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## **IN THE SKIN OF ANOTHER**

*Anne Michaels', Sujata Bhatt's and Adrienne Rich's Dramatic Monologues as  
Embodiments of Painter Paula Modersohn-Becker*

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matricola: 955644

Coordinatore del dottorato

Tutore del dottorando

Prof. Enrica Villari

Prof. Gregory Dowling

*To my father, to my brother.*

*To the memory of my mother.*

## IN THE SKIN OF ANOTHER

*“I am not ashamed that again, as before, it is your images,  
your words almost, with which I attempt to express myself,  
as if I wanted to make you a gift of your own possessions.  
But so it is, Clara Westhoff, we receive many of our greatest treasures  
for the first time when they come to us borne on the voice of another”*

*Rainer Maria Rilke to Clara Westhoff*

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*"I am part of all that I have met;  
Yet all experience is an arch wherethrough  
Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades  
For ever and for ever when I move.  
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,  
To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!"*

*Alfred Tennyson, from "Ulysses"*

This has been a long and rewarding research. Besides allowing me to enter Anne Michaels', Sujata Bhatt's and Adrienne Rich's dramatic monologues as if they were worlds I could temporarily inhabit, I was given the opportunity to experience in the first person German painter Paula Modersohn-Becker's journey into art and life as if I were the protagonist of *Midnight in Paris* by Woody Allen, who is given access into the lively Paris of the Twenties (even though I mostly journeyed into the first decade of the twentieth century...).

My greatest debt is to professor Gregory Dowling, whose personal generosity, passion for poetry, competence and inventiveness were invaluable to me. In him I found the perfect interlocutor with whom to discuss my ideas about poetry, which often needed to be clarified by dialogue before taking a comprehensible shape in words. I want also to acknowledge my debt to professor Rosella Mamoli Zorzi, whose constant reassurance and enthusiasm encouraged me to pursue this line of research; to professor Francesca Bisutti for inviting me to explore the merging of literature and visual arts; to professor Elide Pittarello, whose courses provided me with innumerable clues so as how to let pictures speak within literary texts; to professor Patrizia Magli for giving me precious suggestions as regards the connection between word and image and for fostering my reconstruction of the Parisian artistic *milieu* that exerted such a decisive influence on Becker's painting; to professor Shaul Bassi for widening my view of the processes of 'incorporation' and 'embodiment' within post-colonial literature; to Riccardo Held, for discussing with me my interpretation of Rilke's *Requiem*; to John Phillimore, for always having the right book among his Old World Books; to professors Maria Grazia Ciani and Margherita Losacco from the University of Padova, for asking me to translate *Adonais* by P. B. Shelley and therefore allowing me to perceive better the difference between the 'I' of the poet and the 'I' of the speaker.

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## PROLOGUE

### *A Room of Mirrors*

When one tries to piece together German painter Paula Modersohn-Becker's short but very prolific journey into life and art at the beginning of the twentieth century, one undoubtedly enters a room of mirrors. Not only is it impossible to speak of her without taking into consideration the influence of other artists and friends on her, but especially if one – as is my personal experience – has discovered her by reading poems by living women poets such as Canadian Anne Michaels (1958), Indian Sujata Bhatt (1956) and American Adrienne Rich (1929), the room of mirrors widens and becomes more and more articulated, like a labyrinth.

This research aims at exploring the reasons for a multiple fascination: why does Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907) after her death haunt Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) as a ghost that can find no peace in the hereafter? and, what is more, why does her experience as a woman artist go on haunting three women poets of the present time, who have written poems – and series of poems – in the first person, giving voice to her?

As can be inferred, this research is to be considered either a ghost story or, from a more mystic point of view, the account of successful embodiments, which are equally revelatory of the past as of the present. In the interstices between the real story involving various characters as well as Paula Becker and the parallel figures created by the poems, the form of the dramatic monologue (that is to say the poetic expression which best allows possible embodiments) perfectly serves as a way of entering a slippery yet vital theme, that is to say the one of “Love as the condition of personality, and vice versa,” as John Bayley defines it in his book *The Characters of Love* (265). According to him, it is inevitable that treating such a subject requires the form of the embodiment: “Love is not a theme that can be penetratingly explored, compassionately revealed, and so forth. It cannot be revealed at all: it can only be embodied” (265). And the ability to use literature as a form of embodiment depends on the author's attitude towards his or her own characters. As Bayley remarks, “that author, if fact, is best on love who best loves his own creations” (7). It seems a truism but it is not, as “The writers whom we admire to-day do not appear to love their characters, and the critics who appraise their books show no sign of doing so either. [...] Characters, it seems, are no longer objects of affection. The literary personality has gone down in the world.” Bayley's book is dated 1960 and maybe it

is not by accident that, starting from the Seventies, three poets undertook the experience of embodying Paula Modersohn-Becker's art and life by using the form of the dramatic monologue. Becker's painting was not certainly so renowned at that time but what struck the three poets is that at the base of her experience was the principle that "art is like love," as "the more one gives, the more one receives" (*The Letters and Journals* 315). At the end of the last century there seemed to be a form of poetic experimentalism which tried to concentrate less on purely intellectual issues and was keener on undertaking the human adventure to embody some other artist's personality. The form of dramatic monologue that each time is chosen for this particular purpose does not aim to be explicitly avant-garde, but in fact it turns out to be so, due to its deepest need not only to give life to Paula Modersohn-Becker but to represent her as truthfully as possible on the page.

Bayley himself underlines the danger of creating a language for reflecting on a work of the imagination which is fundamentally different from the language of the work itself (268), and so the present study attempts to approach its subject with a language which does not sound too constrictive or classificatory, but rather aims to enter the poems as if they were places, places of the imagination where besides Paula Becker a certain number of characters, seen from the outside and the inside, can be met along the way. A similar approach has directed the translation of the poems included in the Epilogue. The most successful ones are not only mirrors of reality, but also a possible expansion of it.

Literature then, and poetry in particular, come to fulfill one of its most important functions, that is to say to give back to the reader not only some figures of artists portrayed in their time, but also some unknown or invented chapters of their life, as well as possible links and hints to the present time. As Emily Dickinson well said in her poem [657], "Possibility" is "A fairer House than Prose – / More numerous of Windows – / Superior – for Doors." Like the language of the poems, the language of this study tries to open as many windows and doors as possible, without closing them in any definitive interpretation. The poems are read using as critical guides some of John Bayley's and Isobel Armstrong's works. Both critics in fact see the poem as the expression of the poet's inner division and the result of an unsolved struggle between "a manifest and a latent content, a conscious and unconscious desire" (Armstrong 10). Bayley goes even beyond this affirmation and in *The Uses of Division* (1976) says that the division itself can be a fundamental and relevant aspect of the work of art. The critic's aim therefore consists in detecting it, not in bringing it to a supposed latent or hinted at unity:



We take for granted that the work of art represents a solution, a confluence and a harmony – getting the statue clean away from the marble, as D. H. Lawrence called it – and again the obvious truth in such metaphor is not what is here in question: what matters, rather, is the extent to which disunity and division may themselves have become aspects – indispensable and irremovable ones – of the artistic whole. (12)

Instead of reading the contradictory and divided contents of any work of literature as one of its possible limits, or just as its surface hiding a deep cohesion, the critic, according to Bayley, should be ready to face the inner division as its real necessity, since the same inalienable meaning certainly could not be conveyed by a coherent text: “The point would be how such a literature works on us, and how we work upon it, finding what accident rather than intention put there, and perceiving ourselves how contradictions enlarge and emancipate the world of experience it offers” (12).

Therefore not only the critic, but the reader too, should not look for a solution of contrasts in the text, but on the contrary, they should go in search of signs of incongruence as they signal the great depth of what the author had to say which could not be expressed in its entirety through logic:

To possess an ‘inside’ a work of literature must display as a part of its achievement some kind of reticence, and the tensions of reticence; and these are a sure indication of powers unresolved below the surface, unresolved in what they suggest to us and the impression they make, but effective and triumphant at the level of artistic exposition. (13)

Not only Michaels’, Bhatt’s and Rich’s poems have therefore been read according to this view but also Rilke’s *Requiem for a Friend*, dedicated to Paula Becker, which is to be considered the unavoidable source of inspiration of the three poets’ dramatic monologues. One can say that each poem strives to achieve wholeness but in fact results in an orchestration of inner conflicts and contradictions and cannot but take the form of an inescapable fragmentation. A text, in fact, in Armstrong’s words, “is endless struggle and contention, struggle with a changing project, struggle with the play of ambiguity and contradiction. This is a way of reading which gives equal weight to a text’s stated project and the polysemic and possibly wayward meanings it generates” (10). The more a poem remains mysterious to the reader after all the possible inferences have been made about it, the more such poem is to be considered a work of art. This is why, commenting on T. S. Eliot’s affirmation that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was “most

certainly an artistic failure,” Bayley completely reverses the judgement by choosing the opposite approach:

The success is in presenting a play which retains its mystery in idea while wholly and prodigally spending its material in action. *Hamlet* is, so to speak, superficial at the highest level. That Shakespeare did not ‘know’ *Hamlet* is certain; but that he grasped what was involved must be equally the case, and the turmoil of what was involved, which the artist does not have to get straight or make up his mind about, settles out at the point of maximum effect. (15)

Paula Modersohn-Becker was certainly an attractive subject from this point of view, because as a woman painter all her life she struggled with an inner division between her family duties and her art. It was surely harder for her with respect to W. B. Yeats’s edict quoted by Bayley, that “the intellect of man is forced to choose / Perfection of the life or of the work,” for at least two reasons. First, because the struggle for a woman artist does not only concern the “intellect” but also the body, which is a fundamental source of artistic expression; and secondly because Becker was not interested in “perfection,” but rather in finding a way to reveal the inner and most secret life of the subjects and objects that she painted. And, as Becker very well knew, such an intent does not include perfection among its possible results.

Yet her conflict between art and family duties seemed to be close to being solved at the end of her life, which unfortunately came too soon to give her the opportunity to ascertain if she really had come to a profitable solution. The poems where she is given voice achieve their utmost emotional effect when they do not try to ‘mend’ Becker’s division or to take position by fostering one side or the other of the conflict but dare to dwell within her sharpest contradictions.

What seems fundamental, therefore, is the poets’ effort to embody Paula Becker, their attempt to undergo the same experience that the painter and the group of artists surrounding her entered into by influencing one another. Different codes of expression, and a conception of art as a form of disinterested love which could be freed from some of the social and family constraints, attracted Becker and the other artists of her *milieu* to the same core of a truth which they felt had still to be fully unveiled. Not only was failure part of their great success in the respective arts, but it was also the reason why they so needed one another despite the clashes of opinions, misunderstandings or serious quarrels over personal or artistic matters which often threatened to distance them from one another.

This is also why this research attempts to explore the poems by Michaels, Bhatt and Rich as double experiences: first of all as embodiments of painter Paula Becker but also as quests for new forms of dramatic monologue allowing, in perfect consonance with the poets' time, to combine different arts to represent in absolute contemporaneity the painter's consciousness opening itself as well as a multitude of relations and different times intertwining themselves into the narration. In the twentieth century the dramatic monologue, in its most successful experiments combining tradition and innovation, is inevitably driven towards fragmentation. Narration is broken by interruptions, intervening of memories, and the poet's personality spontaneously emerges here and there in the text as a necessary and sometimes subconscious resistance to total disappearance by reformulating itself on the basis of a renewed consciousness.

Nineteenth-century relativism, which was a certain influence on Robert Browning's dramatic monologues, in the following century has expanded owing to a corollary of historical events and scientific discoveries which, in Michaels' words, "only make our ignorance more precise." The true poet now is more aware than ever that the poem can at best be a journey into the depth of some experience, and that experiencing is more important than knowing. Only the poet's "surplusage of soul," which is necessary to embody some other character, can be potentially boundless. No character in literature – as no person in life – can ever be completely knowable. The same, as Michaels says, is true on a higher level: "Never fully knowable, in a state of perpetual change, the world, like love, like our selves, is seen and reseen through our changing consciousness. [...] It's the great poem's grace, that it seems inexhaustible as our experience" ("Cleopatra's Love" 15).

If knowledge is necessarily limited, the poem however can be driven towards infinity. It can be boundless in its aspiration to embody a character and an entire age together with it. What the poet, as well as the reader, gain back, is the confrontation with another time, the revelation that one not only can live two different times at once, but that deep in anyone a multitude of times, places and maybe different fragments of identity continuously develop a fascinating multiple personality, capable of a wide range of contemporary experiences.

What seems to emerge from this triad of poets' writing is that the twentieth century at its end, announcing the new millennium, needs to confront itself with its beginnings to find a proper mirror for the great changes taking place in the one hundred years that have just elapsed. This research tries to find possible reasons – on the part of the three poets – for the need they felt to reflect themselves into the character of a woman painter living at the beginning of the century in which they were born. It is certainly a stunning coincidence that as many as three nearly contemporary poets writing in English felt the same urge to reopen a life belonging to a period

before their own births. Beside seeming a sort of necessary literary ‘metabolism’ of so many historical, scientific and psychological, not to say artistic, revolutions intervening in the first half of the twentieth century, promising – as Peter Conrad says in his fascinating book *Modern Times, Modern Places* (1998) – “to make the world modern, which meant to create it all over again” (13), it may also be a result of a subsequent disappointment which started to be the dominating mood the end of the century:

Things did not quite turn out as planned. Technology shrank the globe, which allowed the world to make war against itself twice in a single generation. Science trespassed on ultimate mysteries, enabling the two global powers which emerged from the conflagration of nations in 1945 to threaten each other, for much of the century’s second half, with a terminal storm of fire. When the twentieth century began, there was hopeful, predictive talk of a ‘new man’, and of course a ‘new woman’ as well – organisms redesigned according to the most modern principles of ethical uplift and sexual hygiene. (Conrad 13)

When Becker died, in the first decade of the twentieth century, all these changes were announced and some of them close to happening. Personal and collective aspects of this coming universal transformation are reflected in her art and witnessed in her letters and journals. As far as women’s emancipation is concerned, for example, Becker did not adhere to the propaganda she encountered in Berlin and was quite skeptical of the new tendency, as she wrote to her parents on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1897: “some other modern women have an indulgent, rather scornful way of speaking about men as if they were greedy children. And as soon as I hear them speak, I am immediately on the men’s side” (*Letters and Journals* 65). If here she can seem influenced by the fairly rigid education she received, in the following passage she ventured a much more ironical comment: “I guess little Paula is going to let the great men of the world carry on and I’ll continue to trust in their authority. Still, I have to laugh at myself and the world” (65). Four years later, in Berlin, she would again criticize the women’s emancipation movement: “Women’s emancipation here is indeed very unattractive and unpleasant when it comes together in mobs like this” (239). And when, later on she lamented with her husband the restrictions imposed on women with respect to men, she was prompted not by any general theory but by the difficulties she was encountering in her personal life, to pursue her art while fulfilling her duties as a wife who was also dreaming of being a mother. It is more Becker’s personal conflict between art and life which is given voice in different ways in Michaels’, Bhatt’s and Rich’s poems. Such an attention could be evidence of the three poets’ own inner division, which seems therefore to be far from easy to resolve. As the second chapter of this study will show, the

political issue of women's emancipation, instead, is openly discussed only by Rich, who, however, subtly transforms Becker's true attitude towards it into her own political creed in the Seventies.

As Becker's letters show that she felt freest when painting,<sup>1</sup> in the same way these three poets seem to look for freedom within their own poems. First of all they partly disentangle themselves of their identity, to embody a woman painter's voice. Each poem therefore aims at becoming not only a second chance of life for Becker, who died so young, but also for the three women writers, as the use of another identity allows something like a look at their own life from afar. One of the issues the present study deals with, is how a character like Paula Becker can become alive on the page. In other words, how can a poem, and a dramatic monologue to be precise, become the proper space for an embodiment to take place? To put the question in terms more consonant with Bayley's vision, how can a work of literature expand wholly into life? What is necessary to the poem which is asked to host a character that is a true human being, that is to say deprived as much as possible of any artificial feature reminding the reader of its fictitious nature? And, more to the point, to what extent must the poet's subjectivity disappear in order to free the space for such an embodiment to take place?

There are undoubtedly difficult questions to be answered, and, as Bayley underlines in *The Uses of Division*, they date back at least as far as John Keats' poetry, who drew particular attention to them when he was writing poetry and reflecting on its function and meaning. Usually the poets' answers to relevant issues are contained in their poems, and sometimes in their theoretical reflections. This is why the poems themselves are at the centre of this study, and they are considered creative texts in a double sense: besides being representations of the painter's art and life, they are also self-representations of the poets. That is to say that they are able to create a character alive on the page and, while developing that process, they also become mirrors of the respective authors' poetic vision. Poetry is therefore deemed necessary as far as its purest essence is concerned, that is to say as thought incarnate.

As well as critical studies which are very useful to understand how a poem can give life to a human being, this research also fruitfully exploits the lucky coincidence (which, perhaps, is not a coincidence at all) of as many as three poets writing to embody Paula Becker. In their poems the painter's embodiment takes place in different ways, and by comparing them one can better understand where and why the poems – to use Michaels' words – yield to “incantation” and the poems' rhythm and structure beat with the same beat of a human heart.

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<sup>1</sup> “I feel so divinely free!” (*Letters and Journals* 329) Becker wrote to her husband on 15th April 1904, when she was taking advantage of his temporary absence to paint all day long in her studio at the Brünjes in Osterndorf.

The other suggestion derived from Rilke's *Requiem for a Friend*, is that in each poem she is somehow an immortal Eurydice, who reappears each time in a different semblance with respect to the one invoked and wished for by Rilke, and yet she similarly comes back temporarily from the netherworld. Michaels, Bhatt and Rich are therefore all Orpheus-poets who try to get her back to earth and to life and yet cannot but see her disappear again into the unknown at the end of each poem.

Poetry therefore is here used as a means of resurrection, and by reviving the woman painter the poem inevitably becomes a point of fusion between past and present and between different places and arts. The eternal and at the same time extremely earthly dimension which Paula Becker looked for in her painting is also the suspended time that the poems where she is given voice achieve as a result of the poets' embodiment of her. It is an elsewhere that some forms of poetry are evidently still trying to find at the end of the twentieth century, yet the coordinates of such suspension from the here-and-now are very different from the ones that characterize Romanticism. Paula as a character inhabiting the poems evades from the present time of her life just to be physically and mortally there, in the present of her art. The temporal suspension achieved in the poems seems partly to derive from the peculiar effect that verbal representation can attain when used for ekphrastic purposes. In fact, as James A. W. Heffernan says in his book *Museum of Words*,

language achieves its greatest beauty and highest truth when it transcends narrative, when it represents not what has been or will be but *is*. "Beauty is truth, truth beauty." In the second half of this chiasmic utterance, the verb drops away, so that language assumes the juxtapositional effect of sculpture. Entering and envoicing the mute still object, language abandons its narrative impulse and gives itself up to the lasting suspension of visual art.  
(115)

Yet the difference with Romanticism is that the other time dimension allowed by visual art has nothing of the idealism, divinity or potential perfection which was continually hinted at by Romantic poems. By going deep into her art, Paula in the poems (like Becker in her life) cannot but acknowledge her own continual failure, in a constant admission of her own finitude and limitations as a painter. As Peter Conrad puts it, "After the separate twilights of gods and idols came the twilight of men" (23) – and presumably of women too. Art does not represent any ideal model anymore, it is simply the plenitude of everyday life seen through the soul's eyes.

As has already emerged from these few pages of introduction, the use of verbal tenses can leave room for some possible misunderstandings: how to differentiate the actual Paula

Modersohn-Becker from the character inhabiting the poems? In consonance with the considerations dedicated to the use of time within the poems, usually the past is used in this study to refer to the real events or biographical details concerning the painter's life, while when she is given voice by the poets, and therefore enters the realm of art, the everlasting present has been frequently chosen as the most proper tense for the character Paula. In a similar way, the use of proper names can create a certain ambiguity. How to distinguish between the painter who is at the centre of the long first chapter attempting a biographical reconstruction of her life and art, and the character created each time by Michaels, Bhatt and Rich? One of the effects of literature and poetry in particular, as frequently affirmed by Bayley, is that the characters can often become more familiar to the reader than real people. That is why the actual painter is here called with her full name, Paula Becker, or just with her second name, Becker. Perhaps a further differentiation should have been made, between the married Paula Modersohn-Becker and the woman later trying to separate from her husband and signing her letters Paula Becker, but it would have increased the inevitable confusion that always arises when one goes from life to literature and *vice versa*. Conversely, when it comes to the character, she is simply Paula, as Michaels in her poem says that that was what she was always called by Rilke, who instead always remained 'Rilke' and never became 'Rainer.'

The title of the first chapter, "The Novel(s) Behind the Poems," refers to novels in the plural as they are involved in two ways: first as the books mentioned by the characters and influencing Becker's life, and secondly as an invisible novel hinted at in the poems, which try – more or less faithfully – to give life to Becker as a character. How can a novel be implied in one poem or a series of poems? And, more to the point, what can a poem have in common with a novel? Some possible answers can easily be found. In *The Uses of Division*, Bayley affirms that modernity started

identifying fiction with kinds of consciousness, and *vice versa*. And that is indeed the way it has turned out, for the modern reflective consciousness cannot in some sense but see itself as taking part in a novel, the novel being the standard reflection of the individual in our age. When we speak of 'character' we really mean something that exists only in literature though it is usefully and almost unconsciously extrapolated back from literature into life. (18)

The poems which are the object of this research, and are closely analysed in chapter two, tend towards the same aim, as they are dramatic monologues, and as such they endeavor to represent the character's consciousness which is ideally communicated to the reader simultaneously to the character's experiencing it. Of course a great difference remains between a novel and a dramatic

monologue: this latter, in fact, to be successful requires that the dramatic characterization, as Robert Langbaum says in his book on the dramatic monologue, *The Poetry of Experience*, “suggest[s] as much as possible of the speaker’s life outside the poem” (202). This is why the speakers of the dramatic monologues often “excel in passion, will or intellectual virtuosity – in existential courage, the courage to be themselves” (202), as is Paula’s case as a character inside the poems.

In other words, the character’s life, which is fully explored in the novel, in the dramatic monologue is in great part just hinted at, so that, again in Langbaum’s words, “the speaker must [...] evince more life than the situation requires, in order to suggest that life outside the poem which makes him larger than the situation” (202). If Bayley clarifies this process in Shakespearian drama, by saying that the great playwright bestows upon the reader the task to reconstruct or imagine the novel lying behind his plays,<sup>2</sup> this is exactly what has been attempted in the first part of the present dissertation. By doing this kind of research, one immediately realizes that the poems written by Michaels, Bhatt and Rich not only refer more or less manifestly to Becker’s biographical details but also partly change them, or interpret them according to their own view, and sometimes – by following their own imagination – they even try to fill up the blanks of the painter’s biography.

