist's lifetime, which converted Modersohn-Becker into a touchstone for female art historians and critics, in that it is the first known pictorial example of a nude self-portrait by a female artist. The painting's significance is heightened when we consider, as Linda Nochlin points out (1994: 103-104), that it was produced during a period in which the spectator was accustomed to encountering female nudes in artistic representations. Yet in this explicit self-identification of the artist as the nude depicted, that is, as the subject of the self-portrait, when centuries of art history had culturally conditioned the viewer to expect that the subject be masculine (and be depicted fully dressed) the painter from Worpswede displaces all expectations, further affirming her authorship through the scandalous revelation of the painting's title. Even more controversially, here she depicts herself as pregnant when she is not in fact with child. «L'autoportrait comme autofiction»,⁸ as Darrieussecq would go on to describe it (2016a: 118). In this sense, Paula Modersohn-Becker marks out an indelible point of departure in art history. The debate with which we will now concern ourselves, from the field of feminist art theory, centres on the scope and significance of this rupture. Historians such as Griselda Pollock and Roszika Parker (1981) or the aforementioned Nochlin, have expressed scepticism at the supposed originality of the German painter. In their judgement, Modersohn-Becker remains captive to a symbolic code inherited from the tradition which anchors female self-representation in artwork to meanings associated with the natural and the erotic, a tradition which undermines the ability of female artists to present themselves as autonomous creative subjects. In the materialist perspective espoused by these critics, the identification of the female body with the natural world is a trope that actively prevents women's artistic emancipation. Conversely, on the opposite side of this debate, the scholarship of Alessandra Comini (1982) and the more recent writing of Anja Hasch (1997), Anne Higonnet (2009), and Diane Radyicki (2013) attribute Modersohn-Becker with the creation of an artistic language that marries femininity, fertility and artistic practice; a language that generates new and positive meanings, opening up the pathways to other innovative female subjectivities in art, such as those of Frida Kahlo, Ana Mendieta, Rineke Dijkstra or Francesca

8. «The self-portrait as auto-fiction» (Darrieussecq, 2017: 116).

Woodman, an affinity that Darrieussecq herself also highlighted (2016a: 79). Given that it is this second, more positive interpretative thesis that tends to dominate in recent critical appraisals of Modersohn-Becker, in the following section I will return to the critical analysis of Pollock, Parker and Nochlin. A consideration of the similarities between such analysis and the *Darrieussecquian* approach, albeit from opposing sides of the argument, will permit us to undertake a comparative view, with the ultimate aim of profiling more precisely the valuation of Modersohn-Becker's body of work that is in operation throughout *Être ici est une splendeur*.

WOMEN, NATURE AND CREATION IN THE CRITICISM OF LINDA NOCHLIN, ROSZIKA PARKER AND GRISELDA POLLOCK

The reception of the work of Modersohn-Becker amongst feminist art historians of the 1970s and 80s is closely imbricated with the theoretical debate that emerged as one of the major preoccupations around the conditions that facilitate the possibility of female (self) representation. Throughout these two decades, Griselda Pollock and Roszika Parker sought to emphasise that from the Renaissance until the mid-nineteenth century, female artists were not permitted to study nude life models. This form of artistic restriction was in operation at the same time that the most influential and valued forms of art featured historical, mythological or religious themes, with the human body as their protagonist. This politics of control with regard to the nude impeded women from accessing professional training in conditions equal to those enjoyed by their male counterparts, preventing female artists from developing the same pictorial skills as men over the representation of the human body. Moreover, in a more subtle yet more definitive form of control, this punitive system denied women the possibility of participation in the configuration of the language of great art; of the creation of their own systems of meanings and codes. When, in the nineteenth century, images dominated by the presence of the female body began to proliferate, female artists remained absent from the most prestigious art schools (Parker & Pollock, 1981: 114-116). The depiction of women, and more specifically of the female nude, was thus formed through an economy of meaning that was eminently masculine, in which the male artist established himself as the significant subject and women as his Other. Which qualities were associated with the male artist and his female Other at this time? How was this symbolic order organised? As Simone de Beauvoir famously asserted, men have enjoyed the privilege of the attributes of universality and abstraction, while woman, as the signified Other, has always borne the mark of her gender and of her body. Where woman is embodiment, man is universality, abstract and bodiless (Beauvoir, 1986; Butler, 2006). In the 1970s, Sherry Ortner, one of a group of theorists involved in the foundation of a

school of feminist anthropological thought, synthesized the formulations of de Beauvoir in a more concrete articulation: traditionally, and it is through tradition that Western symbology is organized, men have been associated with culture and women with the natural world, a prearranged duality closely imbricated with hierarchical structures that function to the continued detriment of women. (Ortner, 1972; 2006).

54 It is precisely through this prism that Nochlin, Pollock and Parker analyse and interrogate Western artistic traditions, uncovering within these structures the crystallization of a cultural imaginary which presents the male as representative of culture, and as such endowed with the power to transform nature, and female bodies as endowed with the qualities of nature. Female figures thus appear as passive, appropriable, lacking agency and moreover, frequently, asleep, unconscious, distracted and openly sexualized. Within this system of meaning, woman is consistently aligned with body and nature, sited always in opposition to the male culture (Parker & Pollock, 1981: 116). In the artistic representations of the nineteenth century, this linkage between woman and nature acquires clear erotic tones, and sexual connotations often related to pornography. For example, Nochlin's scholarship of this period focuses strongly on the comparison between the desirable female body and fruit. While the specific comparative logic of women's breasts and apples can be traced back to the Greek bucolic poetry of the Idylls of Theocritus («guarding in my breast the apples of Dionysus», as Selene affirms in the second Idyll), this trope of nineteenth century art permeated the social imaginary, from its most popular cultural forms to the realms of fine art. From the Tahitian women painted by Gauguin, who rest their breasts upon mango petals as if their body parts were themselves fruit, to the *Amorous Shepherd* of Cézanne (Nochlin, 1994: 141).