The object of the present study is therefore to explore the poems so as to unveil the peculiar way which the respective authors choose to draw as near as possible to the poem’s truth, which – at least according to Michaels – does not totally coincide with its meaning.<sup>3</sup> Or rather, as Langbaum aptly puts it, it is a very particular kind of meaning that it is sought for in any dramatic monologue:

The dramatic monologue brings to the surface what is underground in drama; what in drama resists the law of the form becomes the law of the dramatic monologue. The sympathy which pulls against the meaning of drama is the meaning and whole *raison d’être* of the dramatic monologue. External and moral relations are still there, but pushed off-stage; they are now the underground and resisting element, the foil against which meaning defines itself. For the meaning of the dramatic monologue derives not from the absorption of the particular in the general but from the defiance of the general. The meaning is not the law which puts character in its place; the meaning *is* character in its unformulated being, in all its particularity. (*Poetry of Experience* 181)

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<sup>2</sup> “it is only in our view, from the end of a long perspective of familiarity, that there lies behind each of his plays the shadow of a gigantic and seemingly limitless novel” (*Uses of Division* 185).

<sup>3</sup> “Meaning isn’t truth, though we long for it to be” (“Cleopatra’s Love” 15).



This is why Becker's paintings inserted into the poems are not usually described but just evoked, as Paula's personality as a woman painter inevitably revolves around the deep centre of her art. The creation of her as a character is more convincing to the reader when it is somehow consonant with Becker's art, that is to say when strict realism is avoided both in the reconstruction of her biographical details and the representation of the visual images which necessarily enter the poems giving body and soul to her. The pictorial process taking place in the dramatic monologues seems closer to the one referred to by Friedrich Schlegel as "ekphrastic allusion and figuration," as opposed to "ekphrastic description." In the definition of what we call today 'ekphrasis,' in fact, he never used the word 'description,' but talked about "die Verwandlung von Gemälden in Gedichte" – the transformation of paintings into poems" (qtd. in *Pictures into Words* 173). Schlegel went even further and, after having described a painting by Leonardo da Vinci in his periodical *Europa. Eine Zeitschrift* in 1803, added that if he were to say anything more about the picture, "it could only be done by means of a poem, as that would be the most natural way of speaking about paintings and other works of art" (173). Very coherently with these affirmations, a contemporary critic like Heffernan affirms that poetry can sometimes take "visual art as the model for a language of transcendence that aspires to represent being rather than becoming" (*Museum of Words* 115).

Chapter three is therefore meant to be a survey of the peculiar strategies and devices that each of the three poets made use of to actually transform Becker's art and life into poems, so that the truth they convey through them coincides with the credibility of the character they create, and not necessarily with the accuracy with which they use fragments of Becker's biography to transform them into poems. Not only will Michaels', Bhatt's and Rich's peculiar forms of dramatic monologue be explored in the light of the most important critical studies on this poetic genre by Robert Langbaum, Alan Sinfield and Glennis Byron, but they will also be compared to other more conventional dramatic monologues where a male or female painter (or visual artist) speaks.

In this research, which explores a series of transformations, from painting into poems, from life into poetry, from the past into the present, translation could not but be the concluding part of the journey into Paula Modersohn-Becker. Like the *ekphrasis* defined by Schlegel, translation is not a descriptive but a transformative process and as such can throw further light on the poems.

*Translating as a Way of Crossing and Enriching Cultures*

*“Everywhere there is a connection,  
everywhere there is illustration.  
No single event, no single literature  
is adequately comprehended except  
in relation to other events, to other literatures.”*

*Matthew Arnold, On the Modern Element in Literature,  
Inaugural Lecture delivered in the University of Oxford, 14 November 1857<sup>4</sup>*

It is undoubtedly interesting to notice that Paula Modersohn-Becker has been given voice three times in English and one in Dutch, by the famous writer Cees Noteboom, but never once in German.<sup>5</sup> It could be evidence not only of the wish – on the part of Michaels, Bhatt and Rich – to embody a painter, but also of crossing cultures, languages and times. Yet such a yearning to absorb other experiences, and possibly foreign ones, is hardly surprising, as usually any great artist’s wish is to get to know and convey what is ‘other’ from himself or herself. As will be shown in the first chapter of this research, both Becker and Rilke in fact derived the most essential principles of their respective arts from other artists that they encountered abroad, like Tolstoy, Jakobsen, Cézanne, Rodin and Gauguin, just to mention the most relevant ones. That is why Becker’s and Rilke’s work too was often based on translation, which of course did not only consist in literary translations of texts that were important for them but also in translations from one art to another and *vice versa*.

In a very similar way, the present study explores texts written by Becker and Rilke in their English translation, not only because the dramatic monologues by Michaels, Bhatt and Rich are written in English, but also because what is really important in such a crossing of cultures and times, is the effort to get straight at the heart of the human nature, where usually the artist finds himself or herself in a tangle of contradictory wishes and yearnings as far as life and art are concerned. It is precisely such inner experience which any translation, despite linguistic and cultural differences and sometimes incompatibilities, should strive to preserve in the process of transferring a text into another language. In the same way as Becker and Rilke nourished their

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<sup>4</sup> Qtd. in Bassnett 1993.

<sup>5</sup> I have personally asked Verena Borgmann, who works at the Paula Modersohn-Becker’s Museum in Bremen and is certainly one of the most informed and updated experts of her painting. She told me about the two Noteboom’s poems, which are not actually dramatic monologues but two ekphrastic poems (“Rilke, geschilderd door Paula Modersohn-Becker, 1906,” dedicated to Becker’s portrait of Rilke, and “Paula Modersohn-Becker, stilleven 1905,” based on one of her most renowned still lifes), but did not know of any German poet having written in Becker’s voice.

art by reading other writers' work in translation to get at the core of their artistic expression, Michaels, Bhatt and Rich translated the two artists' experience into their own. If Bhatt has certainly read Becker's letters and journals and Rilke's poems and letters in German, as she personally told me so, Rich, before translating Rilke's *Requiem* into English with Lilly Engler, wrote her poem when the first English translations of Becker's letters and journals still circulated as manuscripts;<sup>6</sup> while in Michaels' poem there seem to be several literal references to the English translations. Yet, as what matters in this research is how Becker becomes each time a speaker in the three poets' poems, translation cannot but be intrinsic part of the overall transformative process of a real person into a character.

Furthermore, in exploring such a multiple crossing of boundaries, one should also consider that Michaels' and Bhatt's dramatic monologues are instances of post-colonial poetry, pointing to the two poets' long-lasting attraction for European artistic experiences belonging to a recent past – as is the case of Paula Modersohn-Becker's short but brilliant trajectory into Expressionist painting – but equally decided not to renounce their own vision of reality, which gets intermixed with the painter's as they have derived it from her journals and letters. What seems to take place in Michaels' and Bhatt's poems is therefore a two-way circulation of ideas and experiences in a peaceful coexistence and reciprocal interdependence, where European art is not just taken as a model but is acknowledged as one half of a wholeness which necessarily includes the writer's own culture. Such a transformative process in post-colonial literature was underlined by Bill Ashcroft *et al.* in the book *The Empire Writes Back, Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*:

Post-colonial literary theory has begun to deal with the problems of transmuting time into space, with the present struggling out of the past, and, like much recent post-colonial literature, it attempts to construct a future. The post-colonial world is one in which destructive cultural encounter is changing into an acceptance of difference on equal terms. Both literary theorists and cultural historians are beginning to recognize cross-culturality as the potential termination point of an apparently endless human history of conquest and annihilation... the strength of post-colonial theory may well lie in its inherently comparative methodology and the hybridized and syncretic view of the modern world which this implies. (qtd. in Bassnett 1993 75-76)

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<sup>6</sup> In a note to *The Dream of a Common Language*, in fact, Rich affirms: "Some phrases in the poem 'Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff' are quoted from actual diaries and letters of Paula Modersohn-Becker, as translated by Liselotte Erlanger. As yet, no English edition of the Modersohn-Becker manuscript exists."

This is why this research is also a study of comparative literature, as exploring and analyzing Michaels', Bhatt's and Rich's poems inevitably required the reading of texts which were important either for Becker and Rilke or for the poets themselves, in order to start the transformative process taking place in their dramatic monologues. As Bassnett underlines, the same happens when one reads Chaucer, and comes across Boccaccio, or traces Shakespeare's source material through Latin, French, Spanish and Italian; one can similarly detect the process through which Baudelaire's fascination with Edgar Allan Poe enriched his own writing, or how James Joyce borrowed from and loaned to Italo Svevo, until one has the feeling that literature is one whole treasure belonging to everyone:

Once we begin to read we move across frontiers, making associations and connections, no longer reading with a single literature but within that great open space of Literature with a capital L, what Goethe termed *Weltliteratur*. Goethe noted that he liked to 'keep informed about foreign productions' and advised anyone else to do the same. 'It is becoming more and more obvious to me,' he remarked, 'that poetry is the common property of all mankind.'  
(*Comparative Literature 2*)

This is why the critical approach in this research was derived mainly from the poems themselves, which were considered as literary territories to be literally and metaphorically explored. It was the vastness of the themes more or less explicitly discussed in them which required the reading of texts about such subjects. Given the inevitable meeting of poetry and painting, and the importance of the dramatic monologue as a poetical genre, the studies which were privileged were those according attention to verbal or visual arts as forms of embodiment. It is precisely the concept – or better, the process – of the embodiment which has come to constitute the centre around which this dissertation revolves. Not only does it allow the poets' creation of Paula as a character alive on the page, but it was also one of the most important motifs in Rilke's and Becker's art. It is translation which eventually comes quite naturally to round off this research, as it is a further embodiment whose internal coherency was made possible by the preceding reconstruction of Becker's biography and close analysis of the poems also in relation to the classical myth of Orpheus and Eurydice and other works written by the poets.

Taken as a whole, this study is therefore a ghost story whose underlying theme is a fascinating yearning for art which was passed from artists living at the beginning of the twentieth century to those closer to the end of that century and entering the following one. By embodying a successful and fulfilled Paula Modersohn-Becker, Michaels, Bhatt and Rich also

helped to correct the version of her life that Rilke gave in his *Requiem*, and which he himself – in later years – had come to think of as at least incomplete, if not mistaken. Becker in fact, during her short life, was able to attain the valuable and extremely avant-garde result of giving body and soul to her paintings, and of revealing through them what a wholly human and therefore mortal gaze can reveal. This triad of poets' dramatic monologues are not simple rewritings of Becker's life but rather equally successful attempts to undergo the same search for an artistic fulfillment, possibly deprived of a sense of guilt – for being women artists, for having artistic yearnings beside family commitments, for loving beauty and needing solitude as an indispensable condition for artistic creation.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *The Novel(s) Behind the Poems*

*“I was awake but dreaming and I looked  
at my life as though from a second life.”*

*from Paula Modersohn-Becker’s journal<sup>1</sup>*



Paula Modersohn-Becker

It would probably take a novel to tell the whole story of Paula Modersohn-Becker. Yet it must be said that there *is* a novel behind Michaels’, Bhatt’s and Rich’s poems. If the painter can be so alive in their works, it is thanks to the particular way in which the biographical details are reunited in the effort to reconstruct a life or at least some fragments of a life which can hint at the whole of it. And it is precisely this (impossible) whole that one can feel the urge to put together, due to the evocative power of the poems.

Whether they are taken as single poems (as is Michaels’ and Rich’s case) or as an entire collection like *A Colour for Solitude* by Bhatt, the character Paula Modersohn-Becker inhabiting the poems is created with just a few brush strokes, which however – especially when most properly done – have the power to evoke a whole invisible accumulation of Becker’s consciousness which shows through the words. In other terms, the process through which she acquires life in the poems recalls John Bayley’s description of the Shakespearian character, in his book *The Uses of Division*:

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<sup>1</sup> *Letters and Journals* 278.

the Shakespearian character appears to bring to the action in which the play involves him the invisible lifetime which, as a represented human being, he theoretically possesses, but which the artist who has to deal with the exigencies of form and convention usually keeps out of sight, unless a specific dramatic need requires it. The apparent freedom of the Shakespearian character implies the presence of all the hours and years his consciousness has accumulated. (186)

However, as Bayley himself reminds us in his book *The Characters of Love*, “when we say that art can never quite achieve the actuality of life we should also remember that no *one* world – either in life or in art – can wholly contain the reality of any other world: art is only in the position that we ourselves are usually in *vis-à-vis* other aspects of living” (5-6). This explains why there is no way of actually understanding the life in its whole contained in the single poems. One can collect fragments, imagine possible ways of completing it, finding traces of the missing parts in the documents available, but the adventure of reading Paula Modersohn-Becker’s art and life will inevitably seem strangely incomplete, as if not even the pure events could add the necessary part to actually understand her personality.

This is why Bayley’s affirmation that “the highest compliment we can pay to Shakespeare is to discuss his great plays as if they were also great novels” (42) is also to be applied to these poems. Most of them in fact are dramatic monologues and are spoken in Becker’s voice, and yet, in comparing them to the painter’s biography, one can discover that it is always a double voice speaking in them: while trying to speak with her voice, each poet inevitably pours into the verses some of her own yearnings and responses to Becker’s life. The form of the dramatic monologue therefore allows the use of a double, when not a multiple, awareness: the most explicit one is the character’s (as seen by the poet), but more or less explicitly each poet’s view will come out not only in the choices of details and references used to make the painter up, but also in the style and form chosen each time. The inevitable, and in some case sought-for, effect of *expansion* and *deviation* from the actual biography that the poems create, if taken as a whole, can suggest the novel of Paula Modersohn-Becker’s art and life.

What is worth considering is therefore not only the power of poems to allude to an entire novel, but also the meaningfulness of the discrepancies which can be detected between Paula Modersohn-Becker’s biography – as is related in various critical books completing her letters and journals – and the biographical material contained in the poems. A comparison between Becker’s life and the parts chosen which are more or less faithfully represented in the poems, will therefore help in entering the creative processes which give relevance and voice to the

precise character that each poet needs to listen to so as to find out and convey her own idea of the relationship between art and life and in the end her own idea of poetry as required by such a particular form of embodiment.

In order to see what each poet chooses from the painter's biography to give it more attention and develop in a perceptible experience, it is useful to outline some biographical information that can be inferred from various volumes. First of all from *The Letters and Journals*, edited by Günter Busch and Liselotte Von Reinken, and then edited and translated into English by Arthur S. Wensinger and Carole Clew Hoey. The story of the publication of Becker's letters and journals is interesting because her fame as a woman artist was at first due to her writings, connected of course to the pathos of her early death. Only later on was she to become fairly well-known for her qualities as a painter and, even though she never thought of herself as belonging to any one school of painting, she has been called everything, from Neo-Impressionist to primitivist to proto-Expressionist. Now she is simply acknowledged to be the most important woman painter of twentieth-century Germany. Yet outside Germany – and maybe with the exception of England – she remains quite unknown, as if she were enveloped by an aura of reserve exactly in the same way she was when she was still alive, both concerning her private life and her artistic research.

Averil King, in her recent book, *Paula Modersohn-Becker*, observes that Becker is not the only woman painter of her time who became famous first for her writings and only later on for her painting. The same thing in fact also happened to her contemporary the Russian Marianne von Werefkin, who – unlike Becker – was of wealthy descent, and became renowned for her *Lettres à un Inconnu* (1901), that is to say a correspondence addressed to an unknown recipient that embodied her thoughts on life and art. King comments: “Indeed, it seems as if women of their generation felt a need to record their artistic opinions in writing rather than merely debating them amongst themselves, as was perhaps more often the case with their male contemporaries” (161). This fact is important not only because it represents a peculiarity of the *fin-de-siècle* era (even though, as far as Becker is concerned, it is only partially true, as at least in the Worpswede years she frequently discussed her ideas on art with the other women working at the colony), but most of all because it certainly influences the particular forms of dramatic monologue which are used by Michaels, Bhatt and Rich to give shape to their poems. As will be analysed in the following chapter, more than addressing a real audience – as happened in the dramatic monologues by Robert Browning where there is a man painter speaking – in Michaels', Bhatt', and Rich's poems, Paula Modersohn-Becker seems rather to speak to herself, or to record her



thoughts as if she were writing a journal. As if writing were meant as an access to that inner space where others and even oneself can rarely enter.

It is therefore as if the shape that Becker's life took during her brief existence required a precise shape of dramatic monologue to speak again. As Gillian Perry says in her book *Paula Modersohn-Becker*, the painter needed writing to acquire confidence in her own artistic path:

Modersohn-Becker's letters and diaries form an intimate and ingenuous testimony to her personal struggles and her commitment to art. She often uses her diaries as a kind of confessional or confidante, as a means of justifying her chosen career to herself and to others. Her need to write a personal diary which combined intimate revelations with a kind of self-encouragement was shared by many women artists. (10)

The substantial body of letters and journals represents the real material on which the poets can partially root their poems, while the empty spaces – either because of censorship or reticence on Becker's own behalf – are possible voids to be filled with imagination. Nearly one century has elapsed, between the painter's death and the poems written by Michaels, Bhatt and Rich. Many changes have probably made an artistic career easier to pursue for a woman. Yet the need and the difficulty to attain that mysterious inner space where deep life and art reside, remain the same and require new stories – interlocking past and present and different personalities (the painter's and the poet's) – to be explored.

To find her own way into painting, Becker needed to confront herself with other young women who felt the same call towards art. In particular, the wish to become someone which in women is usually accompanied by a sense of guilt, very often needs examples of other women to get started. This is at least what happened to Becker, who, as early as 1898, was impressed by the diary of Marie Bashkirtsev, a Russian woman painter who died of tuberculosis when she was twenty-five. Marie had started to write her diary at the age of thirteen and Becker seemed to read in her words what she thought was the opposite of her own fate. Even though Marie had died so young, in Becker's eyes she had fulfilled her life, as she wrote in her own journal on 15<sup>th</sup> November 1898:

The journal of Marie Bashkirtsev. Her thoughts enter my bloodstream and make me very sad. I say as she does: if only I could accomplish something! My existence seems humiliating to me. We don't have the right to strut around, not until we've made something of ourselves. I am exhausted. I want to accomplish everything and am doing nothing. (*Letters and Journals* 115)

Going back to Paula Modersohn-Becker's writings, some of them were published in 1917, seven years after her death, with the help of the journalist Sophie Dorothea Gallwitz, who, however, made a diplomatic selection of the material put at her disposal by the painter's family. Despite this, the book which bore the title of *Briefe und Tagebuchblätter [Letters and Leaves from the Journals]* became a bestseller in Germany and was reprinted many times in the next twenty years. It was only after World War II that the account of Becker's life offered by that publication was deemed no longer satisfactory. What strikes one as an absolute absurdity is that during the Nazi period Becker was branded as 'degenerate,' and all her paintings were confiscated by the so-called Säuberungs-Kommissionen – that is to say for the 'purification' – as it was claimed that she had painted “‘only stupid, degenerate children’ whose ‘bad racial makeup was the result of deplorable incest’ in the moor village of Worpswede” (*Letters and Journals* 7). It was only in 1979 that a more expanded text of Becker's writing appeared in German under the title *Paula Modersohn-Becker in Briefen und Tagebüchern*, and once it came to its third printing, it was translated into English in 1983 with the title of *Paula Modersohn-Becker: The Letters and Journals*. This edition includes some of the material previously repressed or still unknown. It is incredibly fascinating because, as well as Becker's letters and journals, it contains excerpts from her husband's journal and the replies from her many correspondents, the most important of whom are undoubtedly Rainer Maria Rilke and Clara Westhoff, who first became Becker's friend and was later to marry Rilke.

What is quite strange is that in this English translation there is no mention of a previous one, entitled *The Letters and Journals of Paula Modersohn-Becker*, dating from 1980 – only three years earlier – by J. Diane Radycki, which is the translation of *Briefe und Tagebuchblätter* and therefore includes just a limited selection of letters and journals by Paula Modersohn-Becker. This edition, however, is very important as it also contains Rainer Maria Rilke's *Requiem (For a Friend)* translated from German by Lilly Engler and Adrienne Rich, as well as the poem “Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff” by Rich, reprinted from the collection *The Dream of a Common Language* (1974-1977). This volume already shows how incredibly powerful Becker's adventure in life and art was, if Rich, as early as the Seventies, felt the need to write a poem so as to add an unwritten chapter to Becker's life by giving voice to what seems Rich's interpretation (or fiction?) of the painter's last few days of life.

The latest edition of Becker's letters in German was published in 2007, on the occasion of the tenth anniversary of her death. Unfortunately there is not yet an English translation of this volume, in which all the previously censored parts have been included.

Finally, if one can ever use this adverb connected to Becker's story, a sort of 'dual' biography on Becker and Rilke came out in English in 1998 by Eric Torgersen, entitled *Dear friend. Rainer Maria Rilke and Paula Modersohn-Becker*, which paradoxically is more complete than others that have appeared recently in German,<sup>2</sup> as Torgersen could discuss in his book some excerpts of letters and journals in English which in Germany were still censored by Becker's family descendants for their embarrassing content.

Most of the information will therefore be taken from the latest editions of Becker's letters and journals, and from Torgersen's book, which includes a lot of letters and poems by Rilke, concerning his relationship not only with Becker but also with his wife Clara Westhoff and the Worpswede colony of painters. Most attention will be given to those parts of Becker's life which are more meaningful with respect not only to her artistic research but also to the influence they exert on the composition of Michaels', Bhatt's and Rich's poems.

#### THE BEGINNINGS: BERLIN AND WORPSWEDE

Paula Modersohn-Becker was born in Dresden, Germany, on February 8<sup>th</sup>, 1876, the third of seven children. Her mother came from an aristocratic family and her father, who was born in Russia, was an official with the German railway. When Becker was twelve, the family moved to Bremen, where her father took up a new position with the Prussian Railroad Administration for the Bremen Metropolitan Area.

From a very early age Becker showed a talent for drawing, and in 1892 she took drawing lessons from a painter of local importance called Wiegandt. That same year she travelled to England to stay for several months with her aunt Marie Hill in order to learn English and the art of running a household. The first letters from Becker's hand date back from that year, and there are hints in them that her aunt thought that she was an unsatisfactory pupil, unwilling to accept advice and direction. Yet her aunt enrolled her in drawing lessons in London. Becker therefore attended art classes at one of the many art schools where pupils learnt drawing from plaster casts rather than from living models. At the end of that year, Becker – who was suffering from fainting spells – decided to go home and never return. In one letter to her aunt dated 5<sup>th</sup> May 1883, Becker, who was now back home, reacted to the bad impression that Marie had of her and gave her own version of the story. The main problem arising in the letter is her supposed

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<sup>2</sup> Marina Bohlmann-Modersohn, *Paula Modersohn-Becker: Eine Biographie mit Briefen*, btb Verlag, 2007; Rainer Stamm, *"Ein kurzes intensives Fest": Paula Modersohn-Becker - Eine Biographie*, Reclam, Philipp, jun. GmbH, Verlag, 2008; Renate Berger, *Paula Modersohn-Becker: Paris - Leben wie im Rausch. Biografie*, Bastei Lübbe (Bastei Verlag), 2009.

egotism. Even though she was only seventeen, Becker was already convinced that what was being mistaken for her egotism was simply her strong determination to make art:

You think I am extremely egotistic. I have so often puzzled over that and tried so hard to locate this terrible egotism of mine. I cannot find it. What I have discovered is that I very much want to be in control and that I have gotten used to directing my own life. [...] My pride became my soul. But you saw only the bad side of it. (*Letters and Journals* 38)

Yet it was not the first and last time in her life that she will have to defend herself from accusations of egotism. Later on her husband and then her family will strongly criticize her for what in their eyes was a fault in her character.

In 1893 she began a two-year training period as a tutor. Her father thought that a young girl ought to learn something solid in order to become independent and support herself later in life. He hoped that Paula would later take up a post as a governess. Her mother was a woman of artistic temperament, devoted to literature, music and painting, and the cultural activities taking place in Bremen were regularly discussed at the family dining table.

Her father possessed a melancholy nature, and despite his serious interest in art, he was sometimes quite harsh in his judgments, especially as far as Paula's artistic inclination was concerned. Even though he was a reader and a thinker, in matters of art he adhered precisely to the conventional nineteenth-century wisdom that Becker would struggle against from an early age. Such incomprehension on her father's part was probably one of the reasons why she would become increasingly secretive about her work, while at the same time, in fruitless contradiction, deeply craving for recognition.

Her mother, on the contrary, besides being a successful and very sociable hostess, encouraged her daughter's talent from the start, and was often ready to go against her husband's opinion. It is therefore not surprising that Becker in 1896 could attend a two-month course in drawing and painting at the Society of Berlin Women Artists in Berlin, where she also went to visit museums and exhibitions that were held there.

In the summer of 1897 she returned home for the holidays and together with her family took a trip out to Worpswede, a small, unglamorous moorland village of peasants, some twenty kilometers from Bremen. A group of painters (Otto Modersohn – who was later to become Becker's husband – Fritz Mackensen, Hans am Ende, Heinrich Vogeler and Fritz Overbeck) had chosen that place in the 1880s as they had recognized the artistic potential of the area, with its idyllic nature still untouched by civilization. They were also escaping from the artistic restrictions imposed upon them as academic students. They were a society of friends with

similar ideas on art and life, formulated largely during their student days. The group however upheld no ideas of communal living; they had no fixed program and issued no manifesto.

On the spot Becker decided to spend several weeks there. She must have felt that she was among kindred spirits, as she shared the idealism in the name of which they wanted to pursue their art in defiance of academic tradition and social pressures. With varying degrees of sentimentalism and true devotion, they were attracted to the simple, grand landscape: the pine, the birch, the willow forest; the melancholy moors and heaths; the heavy skies. Moreover, women artists (who around 1900 as well as Becker included Clara Westhoff, Maria Bock and Otilie Reyländer) enjoyed more social and artistic freedom in the colony than in the rigid structure of art schools. In Worpswede in fact they worked and exhibited alongside with men and generally had their own studios. The colony was already quite well known at that time. Mackensen, the founder of the colony and a very competent figurative painter himself, served as their tutor and critic. What Becker did not share with the Worpswede artists, and Mackensen in particular, was the disdain for academic training. It was so hard for women to get one that she could not be so critical of its results. Moreover, if the Worpsweders had adopted a kind of ‘snobbishness about cities,’ Becker had the same attitude only at the beginning, when she expressed a similar dismay with city life, but later on – when she went to Paris – she was at least seized with contradictory feelings.

On July 24<sup>th</sup> 1897, however, Becker noted down her impressions about Worpswede in her journal with enthusiastic words, seeming to have found the landscape very inspiring for her art:

Worpswede, Worpswede, Worpswede! My Sunken Bell mood! Birches, birches, pine trees, and old willows. Beautiful brown moors – exquisite brown! the canals with their black reflections, black as asphalt. The Hamme, with its dark sails – a wonderland, a land of the gods. I pity this beautiful part of the earth – the people who live here don’t seem to know how beautiful it is. One tells them how one feels about it but they don’t seem to understand. [...] No, Paula Becker, better take a little pity on yourself for not living here. Oh, not even that; you are alive, you are happy, your life is intense, and it all means that you are painting.  
(*Letters and Journals* 76)

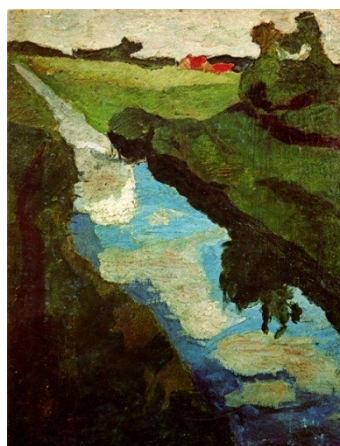
The excited tone of the entry is not only due to Becker’s enthusiasm but also to the fact that, like other early members of the artists’ colony, she was trying to find in the natural landscape a source of inspiration and the ‘feeling of a mood’ (*Stimmungsgefühl*). In contemplating the landscape, Becker is reminded of the sentiments expressed in Gerhart Hauptmann’s *Die Versunkene Glocke* (The Sunken Bell), a romantic novel set in a natural surrounding which is

described as in a fairytale. Like Rilke, Hauptmann was a regular visitor of the Worpswede community around the year 1900, which was defined ‘the era of the Worpswede glory,’ as many artists attended the musical evenings that were held at Vogeler’s house, the ‘Barkenhoff,’ which took its name from the grove of birches – *Birken*, or *Barken* in the Plattdeutsch of the region – that he himself had planted. The house was immortalized by a painting made by Vogeler himself, which included – beside an homage to the painter’s wife, Martha Schröder, in the central position – a portrait of Paula Modersohn-Becker (on the left):



Heinrich Vogeler, *Summer Evening at the Barkenhoff*, 1904-5

Therefore it is not surprising that Becker in those early years seemed to see the place as a “wonderland” and to be already portraying the landscape with her imagination, as a few years later, in 1900-1902, she will do a painting, *Moor Canal*, which recalls very closely the enthusiastic description in her journal:



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Moor Canal*, 1900-1902

Becker’s attraction to the place was very much due to the nature-lyricism she found in many Worpswede paintings, and especially Modersohn’s, which reminded her of the atmosphere

pervading a novel which was one of her favourites: *Niels Lyhne* by Danish writer Jens Peter Jacobsen. She started reading it in 1898, while she was accompanying her uncle Wulf von Bültzingslöwen on a trip to Norway. The book contains rich descriptions of landscape, based on minute observation, which always resound inside the main characters, as in the following passage, where Niels Lyhne recalls a day spent walking in the countryside:

He closed his eyes but still could feel how the light seemed to seep into him, flickering through every nerve, while with every breath the cool, intoxicating air sent his oddly excited blood with wilder and wilder force through his veins, quivering with powerlessness, and a feeling came over him as though everything teeming, bursting, budding, multiplying in the spring-time nature around him was mystically trying to gather inside him in one great big shout; and he thirsted for that shout, listened until his listening took the form of a vague, burgeoning longing. (Jacobsen 59)

Becker was very much influenced by Jacobsen's style, not so much in her painting but more in her writing. Her journals in fact register a growing sensitivity to nature, which is described with a poetic style much indebted to Jacobsen's, like the following undated passage, written in Lilleon:

The buckthorn was in blossom and that was the prettiest thing about it. Its scent filled the soft air and covered me in a dream, tenderly, and sang to my soul a tale of times before I ever was, and of times when I shall be no more. And I had a strange and sweet sensation. I thought of nothing. But all of my senses were alive, every fiber. I lay that way for a long time. And then I came back to myself again, to the wind and to the sun and to the happy buzzing of the insects around me. (*Letters and Journals* 105)

In the following Worpswede period, Becker also began to write Symbolist poetry and fiction in her journal. The following poem is dated 23<sup>rd</sup> March 1899:

Snow and shimmering moon...  
Slender trees inscribing  
the image of their  
soul, lying on winter's white shroud,  
searching, trembling.  
In piety they lay their lovely essence  
down upon the simple ground...

When will my day come  
that I in all humility  
can cast upon that pure  
and chaste same ground  
a shadow of myself...  
A shadow of my soul. (129)

Words and images therefore were always interlocked from the start of her artistic research, and this is one of the most important elements which would lead her – despite many contradictions – to establish such a strong link with Rilke.

Quite early, however, Becker felt the need to move away from the common Worpswede aim of capturing the ‘secret of a mood’ in painting and also started sacrificing the painstaking observation of nature which was the fundamental principle of Mackensen’s teaching. She tried equally to avoid the poetic mood evoked by Modersohn’s atmospheric moor scenes, keeping the motifs of the Worpsweders but concentrating more on the formal possibilities of her subject: “She used flat, roughly painted colour areas and shortened perspective, and the tree trunks are often used to create two-dimensional designs rather than suggest three-dimensional recession” (Perry 109). This is precisely why Mackensen, and Modersohn too, criticized the landscapes she was doing around the year 1900. In fact, in the Worpsweders’ eyes nature assumed a quasi-religious significance. In his monograph on the Worpswede circle, which he wrote in 1902, Rilke emphasized this in his own way, seeing in their paintings the revelation of universal forces within the detailed representation of the natural surroundings. As Perry says, “[a]ccording to Rilke, the Worpswede artists went out into the countryside feeling that every leaf contained within itself a part of ‘the great laws of the universe’” (110). As not only Becker’s paintings show, but her journals too, she was very sensitive to the power of nature. She herself often felt possessed by some kind of natural force. Yet it seems that in her art she was looking for a greater simplicity of forms which was combined with a more consistent use of imagination. This is probably why her landscapes seem rendered by the eye of memory, or seen as if in a dream. The lines are simple, and often very thick, as if reality was substantial and evanescent at the same time.

It must be said, however, that as far as her own painting was concerned, Becker was gradually more attracted by people than by landscapes as subjects: “Painting people is indeed more beautiful than painting a landscape” (*Letters and Journals* 79). And when she was impressed by



some elements of the landscape, it was often because in her eyes they were personifications of human beings. Different kinds of trees in particular were evocative of male and female figures:

Worpswede, Worpswede [...] Your magnificent pine trees! I call them my men – thick, gnarled, powerful, and tall – and yet with the most delicate nerves and fibers in them. That is my image of the ideal artist. And your birch trees – delicate, slender young virgins who delight the eye. With that relaxed and dreamy grace, as if life had not really begun for them yet. [...] But then there are some already masculine and bold, with strong and straight trunks. Those are my ‘Modern Women’. And you willows, with your old knotty trunks, with your little silvery leaves. The wind blows so mysteriously through your branches, speaking of days long gone by. You are my old men with silver beards. (80)

What Becker did in her early Worpswede drawings and paintings was portray peasants from the area, either as individual characters or indistinguishable from the landscape around them, as if to suggest a ‘oneness’ with nature. Women especially are monumental and possess a heroic, timeless quality, which seems to make them unalterable by time and change. In this respect, she was probably greatly influenced by Mackensen, who represented the peasants as being as weathered and elemental as their surroundings. Yet Becker, as she had done seven years earlier with aunt Marie, very soon started to reject Mackensen’s direction of her painting, as is shown in the later account by another woman painter who was studying with Mackensen at the time, Otilie Reyländer:

Mackensen was making corrections and asked her with a penetrating glance whether what she had produced there was something she really saw in the nature of reality. Her answer was remarkable: an instant ‘Yes’ and then, hesitating, ‘No’ as she gazed into the distance... Even as early as this, I would often hear her express views which were totally out of harmony with those of our master. (qtd. in Torgersen 45)

If on this occasion Becker at least made an initial concession to Mackensen, she later set herself directly against him, when in 1903 she painted *Mother and Child*, which shows a peasant woman in the field, nursing a child:



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Mother and Child*, 1903

This picture was her own version of the same subject represented by Mackensen in his famous painting *The Infant* (1892). The comparison between the two images gives an idea of Becker's feelings towards the peasants in her area: they were for her memorable and extremely dignified subjects but she wanted to depict them without any concession to sentimentality. One can observe how for example in Becker's painting the mother's gaze is not directed to the child as in Mackensen's. Moreover, the main difference is also Becker's refusal to represent her subject as beautiful. She was looking for a more simple, and sometimes harsh truth which could not find expression within Mackensen's idealized vision.



Fritz Mackensen, *The Infant*, 1892

Becker's paintings of her first period, lasting until 1900, are often categorized as belonging to her 'dark period,' as she used predominantly dark tones, perhaps evoking the atmosphere of poverty dominating in the peasant world. In this early phase, Becker was fascinated by local activities such as wool spinning or peat cutting, and although she refused to idealize the peasants' faces, she often portrayed her subjects in poses of stoical endurance, not deprived of a special dignity which comes from years of hard work. The monumental quality of her figures, as

Perry observes, was due to the fact that Becker frequently used “a sharp profile or a frontal seated portrait in which [...] the artist’s eye level is below that of the sitter. Thus the spectator seems to be looking up at the subject, who acquires a monumental quality – a quality accentuated by the sitter’s immobility and air of passive resignation” (97).

What can be observed from the start in Becker’s output is that personal feeling was the most important component in her paintings. She was always interested in the persons she was portraying. Not only was she yearning to know their stories, but in particular she was attracted by strange characters. This is why, shortly after her arrival in Worpswede, she went to visit the Worpswede poorhouse. She then became a regular visitor, sometimes together with her husband but other times alone. One of her favourite subjects was a curious character called von Bredow, the destitute son of a Prussian nobleman.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Old Bredow*, 1899

It is interesting to notice how Becker – as happened in this case – frequently made a portrait and then in her journal noted down his life story:

And old von Bredow, from the poorhouse – what a life he has behind him! Now he lives there in the poorhouse, taking care of the cow. Years ago his brother tried to get him to return to the normal, orderly world. But the old fellow had grown too fond of his cow and his dreams. He is never going to leave them again. He holds the cow by its halter, walking with it out to the yellow-grey pasture, giving her a little poke with his stick at every step, and philosophizing. [...] in general probably lived a crazy life, then he turned to drink to try to forget it all, and now he has found a kind of peaceful twilight in the poorhouse. (*Letters and Journals* 110)

Looking at Becker's portraits and reading in parallel her journals and letters is an experience incredibly wide in scope, as if neither painting nor writing were enough to capture all the richness of her surroundings and the people living there. If it is true, as Alessandra Comini says in her introduction to the first volume of Becker's letters and journals translated into English, that "The subjects she has portrayed in paint take on added color and dimension in her writing" (*The Letters and Journals of Paula Modersohn-Becker* xii), the fact that three contemporary poets have written poems in her voice gives the idea of the inexhaustibility of such an experience. Becker's journey from life to art and the other way round seems to offer so many suggestions for other stories, or different versions of the same story, to be told in verses, that the fact that such an early death occurred to the painter seems to matter little. But maybe it is just the opposite, and it is precisely Becker's early death that opens such a wide range of potential – but definitely unattainable – solutions to the conflicts she encountered while living. Rilke's *Requiem* – even though it is not written in the first person – is certainly the prototype of such stories, and must have influenced the three women poets.

#### LEARNING IN WORPSWEDE

In the fall of 1897, Becker returned to Berlin and resumed her course but at the end of the year her father suggested that it was time now to accept a position as a governess. The Prussian Railroad Administration in Bremen in the meantime had been disbanded and his modest pension did not permit expensive art lessons. Luckily a small inheritance from one member of the family allowed her to continue her studies. The lack of money to pursue her art was to remain a persistent problem hindering autonomy in her research. As early as 1897, while writing about Mackensen's difficulties due to his "growing up in humble circumstances," Becker noted down in her journal her reflections – which in her case are also premonitions – about the terrible limitations that the lack of money can exert on one's art:

The fact is that a person can finally never get over it if he had to grow up fighting for every penny, even if he has more than he needs later. At least not a noble person. This battle always leaves its scars. They are almost imperceptible, but there are many, many of them. The practiced eye will discover a new one every minute. The whole person has been bound and tied up tight. The lack of money chains one to the ground; one's wings are clipped, but one doesn't notice it because the shears make only a little snip very cautiously each day. It's astonishing how this cruel, cruel fate slowly but surely cuts human beings down. Greatness,

openness, independence, impetuous rage, the Prometheus in us, the titanic strength of a man, elemental power – all that is lost. Isn't that hard? (*Letters and Journals* 76-77)

In 1898 after the summer Becker went back to her studies in Berlin, but she dreamed of returning to Worpswede. In winter her father insisted that by June of the following year she get a job, but fortunately once again two financial windfalls from members of the extended family enabled Becker first to keep studying in Berlin, and then, in September, to move to Worpswede and make her home in the village. There she immediately became a friend of the painter and sculptor Clara Westhoff. After seeing her put finishing touches to a bust of an old woman, Becker wrote in her journal: "I admired the girl, the way she stood next to her sculpture and added little touches to it. I should like to have her as a friend. She is grand and splendid to look at – and that's the way she is as a person and as an artist" (121).

Becker's first gift to Westhoff was a copy of *Niels Lyhne*, which she had decorated with flowers. The book, which was later to play a very important role in Becker's relationship to Rilke, already established a strong link between the two friends. In March 1899 Becker reread the book and soon noted down in her journal a passage where Mrs. Boye, a woman Niels has loved without ever quite becoming her lover, explains why she has renounced her artistic life for a conventional marriage:

We women, Niels, we can tear ourselves away for a while when there is something in our lives that has opened our eyes to that urge for freedom which we do possess, but we can't hold out, we have a passion in our blood for the most correct of the correct, all the way up to the most prudish point of propriety. (Jacobsen 90)

This passage is not only important because it is an example of a woman who "has fallen back," as Rilke will later say of Becker in his *Requiem*, but also because it shows that, as early as 1899, she already felt within herself the conflict that, after leading her to separate from her husband and go to Paris, will lead her back to her marriage and life in Worpswede. The same struggle is what prompts Michaels, Bhatt and Rich to give their own vision of it in their dramatic monologues. The poems therefore derive from this sense of inner division (in Becker's life as well as in the poets' life) which can probably find no solution. Yet this is precisely why they are needed: they constitute a territory for exchange across centuries and different places. Taken together, they are to be read as a common ground of incompleteness where different generations can meet.

In 1899 Becker attempted her first exhibition at the Bremen Kunsthalle, which however encountered severe criticism on the part of the painter-poet Arthur Fitger, who was one of the first most militant opponents of the Worpswede group. She did not seem to assign great importance to Fitger's opinion, as in her journal she simply recorded: "In December 1899, the first exhibition of my pictures in the Kunsthalle Bremen" (Perry 107). Maybe for Becker exhibiting her works in any case constituted a meaningful occasion which would allow her to progress further in her art. Yet this hostile reaction to her first exhibition could also be one of the sources of her constant secretiveness about her work: she was convinced she had to find her own way into painting, and even though such early responses probably wounded her very deeply, her will to dedicate all of herself to her art was challenged but made stronger each time.

For the first time in 1899, the new director who was appointed at the Kunsthalle, Gustav Pauli, was an art historian. Under his leadership of the museum the collections were enlarged, and the masterpieces by the French Impressionists, as well as paintings by the Worpswede painters found their due place within the building. Pauli, who was Becker's first biographer, acquired the paintings which were to represent a decisive influence on her art. In fact she had been longing to go to Paris for some years. The younger generation of painters saw the French capital as the centre of modern art.

#### FIRST VISIT TO PARIS AND GETTING ENGAGED WITH MODERSOHN

On the symbolic day of New Year's Eve of the twentieth century, Becker therefore journeyed to Paris, where she met Westhoff, who was shortly to become a pupil of the renowned French sculptor Auguste Rodin. After studying with Mackensen, Westhoff had been introduced by him to the printmaker Max Klinger, who had been very impressed by her from the start. After seeing her at work, he said: "She attacks the marble like a man" (qtd. in Torgersen 43). Becker entered the private academy Colarossi and also took part in an anatomy class at the *École des Beaux-Arts*. She had the opportunity of seeing the works of important painters such as Charles Cottet and above all Paul Cézanne. One day in fact she went to visit Ambroise Vollard's gallery where Cézanne's paintings were stacked with their painted sides facing the wall.

The volume accompanying the exhibition "Cézanne to Picasso: Ambroise Vollard, Patron of the Avant-Garde," held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2006, reports that in March 1900 "German painter Paula Modersohn-Becker is enthralled with the works of Cézanne when she visits Vollard's gallery with sculptor Clara Westhoff" (*Cézanne to Picasso* 278). Born in 1866, Vollard was a legend in his lifetime. Taking advantage of the decline of the unwieldy state-

sponsored Salon system, he became the leading contemporary art dealer of his generation and a principal player in the history of modern art. He was full of contradictions and the artists' opinions of him differed widely. Some of them complained that he exploited them and equated his name with the word *voleur*, meaning 'thief': "to Matisse he was 'Fifi voleur,' to Émile Bernard 'Vole-art'" (3). Others, however, valued his loyalty and generosity. In September 1893 he rented a small shop at 37, rue Laffitte, a modest street which was becoming the very heart of the Paris art world. In these early days, Pissarro, to describe the range of Vollard's stock, said that "He shows nothing but pictures of the young" (7). That meant pictures by Gauguin, Sisley, Redon and others. He devoted two exhibitions to Van Gogh and Cézanne in 1895, when both of them were totally unknown. The two exhibitions made his little gallery a place where one wanted to be shocked. Vollard was courageous enough to be the first in Paris to give Cézanne a one-man exhibition. He bought 150 canvases, which was almost Cézanne's entire output, and risked a great deal of money. That is why he did not have enough left to frame the canvases decently, and therefore most of them were hung with two-sou wooden slats. With a certain pride, Vollard claimed that the exhibition was a slap in the face for the art establishment, a fact which was certainly in line with his antiestablishment stance and his role as a *marchand-découvreur*. The exhibition was a total success: practically overnight, Cézanne became a revered master. Artists were the first to buy his pictures and collectors followed. The 1895 exhibition enabled Vollard to become Cézanne's sole dealer and gain a monopoly of his output. Thanks also to the financial success, in May 1896 he could move into spacious new premises, in no. 6 at the other end of rue Laffitte, a prestigious location near the boulevards.

Cézanne was one of the painters who confided in Vollard as a friend, as his letter dated 9<sup>th</sup> January 1903 shows: "I have made some progress. Why so late and with such difficulty? Is art really a priesthood that demands the pure in heart who must belong to it entirely? I am sorry about the distance which separates us, for more than once I should have turned to you to give me a little moral support... If I am still alive we will talk about all this again" (16-17). This letter, and particularly Cézanne's view of art as a "priesthood," also explains Rilke's later unreserved admiration for the French painter. The poet, in fact, cultivated all his life long the ideal of the artist as a recluse, which he could realize only in 1921, when he moved into the ancient Swiss castle of Muzot in Switzerland.