Encumbered by the burden of this cultural inheritance, when women first began to gain access to art academies and to studios with life models, according to Pollock and Parker (1981), not only did they have to overcome the difficulty of being recognised as artists, they were also faced with the challenge of breaking with the signs and meanings of this established iconography, a system of meaning that was constantly working against their attempts at self representation. Often unable to achieve this objective, they continued implementing a language dominated by signs that codified them as Other, and which intensified their symbolic association with the natural world, constantly undermining their efforts through its established iconography. This was, according to Pollock and Parker, the fate of Paula Modersohn-Becker. For both critics, the German artist, in her earlier attempts at self-representation, constitutes an excellent example of the contradictions inherent within their artistic attempts to depict themselves as creative subjects; specifically, in her case, by the consistent con-

nections she makes between woman and nature. Her *Self-Portrait* of 1906, in which the artist appears nude surrounded by vegetation and carrying a flower in each hand, close to her breasts, shares an iconographic heritage with Gauguin's Tahitian Eves. Whilst for the French artist woman is both the Madonna and the primitive, fecund and sexual Venus, for Modersohn-Becker she is the mother, fatalistic and earthly. According to Parker and Pollock, the German artist is unable to escape either the symbolic hegemony or the reactionary ideology of contemporary Germany, with her associations between land, Nature and woman. Her self-portrait demonstrates the tension between the image of womanhood that connotes eroticism and fertility, and her attempt to position herself as an autonomous subject. The peritext of her artwork, present in the title *Self-Portrait*, reinforces this desire for autonomy, but given that no pictorial element of the work allows the viewer to identify the woman represented as the artist, her authorial claim is frustrated, as always, according to the authors, by the associated meanings and connotations. (Parker & Pollock, 1981: 119-121).

Despite having praised the work in question for its heavy and fallen shoulders, and the gravity of the female teutonic face that sits in judgement over the Eves and Liliths of Gauguin, Nochlin considers the German painter as having failed to break with the dominant symbolic system (1994: 104). Indeed, for Nochlin, even if Modersohn-Becker had been able to configure her own distinct aesthetic imaginary of motherhood, the elements which comprise her artwork would be (in Nochlin's judgement) little more than a heightened replica of that identification of woman (and of country women in particular) as the epitome of reproduction and nutrition, as an image of fertility, a highly fashionable aesthetic trope in the last decades of the nineteenth century which precipitated a wave of Madonnas and Child in a range of different and distilled versions, and in which Frédéric, Mary Cassat, Giovanni Segantini, Teofilo Patini and Fritz Mackenson also participated (Nochlin, 2018: 133-134).⁹ Therefore, here the permanence of the female-nature duality in Paula Modersohn-Becker not only compromises the iconoclastic potential of her artistic project, it is also a clear indicator of her participation in the dominant ideology of nineteenth century Germany, which equates authenticity with the material specificities of German peasant life, and its symbiotic relationship with the land.

It is undeniable that Modersohn-Becker's artwork reproduces the association between woman, fruit and vegetation. Indeed, there are numerous paintings in which she depicts herself carrying flowers or crowns of crops and vegetation, or surrounds herself with aesthetic motifs which allude to the natural world. Rainer Maria Rilke, with whom she enjoyed a close friendship, remarked upon this tendency in the *Requiem* (1908) which he dedicated to the artist after her death: «Women too, you saw, where fruits [...]

9. As Anne Higonnet highlights, with reference to the scholarship of Robert Roseblum, the portraits of infants produced by Modersohn-Becker, and praised by Darrieussecq for their originality, can be linked to a German pictorial tradition which, from the Romantic period onwards, resisted the general tendency originating from the eighteenth century to depict infancy as a state of purity and innocence. Examples of infants from this artistic tradition can be viewed as «exceptionally sturdy, moody, almost ugly children» (Higonnet, 2009: 18).

10. This thesis is supported by the North American art historian Anne Higonnet (2009) in an interpretation that, as we shall see, is shared by Darrieussecq. In contrast to those interpretations which assert that the paintings of Modersohn-Becker celebrate the natural, primitive, and animal aspects of the female reproductive cycle, and that the women these artworks represent exist apart or removed from culture, Higonnet opines that within these works nature and culture interact and are fused together, to the point of establishing points of connection between biological procreation and the act of artistic creation in painting.

And at last, you saw yourself as a fruit». What leaves space for interpretation is whether this association works to undermine the emancipation of female artists, or rather whether it is also possible that such motifs can be reappropriated and employed to this end. In fact, it is actually Parker and Pollock who point to this possible reading of her work, although it is a reading that they do not share:

The painting [Modersohn-Becker's 1906 Self-Portrait] can be 'read' as an attempt to produce positive and new relationships between creativity and fecundity, between notions of woman and notions of art (Parker & Pollock, 1981: 121).

Embedded as they are in their own *episteme*, Parker and Pollock do not explore this possibility further. But it is an interpretation that later historians and critics would embrace,¹⁰ perhaps working from other paradigms¹¹ which facilitate a re-consideration of the relationship between woman and nature in new terms. In the case of Marie Darrieussecq's interpretation, as we shall see in the next section, the presence of elements which allude to the natural world in the paintings of Modersohn-Becker does not conflict with the author's conviction as to the originality of the artistic language at play.

56

Unlike the image of the artist we may obtain from the critiques by Nochlin, Pollock and Parker, the Paula Modersohn-Becker that *Être ici est une splendeur* conjures up is a creator of new artistic codes. In this section, I will demonstrate that in Marie Darrieussecq's biography the German painter is presented as an innovator through the subjects she chose to paint, and more significantly in *how* she chooses to depict her subjects, in her use of an idiosyncratic aesthetic language and gaze which inaugurates female self-representation in art. In terms of subject matter, Darrieussecq constructs her Paula Modersohn-Becker as an original creator who gave pictorial reality without filter to Worpswede's women, to the experience of motherhood, babies, infancy, puberty, and the nude female body, resisting the impulse to render her subjects as pleasant or attractive to the masculine gaze of the era. That the artist's husband Otto Modersohn affirmed that Paula was attracted by 'ugly subjects' (Higonnet 2009: 15) underscores Darrieussecq's interpretation, as does the fact that her artwork was categorized by the Nazis as *degenerate/entartet*. They described her artworks as «un mélange dégoûtant de couleurs, de figures idiotes désignées comme paysans, enfants malades, dégénérés, la lie de l'humanité»¹² (Darrieussecq, 2016a: 113). Amongst the other merits Darrieussecq attributes to the artist is that her selection of subjects highlights an unyielding focus on

According to Higonnet, the relation between sign and form in the work of Modersohn-Becker exists specifically in her transformation of the material into a representational system. It establishes a relationship between the subject and the materials selected by the artist to represent them, and in doing so endowing these materials with meaning. Her use of oils, Higonnet suggests, helps to construct a sense of the presence of one body within another, representing the physical act of reproduction in intellectual form (2009: 19).