## CÉZANNE AND THE STILL LIFE(S)

Visiting Vollard's gallery in 1900 – as Becker did – still meant entering the heart of the avant-garde. Curiously enough, there is no trace of this episode in her letters and journals, while she often wrote about visiting exhibitions and seeing other painters' works. One can infer that she probably avoided noting down the experiences which were more remarkable for her art and life. This is at least what Westhoff affirmed in a precious recollection that is worth quoting in its entirety:

One day she [Paula Becker] insisted that I accompany her on a walk to the Right Bank, so that she could show me something special there. She led me to the art dealer Vollard. And in his shop, since we were left to our own devices, she began to turn the pictures around that were standing against the wall, and to choose with great self-assurance a few of them that were of an altogether new simplicity and seemed to be close to her nature. They were pictures by Cézanne which we saw there for the first time. We did not even know his name. In her own way, Paula had discovered him and this discovery was an unexpected confirmation of her own artistic search. Later, I was surprised not to have found anything about this in her letters. Perhaps it was impossible for her to articulate these things in a comprehensible way – indeed, this experience was perhaps so inexpressible that it could only be transformed in her work. (*Letters and Journals* 173)

In case Westhoff's opinion were not enough, Becker's paintings are there to confirm that Cézanne is surely to be considered one of the most significant influences for her, as her numerous still lifes show.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Still Life with Apples*, 1903



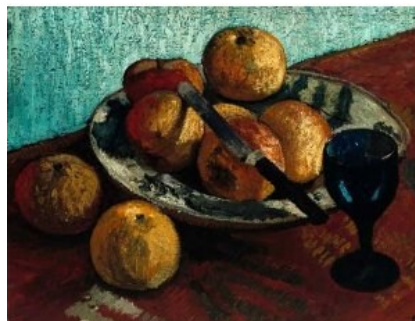
It is only in a letter to Westhoff, dated 21<sup>st</sup> October 1907 (a couple of weeks before giving birth to her daughter and just one month before dying), that Becker mentioned the experience of seeing Cézanne for the first time:

Dear Clara,

My mind has been so much occupied these days by the thought of Cézanne, of how he has been one of the three or four powerful artists who have affected me like a thunderstorm, like some great event. Do you still remember what we saw at Vollard in 1900? (425)

It is interesting to notice that Becker later shared her deepest emotional response to Cézanne's painting more with Rilke than with her husband. If she was impressed by his pictures as early as 1900, as recorded by Westhoff, Rilke became intensely involved in his works especially around 1907, after he had been sacked by Rodin and needed to find another great master from whose works to derive his own idea of poetry. In the above-mentioned letter, Becker asked Westhoff to tell her husband to go and see Cézanne's paintings at the Galerie Pellerin, which she had visited during her last stay in Paris. She also asked her friend to bring her Rilke's letters about Cézanne, which he had written after visiting the Salon d'Automne, where 56 paintings were on exhibit that year. In a letter to her mother, dated the day after, she expressed the wish to go to Paris for one week, just to see that exhibition.

Cézanne's work was so revealing for Becker's and Rilke's art for similar reasons. As for Becker, in Cézanne, according to Gillian Perry, she found "a new expression of form which had abandoned an impressionistic emphasis on atmosphere and transitory impressions, in favour of a clear sense of structure and composition" (119).



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Still Life with Apples and Green Glass*, 1906

The still life above is one of the few paintings that Becker sold during her lifetime. It was Vogeler who bought it, and sent a small sum of money to her in Paris, which must have been

particularly welcome in 1906, as – after her separation from her husband – Becker was still financially dependent on him and was sometimes forced to borrow money from Rilke too.

As one can see in this painting, Becker tended to give each object its own special quality within the composition: the apples, the knife and the glass also exist as separate entities, each of them endowed with particular characteristics of form and colour, before becoming part of the group. As well as by the great attention to the composition, the link with Cézanne's painting is also shown by the use of coloured planes and the lack of tactile distinction between different surfaces and objects, which gives the image that peculiar static quality.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Still Life with Apples and Bananas*, 1904

One can notice how explicitly Becker's *Still Life with Apples and Bananas* (1904) recalls Cézanne's *The Basket of Apples* (ca. 1893), also in the similar rendering of the drapery.



Paul Cézanne, *The Basket of Apples*, ca. 1893

As Rilke knew very well, Cézanne himself derived his technique and use of colour from a French painter of the eighteenth century, Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, who painted mostly still lifes at a time when they were not at all popular. In a letter addressed to Westhoff, dated 8<sup>th</sup> October 1907, Rilke wrote:

Cézanne's own blue has this genesis; it comes from the blue of the eighteenth century; Chardin removed its pretensions, and with Cézanne it no longer has any extraneous meanings. In all of this, Chardin was the agent; his fruits no longer think of having a place on a beautiful table, they lie about on kitchen tables and no longer care about being consumed in an elegant way. With Cézanne their edibility comes to an end altogether, so objective and real have they become, so indestructible in their obstinate presence. (*Letters and Journals* 508n)

However, as can be inferred from Becker's letters to her husband, she encountered Chardin's painting during her second stay in Paris, in 1903. On 12<sup>th</sup> March, in fact, in a state of excitement due to all the wonderful painters she was discovering, she wrote Modersohn: "And you know, I've so very much to tell you, about David, Delacroix, Ingres, and consorts, and about a certain Chardin and many, many more" (311).

Despite the great stimulating experience that Paris offered her, in April Becker was overcome by a sense of depression associated to the impression of having lost her way into painting. Her discouraged mood, which surfaced also in the letters to her parents – who sent more money to her, as they attributed it also to her lack of food and heating in her room – sounds particularly dramatic in her journal entries. On 13<sup>th</sup> April 1900 she wrote:

If I could really paint! A month ago I was so sure of what I wanted. Inside me I saw it out there, walked around with it like a queen, and was blissful. Now the veils have fallen again, grey veils, hiding the whole idea from me. I stand like a beggar at the door, shivering in the cold, pleading to be let in. It is hard to move patiently, step by step, when one is young and demanding. Now I'm beginning to awaken as a human being. I'm becoming a woman. The child in me is beginning to recognize life, the purpose of a woman; and it awaits fulfillment. (*Letters and Journals* 180)

She wrote many similar romantic, daydreaming entries during her first visit to Paris, and it was because of them in particular that the first edition of her letters and journals gained so much popularity as a gift book in the twenties. Yet one can sense that all her artistic quality came out later on, in passages of her letters and journals that perhaps sound less literary but reveal more of her actual and vivid development as a painter. In 1890 much of her research was yet confined in the sometimes too evanescent power of her imagination.

After an exchange of letters with Becker and Westhoff, in June 1900 the Worpswederers (Modersohn, Overbeck and Vogeler) finally came to visit the vast World's Fair in Paris. The city was transformed by huge works which had started four years earlier, in view of the great Fair which was to take place. A new bridge was built across the Seine, and on either side of the street leading up to it stood the new Grand Palais and Petit Palais, which housed the art exhibitions. The Petit Palais, which was by no means small, presented an impressive collection of French art from 1800 to 1899 – including works by Manet, Corot, Millet, Moreau, Monet, Renoir, Pissarro – that would draw Becker back to it more than once. The work of Rodin, which was still controversial despite his fame, had been denied a place in the sculpture hall of the Grand Palais. He therefore decided to have a large pavilion built at the Place de l'Alma, where he placed the largest collection of his work that had ever been shown in one place: 165 sculptures and a complete *Gates of Hell* in plaster shown for the first time. This is Becker's impression of visiting the exhibition, as is recorded in a letter to her parents dated 8<sup>th</sup> June 1900:

The sculptor Rodin has opened a special exhibition, the great, profound lifework of a sixty-year-old. He has captured life and the spirit of life with enormous power. For me, he is comparable only to Michelangelo, and in some ways I even feel closer to him. That such human beings exist on earth makes living and striving worthwhile. (192)

Becker had been writing ecstatic letters to Modersohn describing all the wonderful works of art she was seeing. On 17<sup>th</sup> January she wrote him: "I have so often wished that you were here, Herr Modersohn, and really felt it to be an injustice for me to be seeing all of this, and not you" (158). Modersohn at first hesitated to answer Becker's call, not only because of his wife Helene's rather critical health conditions, but also because he was eleven years older than Becker, he had already been to Paris, was very deeply involved in his new work and had reservations about modern art in general. In the end, however, he decided to come.

During the Worpswederers' stay, on June 14<sup>th</sup>, Modersohn's wife, Helene, suddenly died. The telegram for him was delivered to Becker's address and she was the one to open it. Modersohn was so shocked, as he probably had not seen it coming, and surely felt remorse at having left his wife to die without him. Moreover, during those first days in Paris, he had felt a growing connection to Becker, and this must have further tormented him.

Becker returned to Worpswede at the end of June. Having lived in Paris on little money, she was in poor health. It was then that she first rented the room in the house of the Brünjes family, separated from the busy highway by a tall hawthorn hedge, that for the rest of her life was to be

the true home for her art. There, on her doctor's orders, she took to her bed for a time. Otto Modersohn began to visit her, reading to her and helping her pass the time. After a while they were secretly engaged. It was so soon after Helene Modersohn's death, but – according to Modersohn's later testimony – Becker was eager to press on to formal engagement and marriage as her father again had urged her to take up a position as a governess. Marriage to Modersohn would also mean financial independence from her family.



Paula Becker and Otto Modersohn

In that summer of 1900, the artists who had come to think of themselves as 'the Family' began to gather every Sunday at the Barkenhoff – the women in white dresses, the men in suits – where music was played, poetry was recited, and many distinguished guests were invited by Vogeler to speak or perform. The Barkenhoff therefore became the centre of a new Worpswede, where there started to be a strong erotic charge: Otto and Paula were lovers in secret, delaying consummation of their love but surely anticipating it, while Vogeler and Martha Schröder were lovers by now. Westhoff and Becker were so happy to have found their way in such a place, which seemed to be perfect for their artistic aspirations.

It was then, on 27<sup>th</sup> August, that Rainer Maria Rilke, who had already spent some time in Worpswede as a guest of Vogeler, arrived at the Barkenhoff. The relationship with him, together with the poems and pictures that will represent it in a deeper, but more mysterious way, deserve an entire section of its own, as not only did the two influence each other as far as the respective arts are concerned, but also because Rilke's character and personality, combined with his particular conception of poetry, are very relevant, not to say decisive, to understand the process of writing poems in Becker's voice on the part of Michaels, Bhatt and Rich. From 1900 onwards, alternating moments of silence and detachment to others of close intimacy, Becker and Rilke's story – the documented one together with the inner one recorded by their works of art, sometimes in manifest contradiction with the outer one – must be imagined running in parallel with the events that follow.

## MARRIED LIFE AND PAINTING WITH MODERSOHN

Paula Becker and Otto Modersohn's marriage was delayed by the declining health of Paula's father – who would die in November of the same year – and took place on 25<sup>th</sup> May 1901.

Under the influence of Modersohn's landscape painting, Becker turned away for a time from her figurative work with peasant models and returned to painting landscapes herself. Modersohn was the most talented painter in the Worpswede circle. Intense, earnest, sometimes withdrawn, he was a tireless sketcher of landscapes and natural objects.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Otto Modersohn with his Pipe*, 1906-7

Becker had recorded in her journal her first impression of him in July 1897:

And then there is Modersohn. I've seen him only once and then just for a short time – and I did not get a real sense of him. All I remember is something tall, in a brown suit, and with a reddish beard. There is something soft and sympathetic in his eyes. His landscapes, the ones I saw exhibited there, have a deep, deep mood about them – a hot, brooding autumn sun – or a mysterious, sweet evening light. I should like to get to know him, this Modersohn. (*Letters and Journals* 77)

Modersohn's description of the vivid impression Becker had made on her first arrival in Worpswede gives an idea of the difference in their characters that probably explains the initial attraction they felt for each other. In his journal Modersohn painted what can be considered a very accurate verbal portrait of her:

The impressions we had of her when she first visited us were of liveliness and agility. Her head, with a mass of chestnut brown hair, she tilted gracefully from one side to the other, and there was an occasional burst of cheerful laughter. Whenever she walked by our home,

with an old woman from the poorhouse [on her way to her studio with a model] I delighted in her youthful, refreshing appearance – the way she led the woman by the arm, the intriguing way she walked, the way her feet would touch the ground, toes first. (qtd. in Torgersen 44)

Becker's pet name for Modersohn, taken from a figure of German legend, would be "King Red." He had something of a professional air, and was sometimes the object of fond caricatures. Within the Worpswede circle, he started thinking of himself as different from the other painters and essentially better, as he confided to his journals. He repeatedly corrected what he thought was a flawed version of himself, proclaiming the birth of the new one which he was certain was the right one, until that was dismissed as well. In many entries he tried to define what his 'Ideal' of art was, and nature always played a central role in it. One can recognize in his entry dated 1890 the initial attraction that Becker too felt for nature: "I value most highly the description of Nature in its simplicity with the greatest possible objectivity, without additions, since Nature surely possesses a more original power than the most assiduous conscious efforts of men" (qtd. in Torgersen 35).

As Modersohn noted down in his journal in 1900, his soul was made narrow and oppressed by the continuous cares he had to devote to his sick wife, and his reproachful nature made him enter his marriage to Becker with the guilt of having fallen in love with her, already, in Helene's last days, and also because, as Becker had lured him to Paris, he was not at his wife's bedside when her death finally came. On the other hand, he also knew that his young daughter Elsbeth would profit from Becker's affection, which was very sincere from the start, as the beautiful picture *Elsbeth in Garden* (1902) shows:



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Elsbeth in Garden*, 1902

By 1900 Modersohn had become something of a famous man and Becker, who was eleven years younger than him, was in a position to learn a lot from him. The two of them would often

sit together in front of the same view, striving to outdo each other in a friendly spirit of competition which was gradually to become a more severe battle. In his private journals, Modersohn started criticizing Becker's 'boldness' and 'exaggeration' while he had previously admired the great simplicity of forms in her paintings. She, on her part, was to feel drawn in different directions with respect to her husband's work, and soon was ready to distinguish her own goals from Modersohn's. At the beginning, however, Becker and Modersohn's artistic link was of a nearly perfect harmony: "After a short time their studies of birch trees and of canals running through the moors, of bathing children and of local peasant cottages, could scarcely be distinguished from one another" ("Introduction" in *Letters and Journals* 5).

Modersohn left a testimony of his closeness to Becker as an artist and a wife in his journal. On 25<sup>th</sup> April 1902 he wrote:

Paula's and my tastes in artistic matters are very closely related. We both love the primitive and intimate, the unusual and the particular. [...] P. has brought me back to my own ways (first of all to living à la Brünjes). I have learned to like her atelier at the Brünjes' more and more. The old times come to life again in me. And this spirit also moved into our little house; there, too, the primitive, unusual, and intimate now predominate and no longer the conventional, the materialistic. And so the spirit is now moving into our little garden. Paula and I have been working there for days. P. is making little naïve pathways and benches surrounded by carnations, planted with farmers' flowers; I am constructing arbors. I have never been so active in the garden before. (277)

Modersohn's domestic and artistic happiness seemed however mismatched with Becker's unhappiness that she recorded in her own journal less than a month earlier:

My experience tells me that marriage does not make one happier. It takes away the illusion that had sustained a deep belief in the possibility of a kindred soul.

In marriage one feels doubly misunderstood. For one's whole life up to one's marriage has been devoted to finding another understanding being. And is it perhaps not better without this illusion, better to be eye to eye with one great and lonely truth?

I am writing this in my housekeeping book on Easter Sunday, 1902, sitting in my kitchen, cooking a roast of veal. (274-75)

Once again, there is a hidden reference to *Niels Lyhne* here. When he is on his deathbed and heroically refuses to make any pleas to God, Niels looks the truth in the eye and admits that "It was the great sadness that a soul is always alone. Any belief in the merging



of one soul with another is a lie. Not the mother who took you onto her lap, not a friend, not the wife who rested next to your heart...” (Jacobsen 185).

Becker was also missing Clara Westhoff and the intense life of the Family. After the three marriages, only the men were seeing each other frequently. As for the women, Becker was probably the least burdened, as she was only a stepmother, but Westhoff and Martha Schröder already had very small children. They were therefore quite isolated one from the other, and Becker was particularly saddened by what appeared to her as the Rilkes’ withdrawal from the Family. She was not alone in thinking that her friend had changed much under Rilke’s influence, and not for the better. Everybody at Worspwede found that all her energy was gone, and that she was probably suffering much because of the secluded style of life that Rilke was imposing on her as well.



Rainer Maria Rilke and Clara Westhoff in Rome, 1903

In early February 1902, the tensions between Rilke and the rest of the Worspwede community burst out, and it was Becker who finally gave voice to them. The occasion was her twenty-sixth birthday, which Westhoff forgot. Becker was the more wounded as the same day Rilke had written Otto a letter about his Worspwede monograph, and had sent her regards but not birthday greetings. A few days later a letter arrived in which Westhoff apologized by saying that “I now have everything around me that I used to look for elsewhere, have a house that has to be built – and so I build and build – and the whole world still stands there around me. And it will not let me go” (*Letters and Journals* 267). On 10<sup>th</sup> February 1902 Becker answered with a furious letter, claiming that she had a completely different concept of love and friendship from hers and her husband’s. She was particularly angered by the fact that under her friend’s words she heard Rilke’s voice speaking:

Isn't love thousandfold? Isn't it like the sun that shines on everything? Must love be stingy? Must love give *everything* to *one* person and take from the others? Is love permitted to take? Isn't it much too precious, too great, too all-embracing? Clara Westhoff, live the way nature does. The deer gather in herds, and even the little titmice at our window have their own community, too, not merely that of the family. I follow after you, a little melancholy. Rilke's voice speaks too strongly and too ardently from your words. Do you think that love demands that one person become just like the other? No, it doesn't, a thousand times no. [...] I don't know much about the two of you; but it seems to me that you have shed too much of your old self and spread it out like a cloak so that your king can walk on it. I wish for your sake and for the world and for art and also for my sake that you would wear your own golden cape again. (268)

The reply to this letter came from Rilke, not from Westhoff, and it did not start with the usual "Dear Friend," but with a meaningful "Dear Frau Modersohn." He did not write one single word of apology and somehow reproached Becker for her inability to understand the "particular point in her [friend's] growth" (269). As was in his style, he explained with highly figurative language that their withdrawal was due to their need to "burn all the wood on our own hearth just to warm up our house and make it habitable" (270). Then with a didactic tone he explained to her that he himself was "standing quietly and full of deep trust *outside* the gates of her [Clara's] solitude, because I consider this to be the highest task of the union of two people: that each one should keep watch over the solitude of the other" (270).

The interesting thing is that Becker would reflect privately about her own idea of the connection between solitude and love. In fact, in a journal entry dated 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1902, she recalled Rilke's words and corrected them according to her personal opinion, which however immediately shifted to a more general consideration about the difference between "superficial" and "true" solitude, which she did not deem worth exchanging with him anymore:

But isn't a solitude that someone has to keep watch over merely a superficial solitude? Isn't true solitude completely open and unguarded? And yet no one can get close to it, although it often waits for someone to walk hand in hand with through the valleys and the fields. But waiting is perhaps only weakness, and the fact that no one comes makes the lonely person stronger. For this walking alone is good; it reveals to us many depths and shallows that we would never be aware of with someone else along.

It seems to me terribly difficult to live one's life to its end in a good and great way. (277)

Even though she seemed to be reacting to what she deemed Rilke's cynical and perhaps selfish vision of love, giving all the prominence to his needs as an artist, it is also evident that Becker too – who not only was disappointed by the distance that had intervened within the Family but also by her marriage – was deeply affected by his words. Somehow she too had come to see solitude not so much as a manifesto as it was for Rilke, but certainly as a natural condition for those who want to pursue an inner path into themselves and into art.

It is worth remembering these fragments of letters when one reads Rilke's *Requiem*, and it will become clear not only to what extent his view of love differed from Becker's, but also why he reproached her husband, almost blaming him for her premature death.

#### WORPSWEDE VERSUS PARIS

Less than two years after her marriage, Becker felt the need to escape what she now perceived as the confining reality of the Worpswede colony, to find a dialogue with the greater world of art. That point of her research also marked the start of a sort of separation in her artistic vision which was to remain unsolved during her lifetime: from her first stay in Paris in 1900, Worpswede would always be the source of inner experience, while Paris responded to the need of an external source of inspiration. At the beginning the balance between the small German village and the great French city seemed to be in favour of the former. At least this is what Becker wrote back to her relatives and close friends in Worpswede. The great city was full of art but chaotic, and the small village offered lively peace and quietness, as she wrote to Modersohn in January 1900:

Whenever I have felt most helpless here in Paris, I always let my thoughts wander back to Worpswede. That is always a splendid remedy. It disperses the chaos in me and brings a kind of gentle repose. Of course, Paris is wonderful, but one needs nerves, nerves, and more nerves – strong, fresh and receptive nerves. To keep them under control in the face of these overpowering impressions here is not easy. (157)

In her journal, however, Becker noted down contrasting emotions from the start. Paris also seemed to hold the promise of a new life, as she wrote in an undated page:

It seems to me as if I needed more strength than I have to life here, a brutal strength. But I feel that only sometimes. At other times, I feel blissfully clear, and serene. I can feel a new world arising in me. [...] Everything around me glows with passion. Every day reveals a

new red flower, glowing, scarlet red. Everyone around me carries them. Some wear them quietly hidden in their hearts. (152)

She therefore adjusted to her new surroundings and, instead of painting landscapes, she occasionally – especially during her later visits to Paris – painted cityscapes. There is a painting in particular, *View from the Artist's Studio Window in Paris* (1900), which shows how Becker started to adapt her landscape style to paint a city scene. The painting probably catches the view from her hotel room in the Grand Hôtel de la Haute Loire on the Boulevard Raspail, which is mentioned in her letter dated 1<sup>st</sup> January 1900.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *View from the Artist's Studio Window in Paris*, 1900

The dark tones of the painting recall her Worpswede landscapes belonging to the same period, which Mackensen and Modersohn criticized.

At the turn of the century Paris was undoubtedly the artistic capital of Europe, attracting artists from all over the world. Moreover, in 1900 the city was also the site of the great World's Fair. Becker visited it many times and found it extremely instructive. In particular she appreciated the French: Cottet, Simon, Jean-Pierre. In comparison, she found that “we Germans seem a little bourgeois and Philistine. Lots of zeal and enthusiasm, and too little study” (188). The contrast between Paris and Worpswede was of course also between two cultures: the French seemed more sophisticated and frivolous but freer to indulge in the pleasures that life offers, while the Germans possessed a strong moral stance which also weighed them down, as Becker wrote to her parents in a letter dated between 18<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> March 1900:

Paris is just like its inhabitants. Along with endless corruption, there's a childish joy in living, in letting oneself go the way nature seems to like it best, without much concern about whether it is good or bad. We Germans could not put up with such behavior the way the

French can. After such self-indulgence, we would perish from moralistic hangovers. But the people here seem to have no idea about such things. Each day they begin life anew. That, naturally, has its dark as well as its sunny sides. (173)

As for a more detailed and personal observation of the city, it is very interesting for example that Becker in Paris perceived a constant blossoming of flowers, especially violets (“I’m surrounded by the fragrance of real violets” 169, “Spring is springing everywhere!” 180). Considering how important flowers are in Becker’s paintings, it is worth noticing an impression she communicated to her brother Kurt on 26<sup>th</sup> April of that same year: “Now and again I have to talk to somebody about the flower that blooms inside” (181). It is as if her truest vision of art had to come out of contrasts, and this is why Becker perceived her personality and her life as never complete. Flowers in her paintings are never just ornamental, they seem a way of getting access to the personality of the person who is being portrayed, whether the subject is herself in the self-portraits or her closest friends and acquaintances. Although their symbolism is often ambiguous, it seems that different flowers had specific personal associations for Becker. In more general terms, the flower seems a symbol of transient life, a moment of utmost creativity which already implies its end, that is to say the shadow of its death.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, it is moving to read in its entirety what Paula – in a shocking premonition of her premature death – wrote in her journal as early as the 26<sup>th</sup> July 1900:

As I was painting today, some thoughts came to me and I want to write them down for the people I love. I know I shall not live very long. But I wonder, is that sad? Is a celebration more beautiful because it lasts longer? And my life is a celebration, a short, intense celebration. My powers of perception are becoming finer, as if I were supposed to absorb everything in the few years that are still do be offered me, everything. My sense of smell is unbelievably keen at present. With almost every breath I take, I get a new sense and understanding of the linden tree, of ripened wheat, of hay, and of mignonette. I suck everything up into me. And if only now love would blossom for me, before I depart; and if I can paint three good pictures, then I shall go gladly, with flowers in my hair. It makes me happy again as it did when I was a child, to weave wreaths of flowers. When it’s warm and I’m tired, I sit down and weave a yellow garland, a blue one, and one of thyme.