11. The significance of new and emergent modes of feminism criticism which rethink our relationship to the natural world, such as ecofeminism and posthumanism, should be not underestimated. However, the feminism of difference of Luce Irigaray is particularly relevant here, since in order to «sortir de cet engrangement infernalement rigoureux de l'ordre patriarcal phallogratique», it considers as imperative practices such as «réapprendre le respect de la vie et de la nourriture», given that such actions permit to «retrouver le respect de la mère et de la nature» (1990: 58).

MARIE DARRIEUSSECQ'S PAULA: BABIES, STAINS AND NAKED BODIES

12. «A revolting mixture of colours, of idiotic figures signifying farmers, of sick children, degenerates, the greys of humanity» (Darrieussecq, 2017: 112).

the female reproductive cycle, at a time in history when this somatic experience remained unaddressed in art, as in other areas of life. In Modersohn-Becker's lifetime, the continued vogue for variations on the Madonna and Child theme in art had assumed clear theological connotations (Steingber 1983): such depictions portrayed the divine incarnation of the infant Messiah but eschewed any reference to the corporeal experience of pregnancy, motherhood and breastfeeding. Whilst, as mentioned previously, such scenes can be readily found in all eras of Western art history, there is a notable elision of embodied experience in such depictions; entirely absent here are the distended wombs of late pregnancy, with mother and child bound together as one whole body, in an established biological endeavour of survival. As Anne Higonnet asserts (2009: 15), historically, male artwork has averted its gaze and its paintbrush from these moments of the reproductive cycle, only returning to the depiction of motherhood once the infant is fully independent of the mother, belonging to the external world, awake and fully formed in its individuality. In her ekphrasis of the paintings of Modersohn-Becker Darrieussecq pays particular attention to these subjects, lingering on her descriptions of the plurality of breastfeeding and motherhood. The audacity of Modersohn-Becker's depictions here arguably renders her more commendable to a female author writing a century later, in that her artistic defiance is testament to a continued lack of male interest in issues of motherhood. Darrieussecq affirms this when, referring to the work *Liegende Mutter mit Kind* (1906), the author connects this depiction of motherhood with the reaction to the publication of her novel *Le bébé* in 2005: «Quand le livre est paru, j'ai compris que certains hommes ne peuvent pas prendre au sérieux la maternité»¹³ (Darrieussecq 2016a: 110).

Beyond the physical objects and the subject matter that Modersohn-Becker chooses to depict in her artwork, which notably do not escape the objections of Pollock and Parker – who also recognize the pioneering character of the (self) representations of the painter from Worpswede in this ambit – Darrieussecq's reading situates the originality of the artist in her ability to portray her subjects *in their immanence*. «Elle montre ce qu'elle voit»¹⁴ (*Ibidem*: 114) without added meaning. «Aucun discours. Aucun jugement»¹⁵ (*Idem*). In contrast to other painters of her era, Modersohn-Becker achieves a suspension of any moral judgement of her subjects, representing them without resort to inherited symbolism. We see here the first difference with the critical approaches of Pollock and Parker outlined in the previous section. For Darrieussecq, the duality to avoid is not so much that which aligns man and woman with culture and nature respectively, linking the pairings in a hierarchy which subordinates the latter, but rather that other duality which, incapable of representing woman and the attendant experiences of motherhood, locks the female subject in a polarized system of symbols which can only define her as either madonna or whore (*sic*). Establishing a comparative link

13. «When the book was published, I learned that some men cannot take motherhood seriously» (*Ibidem*: 108).

14. «She shows what she sees» (*Ibidem*: 112).

15. «No sign of rhetoric, or judgment» (*Idem*).

with her own contemporary present, through the reception of her work *Le bébé*, the author asserts that «si la mère n'est pas représentée comme une madone (Vierge à l'Enfant) ou comme une putain (Vénus et Cupidon), ils [men, or at least some men] ne savent pas où se mettre»¹⁶ (*Ibid.*). The provocative tone of this argument should not distract us from the fact that Darrieussecq is highlighting a problematic topic which scholars of feminist anthropology have been eager to highlight since the 1970s. In her pioneering work, Sherry Ortner (1991) asserts that Western cultural tradition has placed women in an ambiguous intermedial position between nature and culture (in a system of meaning where, as we have seen previously, men are always closer to the cultural sphere), since, amongst other reasons the tasks which have historically been assigned to men consisted precisely in transforming *the natural* to the cultural: the newborn into a social subject or raw materials into foodstuff. This intermedial position (the close relationship with nature that it connotes and the persistent ambiguity of the natural in the popular imaginary) would explain why very different cultures from around the world may have been able to *brand women* as simultaneously sacred and contaminatory. Symbolic representations of this apparent contradiction have resulted in a codification of the female that oscillates between two opposing poles: that of a symbolism of the subversive (witches, the evil eye, menstrual contamination, diabolic depravity, witchcraft, *femmes fatales*, etc.); and that of a symbolism of the transcendent (maternal goddesses, merciful dispensers of salvation, female incarnations of justice and symbols of statehood, etc.) (Ortner, 1991). Or, in Darrieussecq's terms, *as either whores or madonnas*. Here, the novelist puts forward a brief tour thorough some of the representations of the female in the art history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in which the majority of the depictions are aligned with one of these two opposite poles:

Les femmes dans l'œuvre de Modersohn-Becker ne sont ni aguicheuses (Gervex), ni exotiques (Gauguin), ni provocantes (Manet), ni victimes (Degas), ni éperdues (Toulouse-Lautrec), ni grosses (Renoir), ni colossales (Picasso), ni sculpturales (Puvis de Chavannes), ni éthérées (Carolus-Duran). Ni «en pâte d'amande blanche et rose» (Cabanel, moqué par Zola)¹⁷ (Darrieussecq, 2016a: 114).

Darrieussecq produces this catalogue in order to contrast the cultural producers listed with the female representations of Modersohn-Becker, who, she posits, can be seen to have broken with a dualism still present in the artwork of many of her contemporaries. «Chez Paula il y a des vraies femmes»¹⁸ (*Idem*). Equally controversial is the contrast between the description that Darrieussecq uses of the peasant women of Modersohn-Becker and that previously put forward by Linda Nochlin. The French author describes these

16. «Mother and child: the truth about this ordinary and fundamental experience is that men cringe if the mother is not represented as a Madonna (Virgin and Child) or a whore (Venus and Cupid)» (*Ibidem*: 108).

17. «Women in the work of Modersohn-Becker's are neither coquettish (Gervex), nor exotic (Gauguin), nor provocative (Manet), nor victims (Degas), nor sculptural (Puvis de Chavannes), nor ethereal (Carolus-Duran). Nor made of 'pink and white almond paste' (Cabanel whom Zola made fun of)» (*Ibidem*: 112).

18. «In Paula's work there are real women» (*Idem*).

women as «corps crayonnées, charbonneux, cagneux, gonflés, mal fichus»¹⁹ (*Ibidem*: 76); here there is no reference linking these women to authenticity, or to their relationship to the land and fecundity that Nochlin formulates, nor a trace of the established pictorial *jargon of authenticity*. «Elle peint les corps, apprend les visages et les mains. Remarque les malformations dues à la misère. N'en fait pas un motif sentimental. Elle peint ce qu'elle voit, elle peindra aussi les corps parisiens et le sien, plus tard»²⁰ (*Ibidem*: 17).

At the root of Darrieussecq's interpretation of the work of Modersohn-Becker there appears to lie the certainty that the artist, far from falling hostage to the accumulated clichés of centuries of male-produced art, has been able to install new codes with which to present, as never before, womanhood and the associated phenomena of motherhood. Two other examples from Darrieussecq's text allow us to consider this argument more clearly. The first deals with the artistic depiction of babies, a topic of particular interest to the French narrator. «J'écris pour renouveler la langue, pour fourbir les mots comme on frotte des cuivres — *le bébé, la mère*²¹ : entendre un son plus claire»²² (Darrieussecq, 2005: 44), she writes in *Le bébé*, a work which on its backcover questions of the general scarcity of babies in literature. In *Être ici est une splendeur*, the history of art is added to this representative déficit, until the appearance of Modersohn-Becker, who emerged as a pioneer in the pictorial exploration of «le petit de l'humain»²³ (*Ibidem*: 11).

L'histoire de l'art a accouché d'une tripotée de petits Jésus terriblement ratés au sein de Madones sceptiques. Museaux de singes, cous de vieillards, allaitement qui évoquent au mieux la vache, au pire une partie de billard à trois bandes. Non, on voit chez Paula des bébés comme je n'en avais jamais vu en peinture, mais tels que j'en ai connu en vrai. Le regard concentré, agrandi, presque fixe, de la petite personne qui tète. La main posée sur le sein, ou le poing fermé. Le poignet inexistant, un pli. Le cou qui ne tient pas. Les jambes dodues mais non musclées. Les bras parfois maigres. Les joues colorées ou pâles, mais jamais du teint des adultes²³ (Darrieussecq, 2016a: 114).

For Darrieussecq, the originality of Modersohn-Becker looms large in art history. If writing can be defined as the project of «dire le non-dit»,²⁴ and «à mi-distance entre dire et ne pas dire, il y a le cliché»²⁵ (Darrieussecq, 2005: 16), the German artist positions herself as the creator of a new language capable of revealing that which was previously occluded, without the compulsion to resort to the comfortable and oft-frequented aesthetic tropes of *cliché*. A second comparison articulated by Darrieussecq returns us to one of the symbolic poles of tradition previously referred to: the identification of woman with *the stain*. The subject of this comparison is, in this case, the representation of

19. «Crayoned, charcoaled, knock-kneed, swollen, clumsy bodies» (*Ibidem*: 70).

20. «She paints bodies, learns how to do faces, hands. She notices deformities caused by poverty, without reducing them to anything sentimental. She paints what she sees. And later she will also paint Parisian bodies, and her own body» (*Ibidem*: 7)

21. Emphasis in original.

22. «I write in order to renew language, to polish words the way you do silverware — *the baby, the mother*: to hear these sounds more clearly» (Darrieussecq, 2019: 34).

23. «A baby human being» (*Ibid*: 3).

24. «To say the unsaid» (Darrieussecq, 2019: 8).

25. «Halfway between saying and not saying are clichés» (*Idem*).

female puberty, which Darrieussecq analyzes in the work *Puberty* by Edward Munch in a direct comparison with the young female nudes painted by Modersohn-Becker. In Munch's work, we encounter all the machinery of a symbolism that equates womanhood with a burgeoning and culpable sexuality. «Chez Munch, il y a les épaules rentrées sur les seins naissants, les bras croisés pour cacher le pubis, le regard embêté, le rouge aux joues, et l'énorme ombre surplombante – chez Paula, il n'y a pas d'ombre»²⁶ (Darrieussecq, 2016a: 74-75). The shadow or stain constitutes a clear adumbration of the very presence of the young women; her chaste gesture signals the abandonment of the innocence of childhood and her entry in the adult world, a realm marked by eroticization, sexuality, and a persisting attendant sense of guilt. The bashfulness of her pose could also be interpreted, in accordance with Sartre's theses (1992: 289), as an attempt to hide as much of herself as possible from the objectifying gaze of the other; in this case, the painter.

This comparison works to reinforce the author's interpretation of Modersohn-Becker as a painter of immanence. In her depictions of puberty, there is no trace of that symbolic polarity which oscillates between the subversive and the transcendent and which is incapable of representing women beyond the antimony of the whore and the virgin. In Modersohn-Becker's representations of puberty, Darrieussecq finds a repudiation of this organizing imperative of meaning:

Pas d'ombre. Pas d'effet. Pas de sens ajouté. Pas d'innocence perdue, pas de virginité bafouée, pas de sainte jetée aux fauves. Ni réserve ni fausse pudeur. Ni pure ni pute. Ici est une *jeune fille* : et déjà ces deux mots sont de trop, chargés de rêveries à la Rilke et de poésie masculine — « laissez-nous donc tranquilles »!²⁷ (*Ibidem*: 75).

The contrast with the young woman depicted by Munch, which the artist's paintbrush imbues with shame and embarrassment, and the nudes of Modersohn-Becker, where guilt is entirely absent from the depictions of nudity, leads us to a final consideration of Darrieussecq's reading of the German artist. Throughout her biography, she is insistent as to the principal factor of difference between Modersohn-Becker and the pictorial tradition that precedes her: that the artist has achieved an escape from the *masculine gaze* foundational to Western art history, inaugurating a new way of seeing women. The young woman posing for Munch experiences shame and embarrassment because she is aware she is *being seen* by him; she is conscious of her own reification, her conversion into object, her Being-for-Others, according to the Sartrean formula (1992: 301-400). Flaunting the right to the gaze, or the right to direct the gaze towards certain objects, has historically been a male privilege. If we assess art history from a gendered

26. «In Munch's painting, there are the hunched shoulders over the budding breasts, the arms crossed to hide the pubic area, the troubled look in the girl's eyes, her red cheeks, and the enormous overhanging shadow — there is no shadow in Paula's painting» (Darrieussecq, 2017: 69).