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<sup>3</sup> In the book *La natura morta*, flowers are said to be mainly associated from ancient times with the ideas of the brevity of life and of beauty (203). The white lily often refers to Mary’s virginity, and very often it appears in paintings depicting the Annunciation.

I was thinking today about a picture of girls playing music under a cloud-covered sky, in gray and green tones, the girls white, gray, and muted red.

A reaper in a blue smock. He mows down all the little flowers in front of my door. I think that perhaps I, too, will not last much longer. I know now of two other pictures with Death in them; I wonder if perhaps I shall still get to paint them? (195)

Needless to say, the reference to death and the flowers, and the garlands above all, inevitably remind one of Ophelia, and her death by water as narrated by the Queen in *Hamlet* IV, vii. Moreover, even though the two paintings “with Death in them” were probably not done by Becker, it is interesting to underline the link between painting and Death, at least in her imagination. In fact it seems that she deemed painting as a sort of farewell. A striking image, that will be evoked by Anne Michaels as the conclusion of her poem.

Before going to Paris for the third time, in a letter to her aunt Marie dated 13<sup>th</sup> January 1905, Becker would confirm her need to look inside herself but also out of herself, as if her art were a continual journey between these two dimensions:

Did I write you from Bremen that I shall probably go to Paris at the end of January? I look forward to it tremendously. My inner thoughts are really always headed in that direction. It is odd that from time to time I feel such a huge desire to go back to Paris. I think it must be that our life here is made up mostly of purely inner experiences, and so one frequently has a powerful desire to be surrounded by external, active life from which one can always escape if one has a mind to. (337)

Going back to the year 1902, the summer was a very productive time both for Paula and Otto, and an intense time of sharing their artistic research. What started to emerge, however, was that what seemed to be an idyllic union was already showing traces of differences not only in their respective conceptions of painting but also in their idea of marriage. The letters and journal entries by both spouses of that year register an alternation of moods, from utmost enthusiasm and marital joy to discouragement and a sense of inner division. Even though Becker still admired her husband’s painting very much, she was gradually discovering that their lines of research were pointing in different directions, as she wrote in her journal on 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1902:

Otto is very excited by Segantini’s technique of placing next to one another bits of color like the mosaic and thus producing a concrete, brilliant effect. He is enthusiastic about color in

motion. And I am, too. I dream of movement in color, of gentle shimmering, vibration, of one object setting another in motion through color. But the means which I should like to use are very different ones. There is something almost tactile for me in the thick application of paint. And I should like to produce it by glazing techniques, maybe over a thick underpainting. A different kind of glazing than Otto has in mind. (278)

Modersohn, on his part, while sincerely appreciating his wife's work, at first welcomed and was even grateful for her criticism of his work, as the following journal entry dated 28<sup>th</sup> February shows:

There is no one else here in Worpswede, in fact, who interests me nearly as much as Paula. She has wit, spirit, fantasy; she has a splendid sense of color and form. When she has progressed to an intimate treatment [of subject matter], then she will be a superb painter. I am full of hope. At the same time that I am able to give her something of this intimacy, she gives me something of her greatness, her freedom, her lapidary quality. I always overdo things and so I can easily become small and fussy and I hate that; I want greatness. Paula stimulates me enormously in this. (280)

Yet, less than two weeks later, Modersohn felt likely to react vehemently to what in his eyes were his wife's faults, which he tried to attribute to the modern times and to the Rilkes' influence on her, even though it was not the first time that someone detected them in Paula's strong temperament. A great frustration can be perceived in what becomes Modersohn's tirade expressing all his conventional notions about women as artists:

Egotism, lack of consideration is the modern sickness. Nietzsche, the father. Opposite of Christian love of neighbor. Think it is terrible, barbaric, brutal, just to think of one's self, take care of one's self, to kick other people. That's the way Rilke and his wife are. [...] Unfortunately, Paula is also very much infected by these modern notions. She is also quite accomplished in the realm of egotism. [...] I wonder whether all gifted women are like that? In art, Paula is certainly gifted; I am astonished at her progress. But if only this were joined by more humane virtues. It must be the most difficult thing for a woman to be highly developed spiritually and to be intelligent, and still be completely feminine. These modern women cannot really love; or they grab hold of love only from the animalistic side of their nature, and the psyche has no part in it. (281)

As can be inferred from these words, Modersohn found it very difficult to love both sides of Becker, the artist and the wife. Yet one cannot know for sure if he was simply dissatisfied by his marriage or if he was also frightened by what he felt as Paula's double nature. It seemed to him that her creative power – which he acknowledged as extremely developed – could prevail on her marital duties. At the same time, for opposite reasons, Rilke appreciated her artistic side but felt that she had to devote herself exclusively to it, as he would say in his *Requiem*. Becker herself felt very divided inside, as became evident during her last stay in Paris: once she had found her way on her own she started feeling very fragile and uncertain about her accomplishments.

The early days of July 1902 for Paula and Otto were therefore marked by the typical ups and downs in married life that are probably intensified by the deep commitment to art shared by the couple. Just a few days after her husband's tirade, Becker in a letter to her mother told her how she was convinced that the day of her self-fulfilment was approaching, and how she regretted that her father had not lived to see it.

There are times when the feeling of devotion to work and dependence on it simply has to slumber in me, times when I just read a lot, or make little jokes, or just live. And then suddenly those feelings are wide awake in me again, and storm and surge so that the vessel seems about to explode, as if there were room for nothing else inside.

Mother, the dawn has broken in me and I can feel the day approaching. I am going to become somebody. If only I had been able to show Father that my life has not been simply fishing in troubled waters, pointless; [...] I feel that the time is soon coming, when I no longer have to be ashamed and remain silent, but when I feel with pride that I am a painter.

*(Letters and Journals 282)*

Silence on Becker's part is undoubtedly an important element here. It seems that she avoided speaking about her work because she felt it was not accomplished yet. It is precisely this silence that the dramatic monologues written by Michaels, Bhatt and Rich will enter. No to fill it but just because a life like Becker's, so full of dreams and so soon interrupted, in that silence preserves so many things left unsaid.

This letter also makes it clear how her father's negative opinion about her vocation kept discouraging her, as if she could be proud of herself only if she attained the highest results in her art, not just a mediocre pursuing of her own interest and passion. Her own yearning to become a painter – and a remarkable one that somehow she felt she was not yet – was also in part a need to posthumously make up for her father's disappointment in her.



At that time it seemed to her that the exchange and communion with her husband were part of her recent growth, as she said in the same letter to her mother: “My dear Otto stands next to me, shakes his head, and says that I’m one devil of a girl, and then we hug each other and we speak about the other’s work, and then we talk about our own again” (282). The following days, that is to say just ten days after Modersohn’s tirade, his journal entries register, as well as the same anecdote depicted by Becker, a great enthusiasm for painting side by side with her but also the first hint of a sense of competition which burst within the couple and both of them at the beginning saw as a stimulus for their own art and perhaps a further reason for a deep inner union with one another:

July 7, 1902

My Paula is such a fine wench. An artist through and through. Her sense of color – no one else here has anything like it; I can’t keep up with her now. I’m simply bowled over by it. [...] It is tremendously good for me. It shakes me up. “This little wench should paint better than you? The devil, you say!” Boy, I am really getting to it now! My eyes are open. That will be a race.

July 8, 1902

After my recent upset over Paula’s painting with the glass globes, I have finally, finally completely awakened from my seven years’ sleep. [...] The scales are falling from my eyes. Thank God that I can finally see clearly, very clearly, what is at stake, what it is all about. I owe that to Paula, this bedeviled wench.

July 9, 1902

In short, this is what painting is: seeing, feeling, doing. [...] Ever since my feelings have changed (since Paula’s picture) I have sensed everywhere harmony, resonance, nothing separate – everything bound together. Air, light, the great unifiers.

I want to go deeper, pull myself together, and paint something profound and great. That is the only thing that occupies me. Paula is my comrade. Paula is a highly gifted woman, the most gifted one here, and rare anywhere; she alone has the great point of view, feels what is at stake, is an artist through and through. All the others are going downhill, all of them. (283)

Modersohn’s journal apparently became the space where he could fight his battle of acceptance of his wife’s great demands as a woman artist. Becker was not as good as Rilke at putting any other claims aside and just devoting all her energies to her art. Yet, despite her husband’s protests, considering his position and what was usually required from a wife and a (step)mother in his days, one can at least say that Modersohn did his best to come to terms with

his wife's need to go back to Paris and widen her artistic horizons. Becker was therefore able to leave for Paris again in early spring 1903. Westhoff and Rilke were there already. Becker's widowed mother offered to go to Worpswede to care for her son-in-law and granddaughter in her daughter's absence. In a letter to family members remaining in Bremen, Frau Becker said that this time she thought that Paula had dared too much.

Once in Paris, Becker immediately spent time with the Rilkes, even though she wrote negative reports of them to her husband, whom she told how skeptical she was of the values they had come to live by, especially as far as Rodin's influence on both of them was concerned, as she reported in a letter dated 17<sup>th</sup> February 1903: "Ever since Rodin said to the Rilkes, 'Travailler, toujours travailler,' they have been taking it literally; they never want to go to the country on Sundays and seem to be getting no more fun out of their lives at all" (295). Yet she immediately added that "Clara Rilke is deep in work and trying very hard to get close to her art from all directions" (295). Becker was very critical of what she saw as her friend's effort to imitate her master, but she also perceived all the richness of the opportunity she had to learn from him:

Recently I visited her [Clara] in her atelier where she was working on a little girl's thumb with great sensitivity. Only, as far as I'm concerned, she is becoming a little bit too wound up and speaks only about herself and her own work. Considering all of this, we shall see how she plans to avoid becoming a little Rodin herself. She already draws exactly in his most original way, but she has also accomplished some good things with it. (295)

In the same way Becker kept reassuring her husband that she valued Worpswede as highly as Paris, while she also felt that she needed to see everything from a distance, as she explained in a letter to him dated 10<sup>th</sup> February 1903: "You know as well as I that the reason why I'm here is to learn to see Worpswede through more critical spectacles" (291). During this time in Paris, as she was evidently feeling guilty for having left home, her letters here and there show her effort to please Modersohn and reassure him. Yet her journal of that same time reports her increasing enthusiasm at being able to see the most compelling works of art and the world itself (which for her meant the world of people). After seeing an exhibition of old Japanese paintings and sculpture which impressed her very much and made her perceive all the conventionality of the Worpsweders' painting, on 15<sup>th</sup> February 1903 Becker wrote:

When I took my eyes from these pictures and began looking at the people around me, I suddenly saw that human beings are more remarkable, much more striking and surprising

than they have ever been painted. A sudden realization like that comes only at moments. Our routine way of life tends to blur such realizations. But it's from moments like these that art must arise. (294)

Becker's inner division between her creative self and what she started to feel as a more conventional image of woman that was required from her, is therefore well represented by the gradually growing gap between her letters and her journal.

As far as her art is concerned, her second stay in Paris was fundamental for her research. Even though she stayed just two months, she had new opportunities to get at what seem to be some of her most distinctive formulations of what she was after. Becker chose to study again at the academy Colarossi. It is worth noticing that this academy, like the Académie Julien (where Becker, no longer satisfied with Colarossi, enrolled during her third stay in 1905) and unlike all the others that the city offered, provided studios for women students. During this second stay she was influenced by Rembrandt's art and Egyptian and archaic sculpture. It is very interesting to notice that both these influences can still be detected in her late self-portraits. On 25<sup>th</sup> February 1903 Becker was already able to note down in her journal the great stride forward, in line with her previous attainments, that she felt she could do under the influence of the works of art she was seeing in Paris:

A great simplicity of form is something marvelous. As far back as I can remember, I have tried to put the simplicity of nature into the heads that I was painting or drawing. Now I have a real sense of being able to learn from the heads of ancient sculpture. What grand and simple insight went into their creation! Brow, eyes, mouth, nose, cheeks, chin, that is all. It sounds so simple and yet it's so very, very much. How simply the planes of such an antique mouth are realized. I feel I must look for all the many remarkable forms and overlapping planes when drawing nature. I have a feeling for the way things slide into and over each other. I must carefully develop and refine this feeling. (300)

It is clear that this idea of the "simplicity of form," which is yet quite vague, was catching all of Becker's attention. The day before, in fact, she had already tried in her journal to define the kind of observation which she deemed necessary to paint the way she wanted:

I must learn how to express the gentle vibration of things, their roughened textures, their intricacies. I have to find an expression for that in my drawing, too, in the way I sketch my nudes here in Paris, only more original, more subtly observed. The strange quality of

expectation that hovers over muted things (skin, Otto's forehead, fabrics, flowers); I must try to get hold of the great and simple beauty of all that. In general, I must strive for the utmost simplicity united with the most intimate power of observation. That's where greatness lies. In looking at the life-size nude of Frau M., the simplicity of the body called my attention to the simplicity of the head. It made me feel how much it's in my blood to overdo things. (299)

This formula is one of Becker's most widely cited, and it must be remembered that the self-critical admission of always being tempted to "overdo things" was a great defect that Modersohn too, one year earlier, in the passage quoted above, detected in his own painting and hoped to avoid precisely thanks to Becker's "lapidary quality." If despite the differences in hers and Modersohn's style of painting, some tendencies and needs of renewal and improvement emerged from their respective lines of research, it is also due to the wide-ranging development in all arts that at the beginning of the century certainly had one of its main poles of attraction in Paris but could also be felt at a certain distance from there. New ideas and directions of research travelled so fast at that time that they must have been clearly perceived as urgently necessary to give new course in every artistic field. This is also why painters were so attentive to other artists' works. It is therefore hardly surprising that one of the strongest influences on Becker's art was certainly that of Rodin's works and personality. Several letters during her Parisian trips indicate that Becker immensely admired the great French master's works. Rodin must have been mentioned a lot in the conversations among Becker and Westhoff (who studied with him in 1900) and Rilke, who before working as his secretary in 1905 had become a friend of his and who wrote a monograph on him as he had done earlier with the Worpswede painters. It was therefore Rilke who arranged for Becker to visit Rodin's studio. He wrote for her a letter of introduction which, strangely enough, did not mention the fact that she was a painter but only – as she reported in the letter to her husband quoted below – referred to her as "femme d'un peintre très distingué."

Becker was not so much concerned with bodily movement as Rodin was, but she was more impressed by the symbolic as well as figurative importance that he attached to the naked human body. Becker's many self-portraits show a similar interest, in the sense that she was studying her own body as a living expression of her deepest and continuously changing identity. In particular she was struck by the great sculptor's wash drawings of the nude, as she wrote her husband on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1903:

My dear Spouse,

Just listen, I'm getting the feeling more and more that you must come here, too. There are so many reasons why you should. But I'll tell you only one, a great reason, the greatest: Rodin. You must get an impression of this man and of his life's work, which he has gathered together in castings all around him. I have the feeling that we shall probably never experience anything like this again in our lifetime. [...]

Armed with a little calling card from Rilke, which referred to me as 'femme d'un peintre très distingué,' I went to Rodin's studio last Saturday afternoon, his usual day for receiving people. There were all sorts of people there already. He didn't even look at the card, just nodded and let me wander freely among his marble sculpture. So many wonderful things there. [...] He always starts from nature. And all his drawings, all his compositions, he does from life. [...] The first thing that comes into my mind to compare them with are those old Japanese works which I saw during my first week here, and perhaps also ancient frescoes or those figures on antique vases. *You must simply see them.* Their colors are a remarkable inspiration, especially for a painter. He showed them to me himself and was so charming and friendly to me. Yes, whatever it is that makes art extraordinary is what he has. In addition there is his piercing conviction that all beauty is in nature. (303)

The viewer of Rodin's and Becker's works as well as the reader of Rilke's poems are struck by a common line of research at the beginning of the century, which undoubtedly justifies and explains the effort on the part of three women poets not only to make Becker speak one century later but also to reconstruct the cultural and artistic *milieu* where she developed her art. This research proceeded in parallel ways but took nourishment from the conscious – as well as unconscious, as Rilke's *Requiem* shows – exchange among these artists of different nationalities. In a journal entry dated 1<sup>st</sup> July 1901, Otto Modersohn discussed the need of simplification in the expression of 'the object in itself in feeling' (*Das Ding an sich in Stimmung*). Becker deeply shared this need, which is embodied in her still lifes as well: the sense that the most 'intimate' qualities of each inanimate object had to be represented in painting. Rilke, through his growing interest in the visual arts which led him to become Rodin's secretary, was developing similar, even though more complex, theories of representation: "Under the influence of Rodin he evolved a notion of the object (*das Ding*) and its intrinsic meaning as the product of careful craftsmanship, extending this theory to apply it to his style of writing" (Perry 117).

Becker returned home in the middle of March 1903, a little earlier than she had planned, and begun painting girl nudes, in the studio only. Modersohn was very glad to have his wife back in Worpswede, and willingly accepted the criticism of his own painting that once again came from

her. As he wrote in his journal a few days later, she thought that his pictures were lacking study and nature. He realized that he was always tempted by his prolific fantasy and that was why in his work nature became standardized and nearly turned into a cliché. He then noted down some fragments of a conversation between the two of them, where all considerations about art are deemed valid for marriage as well, as both of them should be founded on the purest and most disinterested love:

It is remarkable: art is like love (that's what Paula said this morning); the more one gives, the more one receives. One must open oneself completely, admire and worship every detail of nature, and then it will reward one wonderfully; one will receive the blessing of the gods. [...] So it is in marriage; if both partners insist upon their own points of view, love cannot reign, nor can it bless them, or unite them. (315)

This passage is particularly worth quoting not only because it makes evident what the core of Becker's research was in her art but also because the equation between art and love is precisely the heart of Michael's poem too.

Paula's and Otto's life together is inevitably marked by Becker's two further departures for Paris, and returns to Worpswede. After her return in 1903, she stayed in Worpswede for two years before feeling again the deep yearning to go to Paris. For a long time she had the feeling of being on the right path and the "simplicity" she was striving to achieve in her painting seemed to her nearly attained. In a letter to her Aunt Marie dated 20<sup>th</sup> April 1903 it is something close to pure happiness which emerges:

My life glides along day by day, and it gives me the feeling that it is guiding me somewhere. This hopeful, soaring feeling is probably what makes my days so blissful. It is strange; what people usually call "experiences" play such a small role in my life. I believe that I have had some of them, too, but they don't seem to be the most important things in my life at all. What lies between these so-called experiences, the daily course of events, that's what makes me happy. And that is also why I seem to have so little to say in my letters – for these small, mostly private things can probably be captured in writing only by a more knowing hand than mine. In that same sense, my trip to Paris simply passed by, and now I really don't think much about it. I am often amazed about it myself. But while I was there it did bring me new insights, and now I'm already busy again building on that foundation. I believe that I live very intensely in the present. (316)

This passage not only reveals Becker's temporary sense of accomplishment at that time but also, despite her feeling of inadequacy in representing verbally what she was living, her stunning ability to convey the kind of experiences in her life that were most significant to her. What had actually a resonance within her were not the events, but what lay in-between them. Maybe without acknowledging it, she was very close to Rilke's vision of poetry: what one sees and lives must be translated into the most intimate experience. Moreover, it is fascinating to notice how Becker observed that her bliss was also accompanied by a different perception of time: the more she was attentive and one with her inner life, the more she felt she was living "very intensely in the present." The dramatic monologues written in her voice, and particularly Michaels', consciously or unconsciously, reproduce a similar shift from linear time to a sort of perpetual present to which painting (and poetry) seems to open access.

Yet, after a month of vacation in early July which saw the whole family Modersohn moving and exploring the island of Amrum, in the fall of that same year the journals of both spouses started reporting again entries of disappointment concerning painting and family life. Modersohn's high ideal of marriage remained unfulfilled, as he found that his wife's creative qualities were so developing at the expense of her sense of duty. As he wrote on 26<sup>th</sup> September, "Paula has more intellectual interests and a more spirited mind than anyone else. She paints, reads plays, etc. The household is also in very good hands – it is only her feeling for family and her relationship to the house that are too meager (324)." Yet in the same entry he seemed also to start despising her most recent works in which Parisian influences could easily be detected: "Paula hates to be conventional and is now falling prey to the error of preferring to make everything angular, ugly, bizarre, wooden. Her colors are wonderful – but the form? The expression! Hands like spoons, noses like cobs, mouths like wounds, faces like cretins (324)." Becker, on her part, in a letter to her mother lamented the continual demands of her husband and stepdaughter which were burdening her and required that she was always "the oil that calms the waves" (324).

There are not many letters and journal entries dating back to the year 1904. In her two letters addressed to her sister Milly, Becker simply registered that her husband was strenuously painting while she was mostly reading. A significant recorded event, however, is Modersohn's departure for Münster for his father's birthday. His temporary absence gave Becker a sense of freedom that she seemed to be missing a lot and she did not refrain from communicating it to her husband ("I feel so divinely free!" she wrote to him on 15<sup>th</sup> April 1904). She also took the opportunity to go into Otto's studio and told him some doubts she had about his new painting

that she wished to discuss with him: “There is, for me, still something a little uncertain about its mood. What I mean is that, instead of being grand, it is pompous” (330). In another letter written on the 16<sup>th</sup> April she communicated to her husband that she had moved back in her studio at the Brünjes.’ Elsbeth was under the maid’s care and Becker was so happy to find herself once again in the place that – more than Modersohn’s house – was for her the house of her art. It was on 15<sup>th</sup> April (the same day she wrote to her husband too) that she confided to her sister Milly the excitement of being able to feel again who Paula Becker was, which maybe was just half of her but was still undoubtedly there:

My dear sister,

[...] I have moved to the Brünjes’ where I am playing Paula Becker. [...] I’m feeling so marvelous; half of me is still Paula Becker, and the other half is acting as if it were. No matter what, there was and there still is, a great portion of my happiness under this thatched roof. I have probably never in my whole life loved a house so much as this one. [...] It’s so strange, I am happy almost every time Otto and I are apart. One has the rare pleasure to look at oneself and each other from a distance, mentally; and then one can look forward to getting back together again, and in the meantime we can also write letters to each other occasionally. And I can also do certain things now that I can’t do when Otto is around. (331)

One can easily infer from this entry that the inner division between Becker’s lonely self and her married self was becoming more and more manifest. As will be significantly represented in the dramatic monologues written by Michaels, Bhatt and Rich, the choice of the surname she used (Becker when she felt as if she were not married and Modersohn when she still felt like Otto’s wife) is greatly important. Becker’s personality perhaps was so challenging and stimulating for the three poets precisely for her lack of definition, for her continuous feeling of being divided. As Bayley and Armstrong have underlined in their studies, division is a great source of poetical creativity. This is especially true if a poet uses the dramatic monologue, which, as Langbaum has pointed out, allows emotional sympathy on the reader’s part without subjecting it to moral judgment.