27. «No shadow, no effects. No added meaning. No innocence lost, no virginity defiled, no female saints sacrificed. Neither discretion nor false modesty. Neither Madonna nor whore. Here is a *young girl*: already these two words are excessive, loaded with Rilke-like reveries and with masculine poetry. These girls are saying: 'Leave us alone!'» (*Idem*).

perspective, it is difficult to find a female gaze at work throughout centuries of artistic endeavour.²⁸ The question around the definition and characterization of what can be considered as a *female* form of seeing, painting or even writing in the mode of *Être ici est une splendeur* is best answered *more negativo*, that is, through omission: «Je ne sais pas s'il existe une peinture de femmes, mais la peinture des hommes est partout»²⁹ (*Ibidem*: 115), she writes when she describes Modersohn-Becker's first visit to the Louvre. «On³⁰ peint les femmes. « On », c'est l'univers masculin, des siècles de ce regard»³¹ (*Ibidem*: 116). The association of the male world with the pronoun *on* suggests (and denounces) the appropriation of neutrality, of the impersonal and the abstraction of this pronoun. In addition, above all, it alludes to the uncontested power of men over the representation of women and their codification in the symbolic.

However, on various occasions in *Être ici est une splendeur*, Darrieussecq underlines the importance of the climate amongst women that governs the work of Modersohn-Becker, where it is understood that these women «ne posent pas devant un homme»³² (Darrieussecq, 2016a: 114). For the novelist, the relationship between model and painter here presents a stark contrast with other situations in which, like that of *L'Œuvre* de Émile Zola, a fictional narrative inspired by Cézanne that also makes an appearance in Darrieussecq's biography, «la femme est nue, honteuse, modèle sacrifié dans l'atelier glacé»³³ of the male artist (*Ibidem*: 116). Conversely, «chez Paula il y a de vraies femmes. J'ai envie de dire des femmes *enfin* nues : dénudées du regard masculin»³⁴ (*Ibidem*: 114).

In his celebrated work *Ways of Seeing* (1977), John Berger asserts that women are born and grow under the attentive gaze of men, who will judge them on the basis of their appearance in the world; their presence constitutes for men an indicator of how they should be treated. To achieve some form of control over her own existence, a woman therefore learns, from childhood, to keep a close watch over herself and to supervise the way in which she appears in the world in accordance with the male gaze. «The surveyor of women in herself is male» (Berger, 1977: 47). In this way, when a man looks at a woman, she is conscious of herself as an object being looked at. There takes place in her an internal process of splitting, derived from this forced interiorization of another's gaze, and from which her own keeper of this male gaze emerges. If we accept Berger's analysis, it is worth considering that in an environment *amongst women*, such as that which Darrieussecq claims to identify in the works of Modersohn-Becker, female subjects can relax this form of self-vigilance and stop posing, or in other words, cease to accommodate their sense of their own presence as an object for another, behavioural modalities which they activate consciously or unconsciously depending on whose gaze is upon them; in the

28. In the field of cinema, which, although decidedly more recent as a discipline, has not been exempt from the dominance of the male gaze (Mulvey 1999; Kaplan 2001), Laura Mulvey's rereading of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* put into circulation the Freudian concept of scopophilia, associated in its voyeuristic dimension with the pleasure of 'taking' another person as an object, subjecting them to a curious and controlling gaze (1999: 385). Kaplan, for her part, debated whether scopophilia, which in cinema had generally been organized to respond to male fantasies, was an obstacle to be overcome, or if, on the contrary, women could appropriate it (2001: 23-35). This is hardly the moment to delve further into this undoubtedly captivating discussion; we do consider it necessary to point out, however, that, if one were to identify a scopic pleasure in Modersohn-Becker's painting, it would have to be conceptualized on the basis of codes that bar any trace of voyeurism or narcissism.

29. «I don't know if there is such a thing as women's panting, but men's painting is everywhere» (Darrieussecq, 2017: 113).

30. Emphasis in original.

31. «They paint women. 'They' implies here the universal masculine pronoun, centuries of the masculine gaze» (*Ibidem*: 114).

32. «Who are not posing in front of a man» (*Ibidem*: 111).

33. «The woman is naked, ashamed, abandoned in the icy studio» (*Ibidem*: 115).

34. «In Paula's work there are real women. I want to say women who are *naked at long last*: stripped of the masculine gaze» (*Ibidem*: 112).

case of the models of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this gaze originates in the male artist, with whom the models know themselves to be in an unequal relationship. According to the novelist, the «allaite-ments puissants»³⁵ that populate the work of Modersohn-Becker, where «la mère tenant son sein»³⁶ is valued from a natural and unforced position that reveals a form of *knowledge* of motherhood, having been painted «comme seule une femme peintre, peut-être, peut le donner à voir»³⁷ (Darrieussecq, 2016a: 111). These depictions have developed in the previously prohibited space in women's art, shielded from the male gaze which pushes to reinforce self-supervision. This space then, favours the emergence of specific shared experience, of a particular female knowledge of subjects such as motherhood, previously unaddressed in painting. Quoting Modersohn-Becker, Darrieussecq writes: «L'intimité est l'âme du grand art»³⁸ (*Ibidem*: 79).

Moreover, in the self-portraits of Modersohn-Becker, Darrieussecq finds no trace of the self-vigilance imposed by the male gaze, and its organized economy of meaning that flaunts its exclusive right to see nudity. This absence is significant with regard to the readings of Pollock, Parker and Nochlin. According to Darrieussecq, the gaze which the artist imposes upon her own nude body in a work such as *Self-Portrait on Her Sixth Wedding Anniversary* speaks of curiosity and a desire for visual self-exploration. Both subject and artist are present here, seeing herself as if for the first time through the immanence of her own body. There is no eroticism, no othering, and no imposition of meaning.

Le geste de se déshabiller et de se planter devant sa toile et d'y aller, là : ceci est ma peau, je vais montrer mon ventre, et comment se modèlent mes seins et mon nombril... L'autoportrait nu d'une femme, seule à seule avec soi et l'histoire de l'art.

Est-ce parce que les modèles coûtent cher ? Est-ce délibéré ? Cette femme saine, sportive, jolie, ronde, nudiste, allemande, aimait son corps. Se peindre nue : ce geste-là. Nul narcissisme : du travail. Tout est à faire. [...] Tout est à trouver. Je ne sais pas si elle a conscience de ça : d'être la première. En tout cas, nue, elle a toujours l'air joyeuse³⁹ (*Ibidem*: 118).