At the end of the year, on Christmas Eve, Becker wrote to her sister Herma (who was in Paris at that time) that it had not been a very productive year and that she was negotiating with her husband her possible return to ‘her city’: “This winter – which hasn’t even been much of a winter yet – has been a bad time for my work; in fact, I haven’t got anything done. For that reason it’s a very appropriate time to get a little stimulation from the outside” (333). On 2<sup>nd</sup>



January 1905 she wrote again to Herma and her yearning for Paris was conveyed in even more dramatic tones: “This year my soul cries out for Paris” (335). On 5<sup>th</sup> February Becker finally wrote to Herma with great joy: “The most important thing in my world view, of course, is that a certain Paula Modersohn remove herself to Paris during the night from Tuesday to Wednesday” (338). As her use of the surname Modersohn shows, her married self was therefore still there, despite her husband’s apprehension for their imminent separation.

Once in Paris, Becker signed up for drawing classes at the Académie Julian, but derived the main influences on her later work from elsewhere. This time she saw the Fayet collection of Gauguin and, at the Salon des Indépendants, a Seurat retrospective, forty-five van Goghs, and eight Matisse. She also got to know the Gauguin disciples who called themselves the Nabis and it is possible that this time she chose to study at the Académie Julian also because it was there, in the late 1880s, that they had come together. Gauguin undoubtedly was the painter who was most interesting for Becker during this third stay. The important development which was taking place in his works and that was taken even further ahead by the Nabis was a gradually growing freedom from the constraints of realism which pointed toward pure abstraction. Becker immediately translated all those influences into a personal formulation which results in the *Self-portrait with Green Background and Blue Irises*:



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-portrait with Green Background and Blue Irises*, 1905

With respect to previous pictures, one can notice a prominence of the decorative and lyrical element, and the use of a bolder palette. At the same time, Becker’s interest in the still lifes increased and it was to accompany her for the rest of her life. Later she came somehow to insert in her self-portraits some elements of a still life in the background. This way she seemed to illustrate in her own way the second meaning of ‘still life’ – that is to say of ‘silent, suspended

life<sup>4</sup> – which underlies the pictorial one. Still lifes usually include only inanimate objects in their compositions, but Becker applied the technique to people too, and mainly to herself. Maybe the fusion of the two elements allowed her to represent a wholeness coming out of her inner division, as she felt at the same time like a subject and an object of her painting. Once again, this was to coincide with Rilke's vision of poetry and was therefore to emerge as an important point in the *Requiem* he wrote one year after her death.

Becker would have liked to share this new experience in Paris with her husband. Her pleas that he join her are a recurrent theme of her early letters home. She even tried to tempt him by promising to take him to drawing lessons with her where “you will get to see a few naked models for a change” (353). Paris seemed to be the bone of contention and it probably was not. By asking Modersohn to join her, Becker hoped to resolve the tensions she felt not only with him but with her own family, and especially her mother, who had to compensate for her when she was away from home. Modersohn finally made plans to come to Paris but, shortly before, his mother died after a short illness. The death of one close relative once again obliged the two spouses to face a conflict between their demands which was far from being solved: Becker kindly offered to come home but made it clear that not only did she wish to stay, but also to have her husband join her anyway. It seems that she also tried to draw him to her through jealousy, otherwise one cannot see the reason why she had to write in one of her letters to him that she and Herma had been keeping company with two Bulgarians, a sculptor and a painter. Modersohn on his part – as Becker's mother told her – wanted her to stay in Paris but also hoped that she would come home. In the end, as always happened, Becker got the better of it and not only could remain in Paris but finally convinced her husband to come. However, as was easy to foresee, his visit was a disaster. As Becker wrote to Herma once she had returned to Worpswede in April:

He was very jealous of Paris, French art, French nonchalance, the boulevard Miche, the Bulgarians, etc. He imagined that I only preferred to stay in Paris and thought nothing at all

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<sup>4</sup> It is interesting to notice that while English and German are similar in defining this kind of painting (*still life* and *Stilleben*), in Italian ‘*natura morta*’ sounds completely different and, what is worse, disparaging as it evokes dead nature in comparison with the ‘*natura vivente*,’ living nature of the paintings which represented human beings and – at least until the eighteenth century – were considered more elevated than the ‘*natura morte*.’ See *La natura morta*, p. 11. It was Giorgio De Chirico who, in an article entitled “Le nature morte,” dated 1934, attempted to correct ‘*natura morta*’ with what he deemed a more proper translation of the German *Stilleben*: “La natura morta ha, in tedesco un altro nome, molto più bello e molto più giusto: questo nome è *Stilleben*, vita silenziosa. Infatti la natura morta è un quadro che rappresenta la vita silenziosa degli oggetti e delle cose, una vita calma, senza rumore e senza movimento, un’esistenza che si esprime col volume, la forma e la plasticità; gli oggetti, i frutti e le foglie sono immobili, ma potrebbero essere mossi dalla mano umana, o dal vento... cambiamo il nome di *natura morta*... Chiamiamo queste pitture: *Vita silenziosa*, come sono chiamate nella lingua tedesca” (qtd. in *La natura morta* 179).

of Worpswede. [...] He had completely submerged himself in his thoughts and wouldn't say a word, and really ruined the last week for me. (367)

Modersohn, in his travel journal was much more laconic: "This time [in Paris] was not pleasant" (365). As for Westhoff and Rilke, they were not in Paris during Becker's third stay. Due to serious financial troubles, they had been travelling a lot. Rilke, who in late September was invited by Rodin to stay with him in Meudon in exchange for helping with the correspondence, did as much as he could to have his wife invited to work with the French Master. After a period spent in Worpswede, where she and Becker resumed a very close contact, Westhoff was more than happy to take advantage of such an opportunity. At the same time, however, she finally had to realise that her husband was definitely renouncing responsibility for Ruth's upbringing and was totally unreliable for supporting either her or their daughter. Westhoff's self-portrait<sup>5</sup> of that year bears trace of her discouraged and perhaps resigned mood. She seems to endure an uncertain future and her gaze is turned inward. This is how Westhoff saw herself at that time. It is interesting to see how her painter friend saw her at the same time.

During 1904 and 1905, Becker in fact worked on many portraits of her closest friends and people she met that she found particularly interesting. Even though she was not expressly looking for revealing psychological elements of her subjects' personality, her portraits – sometimes without her knowledge – always convey many meaningful emotional aspects of Becker's link with the person portrayed. From this point of view, *Clara's portrait* (1905) is certainly one of the most remarkable, not only because of its beauty, but also because it says a great deal about the relationship between the two friends that year. A comparison between a sketch of her dated 1902 and the portrait Becker did three years afterwards can help in understanding the tensions that were menacing not only the relationship between the two of them but also Rilke's influence on Westhoff, and therefore on Becker too.

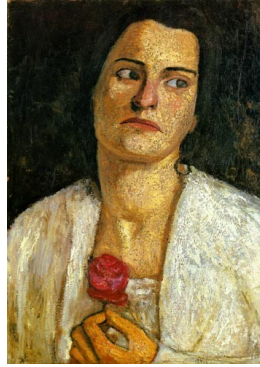


Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Clara Rilke-Westhoff*, 1902

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<sup>5</sup> The painting is reproduced in Sauer, *Die Bildhauerin Clara Rilke-Westhoff* 225.

As one can see from the drawing, not only are Westhoff's strong features particularly emphasized – if not exaggerated – but the lines framing the drawing and running in circles on Westhoff's neck seem to reveal a feeling of resentment, if not anger. Such feelings seem to have completely disappeared from the portrait that Becker did in 1905.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Clara Westhoff-Rilke*, 1905

This time Westhoff is portrayed in the frontal view, even though her eyes are focused to the side. Her head is tilted slightly back, in a pose suggesting aloofness or shyness, in any case some kind of distance. Her features are underlined by the clear white dress and the dark background. Becker, in a letter to her mother dated 26<sup>th</sup> November 1905, wrote: “Mornings I am painting Clara Rilke in a white dress. It’s to be her head and part of a hand holding a rose. She looks very beautiful that way, and I hope that I’m getting a little of her into my portrait” (*Letters and Journals* 375). Westhoff’s beauty is symbolized by the rose, and there is a sweetness or maybe sadness around her. Becker’s comment a few lines below, that, “In spite of everything she is still, of all my friends, the one I care about the most,” refers to some troubles in their relationship that – as the painting shows – seemed to be over. More than that, her portrait expressed a far more positive and hopeful view of Westhoff than she herself had conveyed in her self-portrait. Even though the averted eyes give the impression of vulnerability, the firm lines of head and neck suggest an underlying strength. Westhoff herself from Worpswede wrote to Becker in Paris on 9<sup>th</sup> May 1906: “Every time I look at your portrait of me it seems, to me, to be something very grand. And real grandness must grow from this beginning – it is already a true path – an upward path” (521n).

Nearly at the same time, Becker also painted her self-portrait with white dress and red rose, but by comparison she appears more uncertain and less strong than her friend in the portrait she did.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait with a Red Rose*, 1905

Her face is pensive, somber, and shadowed by the hat: the picture gives the idea of Becker's sense of isolation and maybe confinement. It is worth noticing that she is all dressed up and that she will paint many self-portraits in the nude during her last stay in Paris. Becker in fact felt more and more the limitations that Worpswede imposed on her. A funny contretemps is quite revealing of the narrow mind which was dominating and regulating people's behavior in the neighbourhood at that time: sometimes in the warmer months of 1905 Becker agreed to pose for her husband in the nude at an isolated spot surrounded by trees. However, they were observed, word spread through the village and many people were scandalized. Mackensen and am Ende were very worried for the honour of the colony. The Family at this time was no longer the idyllic group that Vogeler painted in 1905,<sup>6</sup> in a picture which had taken several years to complete. As Torgersen observes, as it was begun as early as 1902, "it may have been conceived as a celebration of the Family, which the intervening years turned into an elegy" (175). Martha stands as a goddess "held out for display like the central gem in an ornate setting" (175) just inside the gates, but the other main characters seem quite isolated from one another. Maybe Vogeler wanted to show them 'lost in thought' as a result of the music but the viewer is tempted to see in the picture a premonition of Vogeler's dashed dreams after Rilke's arrival. Torgersen even supposes that Rilke's presence can be enigmatically encoded in the painting.<sup>7</sup>

In the above-mentioned letter to her mother, it is precisely to Rilke that Becker addressed her most ironic comments which perhaps hide some envy of his new contacts in Paris: "As Rodin's secretary, Rilke is gradually meeting the intelligentsia of Europe" (375). She saw Rilke as a shameless opportunist but at the same time she was missing the world of Parisian art. During the winter of 1905, Becker confided to Westhoff her continual attempts to reconcile Worpswede

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<sup>6</sup> See p. 29.

<sup>7</sup> In fact the noble Carinthian family from which Rilke claimed descent featured *Windhunde*, usually translated as 'greyhounds.' The dog in the foreground therefore, beside referring to the actual member of Vogeler's household, could also evoke the presence of a "lean, aristocratic, nonhuman Russian figure" (Torgersen 175).

and Paris, her marriage and her work. In a memorial devoted to her, her friend so described one of her visits at the Brünjes:

the two of us were sitting by the stove in her little studio. Paula was throwing one piece of peat after the other through the little squeaky door and into the fire; and one tear after the other rolled down her cheeks as she tried to explain to me how very important it was for her to get back into 'the world,' back to Paris. 'That's what I mean when I think: the world'.  
(513n)

It is no surprise that shortly after this episode Becker began planning to leave both Worpswede and her husband. Westhoff encouraged her and Rilke of course was soon to find out. Before Christmas he had returned to Worpswede to stay with Clara and Ruth for a while and he visited Becker's studio as he had done before. This time however he paid attention to her work and was greatly impressed by it. What he saw as the boldness of her progress transformed his perception of her: she had become an estimable artist now and he felt she was his equal. He became a conspirator in Becker's cause, and to support her concretely even bought one of her paintings, *Infant with Its Mother's Hand*.

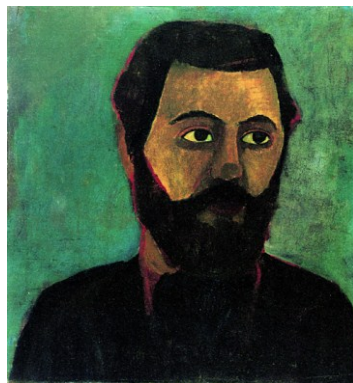


Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Infant with Its Mother's Hand*, 1903

For some reasons which will later be disclosed, the picture also had a symbolic meaning in that precise moment. Rilke thought that Becker simply had to come to Paris, but she hesitated, it was a difficult step to take as Modersohn was against it. She seemed convinced that he was content with Worpswede, even though his journals reveal that it was not so. He somehow vacillated between an alliance with her, and also came to agree with her that their life had become too monotonous, philistine: "Paula is right. The things that made our marriage so fine during the first period, an exciting active life, full of content, experience – we have fallen very far away from that. A great mistake, Worpswede: one gets stuck in the swamp, one turns sour

too easily here” (369). Yet, as happened before, just one month later he was already criticizing his wife’s latest pictures, which in his opinion were done too much under the influence of her Paris visit: “A great gift for color – but unpainterly and harsh, particularly in her completed figures. She admires primitive pictures, which is very bad for her – she should be looking at artistic paintings. She wants to unite color and form – out of the question the way she does it” (377). Once again, Modersohn at least had to convince himself that he knew what was the right way for his wife, even though he was quickly ready to change his opinion. It therefore seems that his judgment of Becker’s painting was much influenced by his mood. On 20<sup>th</sup> December he seemed to consider positively the results they had both attained during that year that was drawing to a close: “Summer was enormously profitable for me with all my painting and then the studies I did – and at Paula’s side with her masterful still lifes and sketches, the boldest and the best use of color that has ever been made here in Worpswede” (379).

After Christmas Otto and Paula went to see Carl Hauptmann and his wife at Schreiberhau. There they met the economist and sociologist Werner Sombart, who must have greatly impressed Becker, as she painted one of her most stunning portraits:



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Portrait of Werner Sombart*, 1906

As has been observed, “Sombart’s clear staring eyes and heavy beard suggest the intense intellectual qualities which so impressed Modersohn-Becker, while the flat areas of colour and the simplified features anticipate the painting of Rilke” (Perry 134). In fact the dark tones of the painting, reflected in Sombart’s eyes, make a strong contrast with the strange red outline, as if Becker perceived a dark but fascinating power emanating from the man. The portrait of Rilke, which will later be discussed, for many reasons can be considered the opposite image to this one. As if the portrait of Sombart were the negative of the picture – intended as photograph – portraying Rilke.

Otto and Paula then went to Dresden and Berlin and did not come back until January 1906. The trip gave Becker the opportunity to meet some stimulating people and works to widen her horizon, which she felt so restricted in Worpswede. Somehow, however, it was too late, as she had already decided to leave her husband and head towards Paris. As her deadline to fulfill her artistic hopes, she had set her thirtieth birthday, which was on 8<sup>th</sup> February. That day Westhoff called at her studio and, as well as speaking with her about the ways in which she might support herself during that stay, she was informed of a secret that the couple had maintained for obvious reasons. As Westhoff immediately wrote to Rilke,

[Paula] says, that for these five years she has lived unmarried; actually, that the man at whose side she lives was incapable, because of nerves, of completing the sexual act. That she herself had felt and experienced nothing but a great disillusion; that for a time he has been less nervous – but that for her naturally any rapprochement would be pointless, without meaning – in other words, impossible. (qtd. in Torgersen 179)

The reader who partakes of such confidence can easily feel as if he or she were eavesdropping on the couple's most intimate life, were it not that Becker's wish to have a child, besides being so important for her, as Westhoff's letter to Rilke reports,<sup>8</sup> is also closely connected with her art, as Rilke's *Requiem* dedicated to her will confirm. On the other hand, Becker's pictures until that time are there to show how relevant the subjects of motherhood and children were for her.

In her painting these two themes are treated in such an emotional and poetical way that they inevitably must have been the artistic mirror of Becker's most hidden wishes. In the light of such disclosures, Becker's *Self-Portrait with a Red Rose*, dating from 1905 and showing her subdued and uncertain attitude, is much more comprehensible and should also be seen as evoking virginity (the white dress) and sexual love (the red rose). It is true that Westhoff, who had a child, was portrayed nearly in the same way, but the two symbols for her could evoke her actual state of separation and emotional distance from Rilke, which was interpreted by Becker as a regained virginity. It is very important to have these two images in mind later on, when the myth of Eurydice will be discussed in Rilke's poetry.

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<sup>8</sup> “She herself believes in her ability to bear children – and would still like to achieve this goal – even on her own, without a man. It's very strange – she means to do all that – and wants to represent [Otto's impotence] above all as the occasion and cause of the separation, because he doesn't understand the other reasons” (qtd. in Torgersen 179).



## BECKER'S SEPARATION FROM MODERSOHN AND WORPSWEDE: HER FOURTH AND FINAL STAY IN PARIS

Becker waited till the night of the 22<sup>nd</sup> February 1906, which was Modersohn's birthday, to leave for Paris while he slept. The scene is not clear, as Becker did not mention the details in her letters and journals: did she leave a note? Did anyone help her to get away? What was so important to her was the radical change in her life that she finally had the courage to undertake.

In Paris she had arranged to stay at 29 Rue Cassette, the same address as her two previous stays. She soon left for a new studio at 14, avenue de Maine that was cheaper. In addition to attending drawing classes at Julian and anatomy and art history lectures at the École des Beaux Arts, she threw herself into painting. The first letter that she wrote her husband did not mention their crisis and only in response to his reply did she shortly say something about it. Modersohn now could not sleep, could not paint, could not read and found the discovery that she had left so painful, that he promised to make all the changes she wanted. Becker, however, did not know how to answer her husband's questions, as she wrote in her letter dated 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1906:

Your letter has all the same things in it which you have already told me. For the moment let us not even talk about this; please let it rest for a time. The answer, which will come by itself, will be the right one. I thank you for all your love. The fact that I am not giving in is neither cruelty nor hardness. It is difficult for me, too. I am acting the way I am because I know for certain that after another half year, if I don't finally put myself to the test now, I would be tormenting you again. Try to get used to the possibility of the thought that our lives can go separate ways. (*Letters and Journals* 385-86).

Becker's sister, Herma, who did not know that Paula was coming to Paris, was shocked when she saw her and thought she was in the wrong and manifesting her egotism once again. And yet, despite her disapproval, not only did she often accompany her on outings but sat as a model for her and later on, when Becker started doing her nude self-portraits, she helped her by photographing her in the poses she wanted. One gets the impression that Becker on one hand seemed very fragile, and found it difficult to make choices, but once she did, she was extremely firm and did not let herself be convinced by others – whether they were artists, friends or family. As for Modersohn, her relationship with him was now nearly completely reversed: he was subdued and she was rejecting all his attempts at reconciliation. In particular, in what seems to be a response to a letter of his where he finally had realized how profoundly she desired to have a child, on 9<sup>th</sup> April she point-blank wrote: “I *cannot* come to you *now*. I *cannot* do it. And I do

not want to meet you in any other place, either. And I do not want any child from you at all; not *now*” (389).

Except for Rilke and Westhoff, nearly everybody else took Modersohn’s side. Hauptmann in particular was very hard on Becker and in a letter dated 5<sup>th</sup> May warned her with very emphatic tones:

may the wellspring of healthy, clear feelings flow again for that lonely, creative life which you, either from ignorance or weakness, call Philistine.

You speak of love! It has a thousand masks. The one you call love, who knows if nothing more than a straw doll is hiding behind it? But Life will instruct you in time if a healthy feeling has not already taught you about it. You have known many a tragedy. By the end of the play *Lear*, too, knows where love was, but he looks for it there in vain. You must also be careful! (394)

From this and other letters that Hauptmann wrote to Becker, some critics deduce that she probably was involved with another man (in Torgersen 185), who might have been Hauptmann’s acquaintance, Werner Sombart, the sociologist she had met at his place and portrayed in such an impressive way. Be that as it may, it must not be forgotten that art was Becker’s point in being in Paris and the spring of 1906, reaching its apex in May, was an extremely productive time for her. This is also due to the fact that she could meet German sculptor Bernhard Hoetger, who was studying with Rodin. As he wrote later on, in 1920, after weeks of intense interchange, Becker humbly confessed to him that she was a painter. As Hoetger’s curiosity was aroused, he went to her atelier and there, as he said, “I experienced, quietly and full of emotion, a miracle. She hung on every word from my lips. The only thing I could say to her was: ‘All of them are great works. Remain true to yourself and give up further instruction’” (526n).

Becker’s letter to thank Hoetger for his visit is incredibly moving as she had finally received the encouragement she yearned for so much:

You have given me the most wonderful gift. You have given me myself. Now I have courage. My courage was always behind barricades and I didn’t know which way to go. You have opened the gates. You are a great benefactor. Now I have begun to believe that I shall become somebody. And when I think about that, I weep tears of joy. (393)

For the first time in her life, Becker had the feeling of having attained her deepest art, where inner experience and outer experience become one. On 8<sup>th</sup> May she wrote enthusiastically to

Modersohn: “D[ear] Otto. I’m getting there. I’m working tremendously, I believe I am getting there” (395). To her sister Milly she addressed a very similar cry of joy and fulfillment: “I’m becoming somebody – I’m living the most intensely happy period of my life. Pray for me”; were it not that, immediately after, Becker added: “Send me sixty francs for models’ fees. Thank you.” (395). This last request gives the idea of Becker’s weakest point during this extremely productive sojourn in Paris: her independence as an artist would also require her economic autonomy, which she did not have.

While her mother wrote her letters full of dismay at this new turn in her daughter’s life – as she clearly took poor Otto’s side<sup>9</sup> – Becker was painting strenuously, and sleeping in the same room with her paintings. As she felt she was ‘passing her test,’ she showed no intention of turning back, as she told her mother: “I am beginning a new life now. Don’t interfere with me; just let me be. It is so wonderfully beautiful. I lived the past week in such a state of excitement. I believe I have accomplished something good” (397). The contact Becker maintained with her husband was mainly aimed at sharing with him the progress in her painting but one can also feel that she was feeling guilty at having to ask him for money. She therefore tried to reassure him (and herself) that it was not only necessary but extremely profitable for her work. On 15<sup>th</sup> May 1906 she wrote him:

Night and day I’ve been most intensely thinking about my painting, and I have been more or less satisfied with everything I’ve done. I’m slackening a little now, not working much, and no longer so satisfied. But all in all, I still have a loftier and happier perspective on my art than I did in Worpswede. But it does demand a very, very great deal from me – working and sleeping in the same room with my paintings is a delight. Even in the moonlight the atelier is very bright. When I wake up in the middle of the night, I jump out of bed and look at my work. And in the morning it’s the first thing I see – (398)

The fact that for Becker it was such a delight to sleep with her pictures, gives an idea of how concretely and symbolically she wanted to become one with her painting. Her pictures started becoming living creatures for her and she finally could pour all her energy into her art, trying to keep at bay other people’s claims on her. The results of such work and concentration were incredible: besides many extraordinary still lifes, self-portraits and portraits in particular followed one another taking her deeper and deeper in her research. The above mentioned letter

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<sup>9</sup> “Your husband is enduring this difficult and taxing time in a singular way; I couldn’t have imagined such a thing. He has dragged your oil studies into his atelier and has surrounded himself with your still lifes. [...] he’s putting your still lifes next to them [his pictures] to compare whether he can duplicate the effect of your colors” (396).

crossed with one from Modersohn in which he made a confession and tried to justify himself: “In the first years, because I loved you too much, I did not want to see you become a mother, I couldn’t bear the thought that your life would be in danger; I wanted you, your self, your spirit. (I couldn’t help thinking that Rembrandt had lost his Saskia to childbirth” (qtd. in Torgersen 190).