In Darrieussecq's text, the nude of Paula Modersohn-Becker does not engage with the aesthetic norms which, defined by the male artist (the author of the nude) and not by the subject herself, make up what John Berger defines as the *nude* (1977: 53-54), in contrast to the *naked* body. «A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude» (*Ibid*: 54). A conventional artistic pose, the nude constitutes a new form of dress which dispossess the female subject of her own nudity, given that it is a way of looking (the skin, the hair converted into a disguise) that is attributed to the author.

35. «Powerful depictions of breastfeeding» (*Ibidem*: 108).

36. «The mother holding her breast» (*Idem*).

37. «As only a women painter, perhaps, could allow us to see» (*Idem*).

38. «Intimacy is the soul of great art» (*Ibidem*: 76).

39. «The gesture of taking her clothes off and setting in front of her canvas and going ahead and doing it: here is my skin, I'm going to show my belly, and the shape of my breasts, and my navel... The nude self-portrait of a woman, one on one with herself and the history of art.

Is it because models are expensive? Is it deliberate? This healthy, sporty, pretty, well-rounded, nudist German woman loved her body. The act of painting herself naked has nothing to do with narcissism; it is work. It is all there for her to do. [...] All there for her to discover. I don't know if she is aware of it: being the first one to do it. In any case, she always looks happy naked» (*Ibidem*: 116).

In contrast, what Darrieussecq identifies in the work of Modersohn-Becker is a *naked* woman, who has discarded the pose of the nude and who is engaged in exploring her own body through painting, thus embarking upon a new labour of self-recognition.

A GENEALOGY OF ONE'S OWN

It is no small undertaking to identify the catalyst, rather than the objective, that lies behind the writing of a literary work. In the case of *Être ici est une splendeur*, it is the author herself who does this in black and white: the task she is undertaking is to restore Modersohn-Becker something more than a degree of justice, to restore her to splendour (*Ibidem*: 132). The mention of justice is settled on a mnemonic level, with the text as vehicle for remembering and recognition, to which end she adds the staging of the exhibition *L'intensité d'un regard* in the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris in 2016, based on her monograph. The historic debt owed by the French capital to Modersohn-Becker leads Darrieussecq to ask herself: «Pourquoi n'est-elle connue qu'en Allemagne? Pourquoi sa ville de Paris ne l'a jamais exposée?»⁴⁰ (*Ibidem*: 141) and through the exhibition, this debt is repaid. However, the restoration of splendour to the artist proves more complex, given the surplus value which splendour entails. The specificities of this unusual biography, which as we saw in the introduction, is closer to a work of literature than to one of historiography, permit the conjecture that the *splendeur* that Darrieussecq aspires to restore to Modersohn-Becker is not solely the sheen of existence, but rather a considered recognition of her artistic labours. The French narrator entertains herself in the recreation of notable scenes, of epistolary exchanges and of personal conflicts from the life of the artist in order to restore something of the *être-là*, but it is no small undertaking (as demonstrated in the previous section) to conquer for her a space of prestige in art history. In this sense, we see that her objective is not limited to removing the artist from the unjust oblivion to which France condemned her. Rather, it goes beyond this, in an endeavour to *construct* Modersohn-Becker as a referent. And a referent not solely confined to the artistic subgenre of the female nude self-portrait, or to the female artists who have come after her, but rather as a referent that transcends disciplinary boundaries because it amplifies the subject and the field of what can be represented. Here we return to the second hypothesis outlined at the beginning of this article: namely, that Paula Modersohn-Becker forms part of the specific canon of Marie Darrieussecq, of her own genealogy in which the author uncovers the German painter as her precursor. In her she finds a referent for the representation of an «expérience féminine qui reste encore à explorer et à dire,⁴¹ as she asserted in an interview in the French cultural television programme *La*

40. «Why is she only known in Germany? Why has *her* city, Paris, never had an exhibition of her work?» (Darrieussecq, 2017: 140).

grande Librairie, whilst promoting the publication of her translation of *A room of one's own* by Virginia Woolf. An experience that «n'est pas l'expérience masculine»,⁴² and that Darrieussecq emphasises goes beyond any essentialism: «Les hommes et les femmes sont différents. Je ne suis pas essentialiste mais ils sont différents parce que ça fait des milliers d'années qu'elles vivent sous domination masculine, et ça crée des psyqués, des êtres différents».⁴³

When asked whether distinct modalities of male and female writing exist, she reponds that this is the central question of her life, and despite not yet having found an answer, she confirms that the experience of inhabiting the world as a woman facilitates access to a distinct subjectivity, different to that which springs from inhabiting it as a man. Thus, it is from this subjectivity that she is able to construct a different language for herself, in linguistic and pictorial terms.

[The question of female writing] C'est la question de ma vie. Je ne sais pas encore [...] Ce que je sais c'est que nous avons une expérience qui n'est pas la même, déjà dans le cours d'une vie, mais aussi... Enfin, mes grands-mères, mes arrière-grands-mères n'ont pas été traitées comme mes grands-pères et mes arrière-grands-pères. Elles étaient sous domination [...] masculine. Cela crée des êtres humains qui sont différents, qui n'ont pas la même approche du monde. Une femme qui sort dans la rue, elle ne marche pas comme un homme [...] Quand elle écrit [a woman], on hérite de tout ça, de cette expérience [...] Il y a une expérience féminine qui reste encore à explorer et à dire. Et ce n'est pas l'expérience masculine. Par contre ce n'est pas une question de biologie⁴⁴ (La Grande Librairie, 2016/01/22: min. 11:04-11:59).

Darrieussecq's interest in the life and work of Modersohn-Becker cannot be extricated from her conception of the German artist as a pioneer in the representation of this distinct subjectivity. Likewise, it is difficult to isolate this interest from the context in which she produced her biographical exploration of the German painter, given that she was simultaneously engaged in work on a new translation of *A room of one's own*. In the prologue to her translation of Woolf's text,⁴⁵ Darrieussecq situates both female creators in the same sphere, forcing herself to highlight that «*ma Paula et ma Virginia sont contemporaines*»⁴⁶ (2016b: 14). Her use of the possessive pronoun here alerts us to the fact that Darrieussecq finds in these women a contiguity that transcends mere chronology. That she encounters this affinity between Paula and Virginia is because both women form part of her own creative genealogy. The achievement of Woolf, who invented «mine de rien, une nouvelle littérature : celle des femmes hors regard masculin»⁴⁷ (*Ibidem*:12) is married to that of Modersohn-Becker, who achieved a similar feat in a male-dominated artistic

41. «Female experience that still remains to be explored and told». All translations of this interview are ours.

42. «Is not the masculine experience».

43. «Men and women are different. I am not essentialist, but they are different because women have lived under male domination for thousands of years, and that forges different psyches and beings».

44. «This is the question of my life. I am not sure yet [...] What I do know is that we have an experience which is not the same, already during a lifetime, but also... In short, my grandmothers, my great-grandmothers were not treated like my grandfathers and my great grandfathers. They were under [...] male domination. That creates separate human beings, with a different approach to the world. A woman who goes on the street, she does not walk like a man [...] We have inherited all that experience when we write. [...] There is a female experience that remains to be explored and to be told. And it is not the male experience. Nevertheless, it is not a question of biology».

45. Her translation was first published in 2016, and is notable for its substitution of the conventional French title, *Une chambre à soi*, as seen in the translation of Clara Malraux, for *Un lieu à soi*, in a specific attempt to demarcate what she perceived as the impulse to normalize the assimilation of women's writing with the bedroom: «It is not a *bedroom* but a *room of one's own* [...] And I do not understand the *camériste* enclosure where tradition has wanted to lock up our wolfie» (Darrieussecq, 2016b: 9-10). All translations of this prologue are ours.

46. «My Paula and my Virginia are contemporaries».

world. For Darrieussecq, both women are pioneers in the creation of a lexicon capable of representing female lived experience in the world, forged far from the male gaze. Here, Woolf and Modersohn-Becker share the longing/desire «de toute femme qui voudrait travailler, écrire, penser et être prise au sérieux»⁴⁸ (*Ibidem*: 11).

Both women are also crucial in repopulating the lacuna of referents to which Marie Darrieussecq has referred on a number of occasions. Her novel *Le bébé* (2005) resonates with this search for precursors in literature and philosophy who could have addressed the question of the baby, and of motherhood itself. It is a search that always leaves the author dissatisfied, despite the fact that, in her own words, «il doit bien avoir quelque chose à comprendre là»⁴⁹ (2005: 11). While on the back cover of the text, she questions the scarcity of babies in literature, throughout the work itself she posits some possible answers, such as that «le bébé est enveloppé de discours épais comme des langues», for which that «il est ainsi l'objet le plus mineur qui soit pour la littérature»⁵⁰. A topic regarded as having been «laissé aux femmes», paradoxically many women do not wish to engage with themselves: «celles qui entendent écrire vraiment se tiennent prudemment à distance»⁵¹ (*Ibid*: 43). Thus, she undertakes a literary search that takes in Guillaume Dustan, Montaigne, Toni Morrison, James Joyce's *Ulysses* and Tolstoy, lamenting the absences of babies for novelist such as Natalie Sarraute, Marguerite Duras and for Woolf herself. Her survey of philosophy proves equally unhelpful:

«Tota mulier in utero», la femme est toute dans l'utérus : Socrate réserve au seul homme la Raison. Rousseau juge indigne la femme qui écrit au lieu de s'occuper de ses enfants. Quatre ou cinq femmes sont réunies dans cette émission de radio et concluent, à propos du désir d'enfant : « C'est cet insondable mystère qui fait que la maternité est inexplicable au philosophe ».

Je ricane dans ma cuisine.

[...] Le bébé rend les femmes idiotes (Darrieussecq 2005: 137-138).⁵²

From her frustrated search for predecessors capable of giving expression to the phenomenon of motherhood and the enigma of the newborn, we gain a deeper understanding of her fascination for the encounter that opened this article: that of her unexpected discovery in the previously unknown German painter Paula Modersohn-Becker of a *predecessor* in the founding of a language, albeit a pictorial one, through which these phenomena can be opened up to representation. It is here in the work of Modersohn-Becker that Darrieussecq finds a language equal to this task of representation, in the artist's sense of immanence and a gaze unmediated by pre-existing systems of male vision.

47. «as if nothing happened, a new literature: that of women outside the male gaze».

48. «Of any woman who would like to work, write, think and be taken seriously».

49. «There must be something to investigate, to understand here» (Darrieussecq, 2019: 3).

50. «All the talk about the baby —he's wrapped up in it, as thick as nappies— means that he holds a very insignificant place in literature» (*Ibidem*: 32).

51. «A subject reserved for women [...] and women intending to write literature, to really write, keep at prudent distance from the theme of babies» (*Idem*).

52. «Tota mulier in utero. A woman is a womb. Socrates declares reason to be the sole preserve of men. Rousseau considers a woman who writes instead of looking after her children to be unworthy. On the subject of wanting to have a child, the four or five women on this radio chat show conclude: 'This unfathomable mystery is what makes motherhood inexplicable to the philosopher'.

I snigger in my kitchen.

[...] Baby makes women silly» (*Ibidem*: 122-123).

In his famous short story, «Kafka and His Precursors», from the collection *Other Inquisitions* (1952), Jorge Luis Borges posits the notion that each writer creates their own precursors. Those which he identifies in Kafka differ so much amongst themselves that, if it were not for the Czech author's writings, we, as readers or interpreters of the text, would remain unable to identify their mutual interconnections, given that their only link is in fact, their shared exposition of a distinctly Kafkaian sensibility. A similar notion may be identified in the attempts of Darrieussecq to create her own precursors, albeit from the perspective of gender. If we recognise Paula Modersohn-Becker and Virginia Woolf as part of the same constellation of subjectivities which Darrieussecq inhabits, it is because the author has taken it upon herself to trace out the lines of creative connectivity between these two women. Consequently, both can now be claimed as referents of a new form of female representation outside male gaze to which Darrieussecq is natural heir, through the literary act of naming these pioneering creative women as her antecedents. It is in this gesture of seeing and naming that Darrieussecq truly restores splendour to Paula Modersohn-Becker.

66

In *Être ici est une splendeur*, Paula Modersohn-Becker appears, as the back cover proclaims, as an artist who «voulait peindre et c'est tout»⁵³ (Darrieussecq, 2016a). Through her life of Modersohn-Becker, Darrieussecq chronicles the social, material and familial struggles that female artists have experienced throughout history, in order to be recognised as cultural producer, and to establish conditions which allowed them to create with independence and freedom. By including details of these struggles in her narrative, Darrieussecq lays the foundations for her portrayal of Modersohn-Becker as a pioneer, a representation that she reinforces through her extensive commentary on the artist's body of work, and her selection of specific works for the originality and innovation of their focus. From her reading of the life of Paula-Modersohn-Becker and from our analysis of this text, we can draw various conclusions.