At this point in her life, Becker seemed to identify Modersohn and Worpswede exclusively with family commitments, while now that inside herself she was choosing to dedicate all her energy to art of course she could feel closer to Rilke. As will be further developed in a section dedicated to her relationship with him, Rilke’s support was fundamental especially in the month of May 1906. On 10<sup>th</sup> May he had been suddenly dismissed by Rodin and therefore had more time to spend with her, and follow the developments of her art more closely. In the first week of June, however, Modersohn traveled to Paris to try to work things out with his wife. It was her sister Herma, who at first had to mediate between the two spouses, that passed on the news to her mother on 8<sup>th</sup> June. Like the rest of the family, Herma thought that her sister was showing evidence of her extreme egotism (“how unfair it is for so many people to have to suffer on account of one, that such power should be given to *one* person” *Letters and Journals* 402) and mainly for that reason apparently there was nothing to do to convince her to resume her marriage:

It is good that Otto is leaving now and that he understands there is nothing to be done at present. We talked about all sorts of things and people, only to return again and again to the underlying problem; one could sense it lurking there even during the most trivial conversation. Otto was touchingly decent, tried everything, promised anything. Paula naturally knows all about that as well as we do, but nevertheless! (402)

Becker’s firmness started to waver at the end of June. As she had done earlier in stressful times, she fell ill after her husband left. She worked less and, as she was not able to support herself in any way, she was forced to borrow money not only from Modersohn, but also from her mother and Vogeler. Maybe it is also due to her financial distress that her determination to go on was weakening, and in a letter to Vogeler dated 30<sup>th</sup> July she did not dismiss the idea of going back to Worpswede sometime, as the pursue of her art in Paris now was starting to become a “bitter struggle” (405). For the moment, however, she wanted to keep going on with her research there, but was not ruling out the possibility to give her and her husband the chance for a reconciliation in a few months’ time:

Things are sad now for Otto Modersohn. I know it. I have written him that as soon as his pictures are finished for the Gurlitt exhibition, he should come here and try painting out in the countryside somewhere. Then we shall see what we still have to give to each other. No matter what, there will be a decision in the fall – (405)

Becker must have felt very lonely during that summer: Herma had left Paris on 1<sup>st</sup> July and Rilke was declining her requests for continued contact. If on the one hand he always dreaded being needed, on the other Clara too was now suffering from isolation in Worspswede, and he agreed to spend some holiday on the Belgian coast with his family. Becker invited herself along but he simply advised her *not* to go. Rilke's family was now very fragile and he was probably unable to help his needful friend. Maybe Westhoff, if given a voice, would have answered differently, but as usual he was speaking on behalf of the three of them. Luckily, the Hoetgers invited Becker to spend some days in Bures, outside Paris. Later on Hoetger wrote that the whole party enjoyed that time very much and that they gathered flowers for the still lifes. Becker did three portraits of Hoetger's wife, Lee, and the most lyrical one with stylized flowers probably shows the influence of *Le Douanier* by Rousseau, whose work she had seen at the Salon des Indépendants in 1905. Hoetger had one of his pictures in his studio as well.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Portrait of Lee Hoetger*, 1906

Becker was still telling Modersohn about the progress in her painting, and – as she wrote him on 3<sup>rd</sup> August – she felt close to finding the right path again:

Recently I've been very happily at work again. Today I begun the portrait of Frau Hoetger. The woman interests me, and I like her more and more. There is something very grand about her, and she is quite magnificent to paint. If only I can get something of what I sense about her into my picture. [...]

Painting is beautiful, only it is very, very difficult.

One must only believe in oneself; that is the way one can produce something. (406)

Even though from this letter one could infer that there was still a close contact between the two spouses, just one month later, on 3<sup>rd</sup> September, Becker made a final attempt to ask her husband not to come to Paris in autumn and let her go: “Now I must ask you for your sake and mine, please spare both of us this time of trial. Let me go, Otto. I do not want you as my husband. I do not want it. Accept this fact. Accept this fact. Don’t torture yourself any longer” (408). She also had to ask him for five hundred marks, which was very painful for her and she said that she intended to take steps to secure her livelihood. The same day she informed her mother of her decision and told her that she could not do otherwise. If one reads how Becker closed that letter, her sense of guilt is very clear: “I love you all so much even if, at the moment, it may not seem so” (409). As she said in her letter to Rilke written in 1902, when the relationship with him and Westhoff was fraught, she actually felt that love is “thousandfold.” She was seeing it for herself and no one, apart the Hoetgers, now seemed to understand her. She needed to pour all her love into painting and for the moment she could not meet any other people’s claims. She did not know how to explain that it was not for egotism but because all her energy had to be spent on her art.

How strange it seems at this point that, only six days after the letter in which Becker asked Modersohn not to come, she was to retrace her steps and suddenly change her mind:

Dear Otto,

My harsh letter was written during a time when I was terribly upset. [...] Also my wish not to have a child by you was only for the moment, and stood on weak legs. [...] I am sorry now for having written it. If you have not completely given up on me, then come here soon so that we can try to find one another again.

The sudden shift in the way I feel will seem strange to you.

Poor little creature that I am, I can’t tell which path is the right one for me.

All these things have overtaken me, and yet I still do not feel guilty.

I don’t want to cause pain to any of you.

Your Paula (409)

What could have intervened in such a short time to induce Becker to change idea? In one letter she later wrote to her sister Milly, she told her that Hoetger had persuaded her to do so. It seems quite contradictory that precisely the artist who had acknowledged her great talent was to be the one to advise her to resume her marriage. Maybe he was playing a double role with her,

as in a letter he wrote to Modersohn his praise of Becker's painting was quite mild with respect to the appreciation he had earlier expressed with her.<sup>10</sup>

The tone of this letter is very irritating as Hoetger – who had previously told Becker that she did not need any further instruction – now nearly became Modersohn's ally and arrogated to the two of them the right to decide what she still had to do to actually become a great painter. Once again one gets the impression that the experimental nature of her painting was yet far from being recognized. Her family's skepticism about her art could not but be further discouraging for her. When in November 1906 four of Becker's paintings had been included in a selection of Worpswede work to be shown first at the Kunsthalle in Bremen and then at the Furlitt gallery in Berlin, and Gustav Pauli, the director of the Kunsthalle, wrote an article in praise of Becker's work, her mother on 11<sup>th</sup> November wrote her daughter that she was very happy for her, yet could not refrain from expressing her harsh personal judgment of the *Head of a Young Girl* that Pauli seemed to appreciate so much: "I really cannot stand that portrait" (411n). About the same time, Kurt, Becker's brother, wrote Modersohn that he did not think that Pauli's praise was sincere, "since the article was doubtlessly inspired by someone else and does not contain Pauli's real opinion" (411n). Becker, on her part, in a letter to her sister Milly welcomed the review in a way that only confirmed to her how – as Rilke would have said – the artist's path was a solitary one which had to be pursued inside independently of discouraging or encouraging opinions coming from the outside:

The review was more a satisfaction to me than a joy. Joy, overpoweringly beautiful moments, comes to an artist without others noticing. The same is true for moments of sadness. That is why it's true that artists live mostly in solitude. But for all that, the review will be good for my reappearance in Bremen. And it will perhaps also cast a different light on my reasons for leaving Worpswede. (413)

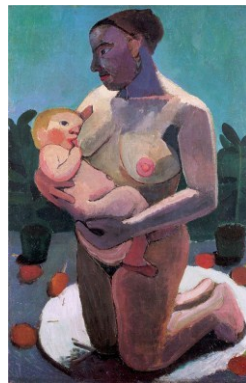
It is therefore less surprising that Becker – who finally had not found a way to support herself and could not conceive for long of living the bohemian life of Montmartre – should decide to accept some compromise in order to get on with her art.

At the end of October 1906, Modersohn came to Paris. He and Becker moved to the boulevard Montparnasse where once – as they had been told – Gauguin had lived, and each of them had a

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<sup>10</sup> "Whenever I praised your wife I was always careful to temper it with an additional remark, out of a natural and sincere urge; for, as you must know, we can consider the great talent of your wife only as a still untutored gift which will not come into blossom until serious conflicts of the soul permit her to recognize good discipline, and until calm consideration leads her to apply it to her work." (527n)

separate studio. They stayed there until March, just returning briefly to Worspwede for Christmas. Their first week in Paris was shared with Heinrich and Martha Vogeler, and they all went to see the great Gauguin retrospective at the Salon d'Automne, as well as work by Cézanne, Matisse, Bonnard, Dérain and Kandinsky. For Becker it was a difficult time, as she could not maintain her productivity of her days alone in Paris, and in a letter to her mother dated 1<sup>st</sup> November she conveyed all her frustration: “At the moment I’m not really very happy. My moving, Otto’s being here, and last week’s parting with the Vogelers have taken me completely away from my work. But next Monday I plan to begin again. I don’t like when life takes me away from my work too long” (411). In a later testimony to Kunsthalle director Pauli, Modersohn said that she had started again to spend whole days in her studio, emerging only for dinner and that he had feared for her health. He had told her so but her reply had been that she could not moderate her pace, as her life might well be a short one. Modersohn’s arrival had not inhibited the experimentation she was pursuing with her subjects. From the pictures she was doing at that time, one can see that the influence of Gauguin’s Tahitian pictures was very strong, but also that motherhood was a recurrent theme.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Mother and child*, 1906-7

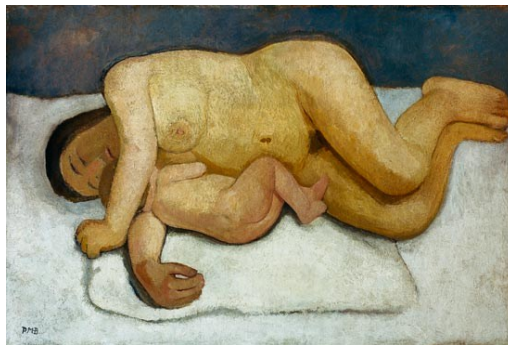
Becker began seeing her future as a married woman and motherhood was central to the life she imagined. As she wrote her sister Milly on 18<sup>th</sup> November, it seemed that she and Modersohn now understood each other better and had reached a mutual agreement about how they would live once they returned to Worspwede:

Otto and I shall be coming home again in the spring. That man is touching in his love. We are going to try to buy the Brünjes place in order to make our lives together freer and more open... My thoughts run like this just now: if the dear Lord will allow me once again to create something beautiful, then I shall be happy and satisfied; if only I have a place where I



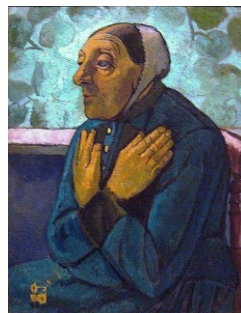
can work in peace. I will be grateful for the portion of love I've received. If one can only remain healthy and not die too young. (413-14)

On March 9<sup>th</sup> 1907 Becker sent short notes to her mother and Milly to tell them that she was pregnant. By early April she and Modersohn were back to Worspwede. In a letter to Herma, her mother described an idyllic picture of their life together, showing “security and clarity everywhere,” (420) as if nothing had been patched and put back together again. That is hardly surprising, as Becker had always wanted a child and could not in the end renounce the middle-class life in which she had grown up. She loved her studio at the Brünjes, her husband seemed to be very accommodating to her needs now and she had never perceived having a child as incompatible with the pursuit of her art. When she had married Modersohn, in fact, Elsbeth was a toddler and she had never felt her presence as hindering her progress in her art.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Sleeping Mother with Child*, 1906

Even though she had to restrict her artistic activity because of pregnancy, Becker did fourteen paintings after returning to Worspwede. She went back to portraying peasants, which still retained her attention. She did a wonderful painting of an old woman with her arms crossed over her chest, who seems to be caught by the painter in a moment of holy recollection:



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Old Peasant Woman with Hands Crossed at Her Breast*, 1906-7

Mathilde was born on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1907. Becker's mother's description of her first days as a mother in a letter to Milly recalls so many paintings with mothers and children that Paula had painted: "Paula reclines on snow-white pillows beneath her beloved Gauguins and Rodins. [...] After the bath she [Mathilde] is laid at Paula's breast and takes hold as cleverly as an old hand, and nurses and feeds until she falls asleep, a little brunette next to a big brunette" (426-27). A week after the birth, Becker had pains in her legs for two days and she was kept in bed longer than usual. On 20<sup>th</sup> November 1907, she died of an embolism. There is no direct record of her last moments; the only testimony is taken from a "family letter" of uncertain origin, and, much later, Westhoff's description based on Modersohn's account to her:

Paula was given permission to get out of bed and happily prepared herself for this occasion. She had a large mirror placed at the foot of her bed and combed her beautiful hair, braided it, and wound the braids into a crown around her head. She pinned roses which someone had sent her to the dressing gown and when her husband and brother were preparing to support her on either side, she gently walked ahead of them into the other room. There, candles had been lighted everywhere in the chandelier, on a garland of candle holders around the body of a carved baroque angel, and in many other places. She then asked for her child to be brought to her. When this was done she said, 'Now it is almost as beautiful as Christmas.' Then suddenly she had to elevate her foot – and when they came to help her she said only, "A pity." (345-46).

Westhoff, who had returned to Berlin after visiting Becker, did not know of her friend's death until more than a week later. Once again, Rilke, who was not there but was certainly told this same version, used it in the *Requiem* as if he had been close to Becker.<sup>11</sup>

She was buried in the Worpswede churchyard, close to Modersohn's first wife. In her journal, as early as February 1902, Becker had written that she wished to have a very simple tomb<sup>12</sup> but in the end, at her death, according to her mother's wishes, she got dedicated a monument by Hoetger.

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<sup>11</sup> "You sat up / in child-bed, and before you was a mirror / that gave all back to you. / That was all *you*, all *outside*, / and inside it just illusion, the lovely illusion / of any woman trying on her jewels, / combing her hair in a new way" (*Requiem* vv. 183-89).

<sup>12</sup> "I have often thought of my grave [...]. It must not have a mound. Let it be a rectangular bed with white carnations planted around it. And around that there will be a modest little gravel path also bordered by carnations, and then will come a wooden trellis, quiet and humble, and simply there to support the abundance of roses surrounding my grave. And there will be a little gate in front of the fence through which people can come to visit me, and at the back a quiet little bench where people can sit. It will be in our Worpswede churchyard, by the hedge near the fields, in the old part, not at the far end. Perhaps at the head of my grave there should be two little juniper trees, and in the center a black wooden tablet with just my name, no dates, no other words.



Paula Modersohn-Becker's grave (detail). Photo by Monica Pavani

The last day of November, when Westhoff finally went to Worspswede with a bouquet of autumn foliage to take to Becker's grave, she found that her house was empty: Milly had taken the child with her, and Modersohn had gone away. There was a painting left unfinished on her easel, a still life with sunflowers in dark colours, strongly influenced by that Dutch painter Vincent Van Gogh she had come to appreciate hugely. And she wanted to go on with her search for a truthful, and simple way of painting objects and people as she perceived them, irradiated by their inner life.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Still Life with Sunflowers*, 1907

On 4<sup>th</sup> December 1907, Becker's mother wrote to Herma what Paula said in her last letter to Fellner, an engineer who was a close friend of the family: "I'm not afraid of anything, all will be well – except death; that is the only ghost I am afraid of, that is the only true misfortune" (428). From her last paintings or even from her last words – which seem too perfect and, as Torgersen writes, contribute "to the nearly irresistible mythic redactions of Paula's life that both compel our attention and obscure our sight of her" (216) – it is difficult to infer whether she was

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That's the way it should be... And I shall probably want to have a bowl where people can put fresh flowers for me." (271). Without knowing of this journal entry, Westhoff, who was not in Worspswede at that time, sent her brother there so that he could set a bowl with fruit on Paula's snow-covered grave.

actually content with the new life that was taking shape for her. It is even more difficult, if not impossible, to figure out if, now that she was back in Worpswede, she would have continued to follow her own path in her research. As she wrote Hoetger that summer, she was no longer satisfied with the paintings she had done in Paris, as now she saw them as “too cool, too solitary and empty. They are the reaction to a restless and superficial period in my life and seem to strain for a simple, grand effect” (422).

Becker’s life was so short that – apart from the years of study – she only had seven years for her life’s work. During that time however she was able to do no fewer than 560 paintings and more than 700 drawings and 13 etchings. She sold only three or four pictures, and two of them were bought by her friends Rilke and Vogeler. Among the themes she privileged in her art is the image of the child, and she loved to portray in particular peasant children of Worpswede; she also portrayed a lot of peasant men and women and was very devoted to the figure of mother and child. Her way of portraying was the opposite of any folkloristic, native regional art but her art was inclined in particular to cultivate a powerful disregard of all conventional notions of beauty. Becker was interested in portraying the human being per se. She did a relatively small number of portraits as the word is commonly understood, and mostly they were portraits of people close to her: her husband, his daughter Elsbeth, Clara Rilke-Westhoff, Rainer Maria Rilke or Werner Sombart. By contrast, she painted a large number of self-portraits, where a depersonalizing tendency seemed gradually to dominate: Becker was not interested in depicting her personal mood or atmosphere, but in evoking the human essence, the fundamental, primitive qualities of the human *vis-à-vis*: “The human being as subject and object of creation was her theme” (“Introduction,” in *Letters and Journals* 8).

Becker painted also many still lifes, approximately seventy of them. Despite the evident influence of Cézanne’s painting, it must be said that, in contrast with the French painter’s art she admired so much, she always strove to give to her works a more weighted, heavy and earthly coloration than the one that can be found in Cézanne’s still lifes. As far as Becker’s late nude compositions are concerned, the critics have emphasized in particular the role of Gauguin as a model for her, with a very remarkable difference: the almost total lack of the decorative element in Becker’s work with respect to Gauguin’s.

What is worth noticing is that the more she came into contact with other artistic expressions in Paris, the more she was encouraged to work alone and take a different path from the one she had undertaken in Worpswede. Already after her second stay in Paris, she went back to figurative painting, self-portraits in particular, and still lifes started to come to the forefront of

her work. Even more deserving of attention, however, is that the closer she was getting to her own way of conceiving painting, the less she was bringing up and articulating questions dealing with her art in her journals. It is precisely at that point of Becker's exhaustion – coinciding with a feeling of a personal achievement on her part – that the poems by Michaels, Bhatt and Rich intervene. It is from the silence of accomplished art that the poems spring as from a rich source.

It will be very interesting to observe how the poets give their dramatic monologues a form and a content which they think is more apt to represent in words the great achievements and more original traits of Becker's art:

Almost every artistic product of her hand (that is, of her eye and her heart) is saturated with a feeling of totality in a very special sense. It is the direct expression of her rare ability to distil something complete from reality and from its fragments. [...] The language of her canvases is simple, sober, strict, astringent, almost tight-fisted – but it is great in its form and in its demands on the observer. And yet in every one of her works there is also, even in a hidden way, a human warmth, a heartfelt quality, and love. This is art that a woman created. However, this description of it must not be misunderstood, especially today, for hers is certainly no “feminist art.” Everything programmatic or ideological was antipathetic to her personality and creativity. (“Introduction,” in *Letters and Journals* 9)

Michaels', Bhatt's and Rich's poems give voice to Becker in very different ways, and – as will be analyzed in the next chapter – are more or less successful in finding a kind of balance between the depiction of her as a character involved in art and life, and in trying to give a visual idea of her art.

## BECKER AND RILKE

*“Le vrai peintre, toute sa vie, cherche la peinture ;  
le vrai poète, la Poésie, etc. Car ce ne sont point  
des activités déterminées. Dans celles-ci, il faut créer  
le besoin, le but, les moyens, et jusqu'aux obstacles...”*

*Paul Valéry*<sup>13</sup>

It is hardly surprising that Eric Torgersen, in his book *Dear friend. Rainer Maria Rilke and Paula Modersohn-Becker*, which takes for its subject “the vital business that each had with the other” (9) cannot but start from a very close reading of Rilke's *Requiem*. If, according to

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<sup>13</sup> Qtd. in Blanchot 105.

Torgersen, what actually matters in the relationship between the two artists is not whether they were ever lovers or not, but rather the kind of intimate connection which led both of them to develop their own conception of art, and the deep influence that they exerted on each other, the *Requiem* is certainly to be considered the inner version of Rilke's relationship with Becker – exclusively in his view, of course. Besides, the *Requiem* is the starting point of the ghost story having Paula as its main character, as the poem, in Torgersen's words, “was born of a pregnant silence” (3).

In fact, even though Rilke became no less prolific in letter-writing after Becker's death, it is striking that during the year that elapsed between her death and the writing of the *Requiem*, he avoided referring directly to her with any of his many correspondents. The silence was broken only on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1908 – the day after All Souls' Day, when he finished the poem – in a letter to Sidonie Nádherný von Borutin, the handsome daughter of a baroness at whose estate in Prague he had been to tea on All Souls Day one year earlier. That same day, Becker had given birth to her daughter, Mathilde Modersohn.

In his letter to Sidonie, Rilke did not name Becker yet not only did he offer an interesting summary of the *Requiem*, but also gave a useful key to his vision of her life and art, two motifs that for him were closely connected:

An unexpected, powerful current of work had suddenly surfaced; I wrote and completed, without thinking of its remarkable relation to the day itself, a requiem for a compelling figure passed away a year ago: a woman who, from the great beginnings of her own artistic work, had fallen back, first, into her family, and from there into an unfortunate fate, and into an impersonal death, one which, in life, she had not prepared. (Torgersen 1)

Two themes in particular seem to be so relevant: the search for an artistic fulfilment – which is usually in conflict with familial expectations – and Rilke's great preoccupation with avoiding an “impersonal death.” He always needed to transcend mortality on the one hand and a common fate on the other: that is why he cherished so much his duty as a poet but not as a family man. All his immense work, however, should not only be seen in this light, neither can it be diminished just to the effort, on his part, to escape the anguish of death.