The first of these is that Darrieussecq begins with an assumption that is far from certain, namely her assertion of the alleged lack of public and artistic recognition of the figure of Modersohn-Becker. While it is true that the artist does not enjoy the same recognition as some of her contemporaries, and that this situation is particularly valid in France in the period in which Darrieussecq is writing her biography, the brief examination of her reception presented in the second section of this article prevents her inclusion in the category of forgotten female artists. Moreover, the wide and ongoing discussion of her work amongst feminist art historians is further testament

CONCLUSIONS

53. «Wanted to paint, and that's all».

to this. From this thread of the debate, we can draw a second conclusion: there is no trace in Darrieussecq's biography of the difficulty that the German artist experiences in breaking with established aesthetic codes, as highlighted by Griselda Pollock, Roszika Parker and Linda Nochlin. The *Paula* of Marie Darrieussecq has successfully cast off the bonds of conformity that the male gaze had historically imposed on the possibility of a genuine female self-representation. The life of Modersohn-Becker, as written by the French novelist is that of a pioneer, not only as the first woman artist to produce a nude self-portrait but more significantly, for having implemented a language and gaze of her own in regard to certain subjects which, whether due to a lack of interest – as with the example of motherhood –, or whether due to an established symbolism that defined them as other, previously belonged the realm of the unsaid and unexpressed. In her representation of the artist she proves the hypothesis raised and subsequently dismissed by Parker and Pollock: Modersohn-Becker generated new and positive systems of meaning for women, creation and nature. Perhaps this is why Darrieussecq writes her biography as if talking of a beloved friend. «J'ai écrit cette biographie [...] parce que cette femme que je n'ai pas connue me manque»⁵⁴ (Darrieussecq, 2016a: 132). She misses Modersohn-Becker in the same way that a distant forerunner is missed, just as she misses the Virginia Woolf whom she translated in *Un lieu à soi*. The third conclusion we may draw from this study is that both Darrieussecq's biography of Modersohn-Becker and her translation of Woolf appear shaped by the author's search for a female genealogy. A genealogy which allows her to assess her own relation to those female creators of the past who laid the first bricks in the wall of their own dwelling place of language, from inside which they sought to narrate their experiences of living in and representing a world made by women. Thus, in an interrogation of certain modes of interpretation prevalent in feminist art history, and through a transdisciplinary dialogue with her own body of work, Darrieussecq asserts Modersohn-Becker's significance within and beyond the boundaries of art, consecrating her as a fully-formed referent of female self-representation.

67

54. «I have written this little biography [...] because I miss this woman I never knew» (Darrieussecq, 2017: 131).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BEAUVOIR, Simone de (1982). *Le deuxième sexe, Tome 1*. Paris: Folio Essais.
- BERGER, John (1977). *Ways of Seeing*. London: Penguin Books.
- BUTLER, Judith (2006). *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- COMINI, Alessandra (1982). «Gender or Genius? The Women Artists of German Expressionism». In BROUDE, Norma and GARRAND, Mary (eds.). *Feminism and Art History, Questioning the Litany*. New York: Harper & Row, 271-92.
- DARRIEUSSECQ, Marie (2005). *Le bébé*. Paris: P.O.L éditeur.

- (2016a). *Être ici est une splendeur. Vie de Paula Modersohn-Becker*. Paris: P.O.L éditeur, coll. Folio.
- (2016b). Preface to WOOLF, Virginia. *Un lieu à soi*. Paris: Denoël.
- (2017). *Being Here is Everything. The Life of Paula Modersohn-Becker*. Translated by Penny Hueston. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- (2019). *The Baby*. Translated by Penny Hueston. Australia: Text Publishing Company.
- FRIEDRICHSMEYER, Sara (1991). «Paula Modersohn-Becker and the Fictions of Artistic Self-Representation». *German Studies Review* 14 (3, October), 489-510.
- HEISE, Carl Georg (1961). *Paula Modersohn-Becker, Mutter und Kind en Werkmonographien zur bildenden Kunst*. Ditzingen: P. Reclam, n.º 62.
- HIGONNET, Anne (2009). «Making babies, painting bodies: Women, Art and Paula Modersohn-Becker's Productivity». *Woman's Art Journal* 30 (2 Fall/Winter), 15-21.
- IRIGARAY, Luce (1981). *Le corps-à-corps avec la mère*. Ottawa: Les éditions de la pleine lune.
- (1990). *Je, tu, nous. Pour une culture de la différence*. Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle.
- 68 KAPLAN, E. Anne (2001). *Women and Film. Both Sides of the Camera*. London and New York: Routledge / Taylor & Francis e-Library.
- LA GRANDE LIBRAIRIE (2016). «Marie Darrieussecq aborde les thèmes de la fiction et des femmes». *La Grande Librairie*. 22 January 2016. Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9U7KMhEXLk&ab_channel=LaGrandeLibrairie
- LEE, Hermione (2009). *Biography. A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- LEJEUNE, Philippe (1975). *Le pacte autobiographique*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- MULVEY, Laura (1999). «Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema». In BRAUDY, Loe and COHEN, Marshall (eds). *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. New York: Oxford UP, 833-44.
- NOCHLIN, Linda (1994). *Women, Art, and Power and Other Essays*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd.
- (2018). *The Politics of Vision. Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society*. New York: Routledge.
- ORTNER, Sherry B. (1991). «¿Es la mujer con respecto al hombre lo que la naturaleza con respecto a la cultura?» in HARRIS, Olivia & YOUNG, Kate (eds.) *Antropología y feminismo*. Madrid, Ediciones Cátedra.
- (2006) «Entonces, ¿es la mujer al hombre lo que la naturaleza a la cultura?» in *AIBR. Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana*, Vol. 1, n.º 1, February 2006, 12-21.
- PARKER, Roszika, POLLOCK, Grisela (1981). *Old Mistresses. Women, Art and Ideology*. London: Pandora Press.

- RADYCKI, Diane (2013). *Paula Modersohn-Becker: The First Modern Woman Artist*. United States: Yale University Press.
- SARTRE, Jean Paul (1992). *Being and Nothingness. A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*. United States: Washington Square Press.
- SCHWOCHOV, Christian (2016). *Paula*. Germany, France: Pandora Filmproduktion, Grown up films.
- STEINBERG, Leo (1983). *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.