His relationship with Becker is particularly enlightening with respect to the importance that death had in the work of art for him. He was very closely linked to her – she was a woman and an artist who had all his esteem. And she had died shortly after having given birth to her daughter Mathilde. If women can generate offspring as well as works of art, men can only bring forth works of art. Yet, as the French critic and writer Maurice Blanchot well explains in his

book *L'espace littéraire*, Rilke thought that each one of us had to grow one's own death inside like a fruit or a child:

La mort ferait donc partie de l'existence, elle vivrait de ma vie, dans le plus intérieur. Elle serait faite de moi et, peut-être, pour moi, comme un enfant est l'enfant de sa mère, images que Rilke emploie aussi plusieurs fois : nous engendrons notre mort, ou bien nous mettons au monde l'enfant mort-né de notre mort. (158)

In other words, one – and especially the artist, who this way can avoid an “impersonal death” – should give birth to the dead child generated by the death of one's ego. Men and women can equally do this, and this way they can learn from their death. The artist's life is a continual apprenticeship in selflessness – the condition that for Rilke was so necessary to art. The image that Blanchot gives to represent the essence of this mysterious call is unsettling if one thinks that Becker was to encounter the opposite fate – and not from a spiritual but rather from a biological point of view: she died after giving birth to a living child. Moreover, the fact that somehow Rilke felt literally compelled to write the long poem which was to become *Für eine Freundin* (*Requiem for a Friend*) gives an idea of the sense of identification with Becker that perhaps until that time he had tried to resist. The *Requiem* can therefore be used as a starting point to enter, rather than presume to understand, the profound link uniting the two artists. Yet, many symbols, allusions and transfigurations in the poems are not understandable without knowing more about Becker and Rilke in real life, as is recorded in their letters and journals and by the testimony of other people in their surroundings.

### *Becker and Rilke Falling 'Out of the Frame'*

Becker's actual relationship with Rilke, despite the several studies on this subject, is still enveloped by an aura of mystery: according to Torgersen, it seems that Rilke in Worpswede was at first more impressed by Becker than by Clara Westhoff, whom he started to court only after he learned that Becker had been secretly engaged to Otto Modersohn; Becker, on the other hand, when already engaged to Modersohn, did everything that was in her power to maintain an intense correspondence with Rilke, calling him 'Dear friend' in all her letters. The attempt here will be to note down the tangled web of events which are relevant in Michaels', Bhatt's and Rich's poems and also some others that are significantly left out but seem equally, if even not more important, to see how the woman painter Paula Modersohn-Becker gets transformed into a character within the poems.

When poet Rainer Maria Rilke and painter Paula Becker met for the first time in 1900 in Worpswede, they already had a good deal in common: beside being nearly the same age, they both wished to ‘become someone,’ even though in different arts. The novel *Niels Lyhne* by Jacobsen that Becker loved so much was also Rilke’s favourite. The detail is important, as the poet immediately identified with the protagonist, Niels Lyhne, for a thousand reasons but most of all because Niels at the end of the novel dies “the difficult death,” which means that he does not ask for the pastor and remains faithful to his chosen atheism (Torgersen 19). He therefore avoided the “impersonal death” which eight years later still troubled Rilke so much in the *Requiem*. Above all, Becker and Rilke shared a vision of art. Both of them thought that an artist is someone who *learns to see*.

The first recorded meeting between the two of them took place on the first of the Sunday gatherings at the Barkenhoff that he attended, on 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1900. Becker was more impressed by another guest who was there that night, Carl Hauptmann – less well-known than his brother Gerhart, Germany’s best known playwright – who was visiting his friend Otto Modersohn. In fact, in a journal entry dated 3<sup>rd</sup> September, which curiously starts with a stunning remark about her life, if one considers how it ended, she wrote: “And it [life] will be going on for a long time. I am healthy and strong and alive. Hail! Dr. Carl Hauptmann is here for a week. He is a great, strong, struggling soul, someone very much to be reckoned with” (*Letters and Journals* 198). Rilke, by contrast, is described as “a refined, lyrical talent, gentle and sensitive, with small, touching hands. He read his poems to us, tender and full of presentiment. He is sweet and pale. In the end, the two men were unable to understand each other. The battle of realism with idealism” (198). The final note is interesting because such a battle was also of crucial importance in the novel *Niels Lyhne*, which both Becker and Rilke considered *their* novel.

Rilke, on his part, often referred to Paula and Clara as sisters, not only because of the friendship that linked them but also as the community called itself a Family. Rilke immediately impressed ‘the Girls’ with a poem written in the voice of a girl who is carried off by a wandering singer where “no one can say,” but there is a hint that it might be death that has carried her off (in Torgersen 63). Rilke certainly cast a poet’s spell over the Family, as Modersohn later described: “Rilke gave these evenings an air of especially solemn consecration. He often read from his works, with his wonderful soft, vibrating voice. No one could escape the deep, gripping effect. It was as if one was entranced by the evocative power that radiated from him.” (qtd. in Torgersen 63).



When Rilke arrived in Worpswede, one of his obsessions as an artist – which was also to permeate his *Requiem* for Becker – was the need he already felt to give priority to inner reality over outer reality. The mirror was to become his favorite metaphor for this tendency. Therefore he did not have to wait long after his encounter with Becker to see it appear in a poem written during his stay in the colony. On the rainy evening of 7<sup>th</sup> September 1900, he visited Becker for the first time in her studio at the Brünjes, and he exchanged opinions with her about art and the vision of it contained in *Niels Lhyne*. He felt that he and Becker were one, as far as such feelings and ideas were concerned, and an eloquent silence followed the acknowledgement of that deep understanding between the two of them. The elegant love lyric he wrote a few days later ends with a double mirrored image:

The water gave me back a darkened land  
On that evening with its rainy skies.  
I saw myself reflected in your eyes...  
The water gave me back a darkened land. (Torgersen 64)

There would be other occasions to see himself reflected in Paula Becker's brown eyes. Poetry was therefore to become the true way of seeing for Rilke (on 1<sup>st</sup> September, in a note addressed to Lou Salomé in his journal, he wrote: "Yes, everything that is truly seen *must* become a poem!" 60). After two trips to Russia, his relationship with Lou, fourteen years older and far more renowned than him, was wearing out – at least from a sentimental point of view. Lou however always remained a constantly supportive mother for him. By 1900, therefore, Rilke was ripe for transformation and yearning to find in the Family of the Worpswede artists his true home. Above all, he was more than ready to court the two young women – Paula and Clara – he found there, and immediately started to write poems as mirrors of his deep and unspeakable inner experiences – that is to say, the only true ones for Rilke.

On 9<sup>th</sup> September, on the occasion of the second Sunday's gathering, it was Westhoff that he singled out for beauty. Rilke read his verse play, *The White Princess*, which he saw as a fitting tribute to Westhoff, who – as he recorded in his journal – was wearing "a dress of white batiste without bodice, in Empire style. With light supported bust and long smooth folds" (qtd. in Torgersen 65). In the play, the princess, who has been married for many years to a man she does not love, has managed to remain a virgin, and her white is the sign of virginity. The next Saturday Rilke was back in Becker's studio. She made tea and, as Rilke's journal reports, they spoke "of Tolstoy, of death, of Georges Rodenbach and [Gerhart] Hauptmann's *Friedensfest*, of life, and of the beauty in all experience, of being able to die and wanting to die, of eternity, of

why we feel related to the Eternal” (Torgersen 68). What Rilke did not know was that Becker, just three days earlier, during an afternoon boat trip on the river Hamme at which Rilke too had been present, had agreed to marry Otto Modersohn. As it was so soon after Helene’s death, the couple preferred to guard the secret of this development in their relationship.

Even though it seems to be true that Becker responded to Rilke with particular intensity, she must have considered her connection with him on a different plane with respect to her growing love for Modersohn. Yet with Rilke she was able to exchange very private confidences, as if he touched chords in her that no one else could touch. They gradually entered a rarefied atmosphere, sometimes even feverish, where imagination played the main role, perhaps reminding both of them of the romantic love stories and affairs described by Jacobsen in *Niels Lhyne*. If no one can ascertain for sure what happened between the two of them, there is something which certainly did not happen: when Rilke visited Becker’s studio, he did not pay any attention to her work. The fact is very strange, especially if one considers how she was craving for recognition, even though Rilke later said that she simply had not shown her pictures to him. It is possible that she could omit to talk with him about her work because she was already exchanging opinions about it with Modersohn.

With Westhoff it went in a different way: Rilke was eager to see her work and, on visiting her studio, he was very impressed by the sculptures she was doing. Westhoff told him also about Rodin, whom until then Rilke had known only from afar, and he shared with her one of his ideas about the French Master: “his works do not look out from inside, do not look outwards in a personal way from some point or other, as if for the sake of a conversation, but always remain works of art, that is, nothing truly present, but what is in every moment possible...” (qtd. in Torgersen 71). Rilke’s opinion about Rodin’s work is not only important because it already foreshadows the future influence that Rodin’s work will exert on his poetry, but also because the multiple points of views that he detects in his sculptures seems to coincide with the ‘holy look’ in Becker’s art which he will praise in his *Requiem*, and which is also attempted especially in Anne Michaels’ dramatic monologue “Modersohn-Becker” that will be further explored.

The atmosphere at Worpswede was therefore intensely productive and Rilke, who felt so warmly welcomed from the Family of the Worpsweders as he probably had never been before by any family or community, wrote in his journal that he intended to stay in Worpswede through the winter. Strikingly enough for him, in his journal on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1900 he started using the collective ‘we’ referring to the whole Family who unfortunately will not be meeting for the next two Sundays, as if all shared the same feelings: “We stood around each other, utterly saddened. Until it occurred to us, that the Sundays and our togetherness must be something very beautiful,

if the thought of having to do without them can sadden us so. And we all felt beauty and gratitude toward one another” (qtd. in Torgersen 75). What is very surprising on his part is that, a few days after renting a house in which to pass the Worpswede winter, on 5<sup>th</sup> October he suddenly left bound for Berlin, without any good-byes. Even though he later said that he had departed to pursue his studies of things Russian there, it seems more probable that he had discovered that Becker was engaged to Modersohn and that he found the news devastating. No mention of this is reported in his journal, which at this point is abruptly interrupted as a page has been torn out by unknown hands. Rilke left for Becker a small sketchbook where he had copied his poems, with a note expressing all his gratitude for the hours they had spent together. His sudden departure for Berlin meant many things: that Becker – to whom he had dedicated so many poems – was no longer available, that he already felt expelled from the Worpswede community, and that is why he was going back to Russian things – which meant Lou Salomé for him. He realized however that nothing was the same with her, as they were no longer lovers. He resumed contact with the Worpswede colony, and the reason he gave for his sudden departure was that Worpswede had too powerful an effect on him. Rilke wrote a letter to Becker and together with it he sent her two books by Jacobsen, *Marie Grubbe* and one volume of poetry, as if he was fixing anyway a place where they could be alone together. He copied for her a part of *Niels Lyhne* that he knew she would recognize, where Niels – before betraying his friend Erik by becoming his wife Fennimore’s lover – takes up Erik’s cause in the face of Fennimore’s disillusion.

Books, poems and dedications referring to them, not only are once again superimposed on the true stories of these artists so closely linked together, but they also transform them into characters of a parallel invisible novel, and very often define – or at least influence – their oncoming fate or direction in life.

Rilke and Becker exchanged many letters and, as Modersohn was jealous of such an intense correspondence, it seems that he insisted with Becker that she told him of their official engagement. And so she did, on 12<sup>th</sup> November 1900, with a long letter starting as usual with “Dear Friend.” In response to her, Rilke wrote a poem, “Blessing for a Bride,” where a few significant passages can be extrapolated. Rilke was again trying to locate in poetry a space where his relationship with Becker could continue without interfering with her love for Modersohn:

It is so strange; being young and giving blessings.

And yet I thirst to do so:  
To meet you at the edge of words,  
and to rest in your hands at evening  
my hands which turn the pages  
of books I have laid aside... (*Letters and Journals* 208)

Poetry was therefore the free territory where Rilke could hope to maintain his close contact with Becker without hurting anyone. The following lines have been read as a plea for Becker to paint his portrait (in Torgersen 88):

And now that my hands are in yours,  
listen to the blood which gently speaks,  
invent a good face to join  
these hands which are within yours.  
A wise face, which grew worthy of life,  
a still one, which understands whispered things,  
a deep one which, framed by his beard,  
remains so calm, as behind crowns of the oak  
through which a storm is speaking, a very quiet house  
in which you will no longer fear to dwell. (209)

Becker in fact would paint Rilke's portrait six years later, during her fourth and last stay in Paris, after temporarily separating from Modersohn. Rilke's letter ends with a resolving "Cordial greetings to Otto Modersohn" (210), which can be interpreted as a mending of the tear in the fabric of the Family. When Becker, in accordance with her parents' decision, will later come to Berlin in order to learn how to cook and become a competent housewife before marrying Modersohn, she and Rilke will be able to openly resume contacts without leaving room for any further jealousy on Modersohn's part.

In the meantime, Rilke increased his correspondence with Clara Westhoff and with her he started something which would have been impossible with Becker, that is to say appropriating parts of her inner life, embellishing them thanks to his ability to use words in order to manipulate everything he wanted to transform into a work of art. In other words, he started retelling her the stories she herself was telling him in her letters, that is to say speaking with her voice, as he openly affirmed in a letter addressed to her: "[...] this would have been my daily

duty: to load my speech with your possessions and send you my sentences like heavy, swaying caravans, to fill all the spaces in your soul with the beauties and treasures of its hidden mines and treasure-chambers” (qtd. in Torgersen 91). In Westhoff’s voice he will even write a requiem for the death of one of her friends who had died young, and some parts of the poem will merge into the *Requiem* he will write one year after Becker’s death. One can say that he put everything to use, and many of the feelings he earlier addressed to Becker were unashamedly redirected to Westhoff.

While Becker made preparations for her marriage, she had no intention of letting it loosen the bonds either of her friendship with Westhoff, or of her close link with the Family.

Otto Modersohn and Clara Westhoff accompanied Becker when she was to leave for Berlin. The three of them skated from Worpswede to Bremen on the iced-over canals. Already at the train station before leaving, Becker got very depressed at the prospect of the two months that lay ahead. As she wrote Modersohn, that time apart would mean quite different things for each one of them: “For you, my King, it will be beautiful pictures – for me: soups, dumplings and stews” (*Letters and Journals* 221). The feeling worsened once she arrived in Berlin:

I think I’m going to have a very hard time of it for the next two months. I don’t fit into a city like this, and particularly not into this elegant district. I fall right out of the frame. It was quite a different thing being in Paris, in the Latin Quarter. The people around me are sweet and friendly. But they live their lives in such strict adherence to their social status. And yet there are delicate, vibrant, sensitive women here. Garden flowers. But where I have to flower is in the field. Everything will turn out all right. Only my poor little soul is marching right into a cage. [...] Mostly I have this strong feeling of having had my wings clipped. Yes, things will get better, but not until I’ve sorted out my life into art and cooking. [...] Dear, wasn’t our last day on ice together really wonderful? (229)

Before leaving for Berlin, Becker had written Rilke a note where she told him that she planned to call on him, and ask him to read to her the poem “The Singer Sings before a Child of Princes” from the sketchbook he had left with her. Now that Becker felt that things had been cleared up concerning her engagement with Modersohn, she and Rilke spent nearly every Sunday at Becker’s place, and exchanged many letters during her stay there. Their interactions remained very intense and pervaded by the pregnant idealism that probably reminded both of them of the enchanted moments that Niels shared with Fennimore before betraying his friend Erik in *Niels Lyhne*.

Becker wrote Modersohn candidly about her times with Rilke and was happy to learn that Modersohn was seeing a lot of Westhoff in Worpswede. The members of the Family seemed by now to have attained an open interaction, no longer menaced by jealousy and enriched by sincere friendship. Yet Becker granted Rilke access to her inner life in a way she did not do with Modersohn. On January 1901 she sent her journal to Rilke, asking him to read the more recent entries. He immediately wrote a letter back, full of elaborate images, with which he intended to apologize for not having acknowledged, before reading her journal, the importance that painting had for her:

There is something I now must regret: in Worpswede I was always with you in the evening, and I doubtless saw here and there, while we were conversing, a sketch (a canal with a bridge and sky is still very clear in my memory) until words came from you, words which I wanted to see at once, so that I denied my eyes the view of your walls, and followed your words... Thus it happened that I never saw much by you, for you yourself never showed me anything. (qtd. in Torgersen 103)

At the end of January Westhoff came to Berlin, and they called together on Rilke. He read to them his poem "The Annunciation," based on a painting by Vogeler, and Becker mentioned the episode in a letter to Modersohn, as she had been very moved by the poem and had felt that the conception of a child "will happen to the two of us also, dear, and I fold my hands silently" (*Letters and Journals* 239-40). Evidently Becker was looking forward to motherhood. In Berlin she also bought a coral bracelet intended for a future daughter.

Rilke, Becker and Westhoff spent a lot of time together in Berlin, but especially Rilke and Westhoff, who by February 11<sup>th</sup> were lovers and already considering marriage. Becker seemed to have trouble in accepting the news but she could not too openly admit it with her two friends. On 6<sup>th</sup> March she wrote a letter to Modersohn where she said that, against her parents' wishes, she wanted to return early to Worpswede and, as she did very rarely, she protested against the constraints that were laid upon women and not upon men:

Funny, from the very beginning of marriage it's we women who are put to the test. All you men are permitted to stay simply the way you are. Well, I don't really take that amiss because I do like you all so very much. It's only that in general the masculine nature is bigger than the feminine, more connected, and more as if it had been made from one mold; that is probably why it is the way it is. By that I don't mean to refer to the two of us in

particular, for I consider myself made from the same mold, too. But I'm speaking in general about male and female. (254)

Three couples of the Worpswede community married in the spring of 1901: Heinrich Vogeler and Martha Schröder on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, Westhoff and Rilke on April 28<sup>th</sup>, and they went to live in a house in Westerwede, while Becker and Modersohn's marriage – as mentioned above – took place on May 25<sup>th</sup>.

Westhoff and Rilke had serious financial troubles. Their daughter, Ruth, was born on December 12<sup>th</sup>, but neither of her parents earned a steady income. Rilke rejected a job in a bank in Prague that his father offered him, as to him it meant the ruin of his art. He tried writing for the theatre, but his play *Daily Life*, premiered in Berlin, was a total flop. Pauli, the director of the Kunsthalle in Bremen, secured him some journalistic work in Bremen newspapers, and also a commission to write a monograph on the Worpswede painters. Rilke began writing it on May 1<sup>st</sup> 1902. He had to lock himself in his study until it was done, as somehow he felt that he had already outgrown the Worpswede painters. He therefore took the opportunity to write something which is more on artistic creation in general than exclusively on painting. Moreover, in his letters at the beginning of 1902, he was already mentioning the possibility of breaking up the household in Westerwede, and therefore he needed to finish the monograph as soon as possible in order to get the money for it, which was more than ever needed at that point. By that time he thought that a future might lie for him – and perhaps for Clara, and Ruth, even though in the end it was not so – in Paris. When he wrote the monograph, the Worpswede community was therefore already behind him. That is why, apart from what seemed to be his sincere praise for Modersohn's and Vogeler's painting, he avoided passing any judgment about the other painters, which he considered in the process of becoming. Once again, as he wrote in a brief passage at the beginning of the book, he had been guided by Jacobsen's words which in *Niels Lyhne* are pronounced by Niels when he stands up for Erik's with Fennimore; Rilke as usual quoted the passage to his personal use, that is in order to define his viewpoint of the Worpswede artists: "Don't think about who's right or about the amount of the injustice. You shouldn't act righteous toward him, because how far would the best of us get with righteousness? No, think about him instead as he was in that hour when you loved him most; believe me, he's worth it" (Jacobsen 145).

If Rilke praised Modersohn's painting almost without reservation, defining him as a poet, who in his landscapes expressed himself as any real artist should do, he did not mention Becker's works at all. Even though, as Torgersen reports, this omission is often viewed as the

typical inability of male critics to acknowledge the accomplishment of female artists, one – says Torgersen – should also consider that “Paula was twenty-six, an age at which recognition in a monograph would have been more surprising than its absence. Rilke had not yet *seen* very much of her work [...]. At the moment of writing the monograph, his relations to Paula were utterly strained” (Torgersen 133). This does not mean that in the monograph there are no underlying connections with her work, first of all the “fascinating suggestion that to paint a portrait is to treat a face as a landscape” (133). A long time had yet to elapse before Becker’s personality and art could openly enter Rilke’s work. And, in accordance with their relationship, it would be in an intimate way, which would be impossible in a monograph purposely addressed to an audience. Becker crossed Rilke’s life at a deep level, and their friendship – with its ups and downs – marked anyway the meeting of two kindred souls. This explains why any misunderstanding between the two of them gave rise to such dramatic consequences.

Rilke sent the final draft of his monograph on the Worpswede painters on 30<sup>th</sup> May and one month later wrote to one of his potential patronesses to support him for a year while he was in Paris, and introduced Clara to her, expressing his opinion on childbearing which was completely different from the one he would state later on about Becker’s case:

I am filled with the conviction that the woman-and-artist who has had a child, and cares for and loves it, is capable like the mature man of reaching every artistic height that the man – making the same assumption, i.e. that he is an artist – can reach. In a word, I consider the woman in whom deep artistic striving dwells, from the moment of her maturity and fulfillment [in childbirth], equal to the male artist. (qtd. in Torgersen 134-35)

Yet, if Rilke seemed ready to acknowledge the importance of childbearing for his wife, he then did everything that was in his power to convince her that she had better find her artistic accomplishment in Paris and leave Ruth with her parents. As Rilke had received the commission to write a monograph on Rodin, he did not hesitate to write him invoking the name of Clara and speaking as usual on her behalf. He therefore asked the French Master if he could give his precious advice on the pictures of his wife’s recent work that he had sent a few months earlier and informed him that he was coming to see him not only because of the monograph he had to write on him, but also as a poet seeking a master. It is no surprise that he mentioned his discovery of Jacobsen and that he soon started to dedicate to Rodin poems in French in order to win his approval.

Rodin was ready to welcome the poet as a disciple, and Rilke left for Paris at the end of August in 1902. Westhoff was to join him in September, after breaking up the household in



Westerwede. In his first letters addressed to his wife, Rilke made clear that his cardinal rule with respect to art now coincided with one that the famous French Master had defined as “*il faut travailler, rien que travailler. Et il faut avoir patience.*” To Rilke it meant that “The great men all let their lives become overgrown like an old path and brought everything into their art. Their life is atrophied like an organ that they no longer need” (qtd. in Torgersen 137). Such an affirmation confirms that Rilke was leaving Worpswede behind, together with Vogeler’s hope – to which Becker too at first had a deep commitment – of fusing, in Worpswede, one’s art and a life of grace and love.

From then on, a great distance would often be interposed between Rilke and Clara (and Ruth) and a copious number of letters addressed to his wife would become his way not only of sharing with his wife his views on art, but also to try them out before transforming them so as to make them part of his work. Rilke started his Rodin monograph in mid-November 1902, and by mid-December he had already finished it. The book marked a progress with respect to his monograph on the Worpswede painters, as in Rilke’s view Rodin was what the Worpsweders had not been: a new master from whom he could learn to *see*, and who was pointing to him the direction he had yet to take in his art.

In the meantime, at the beginning of 1903, Becker had arrived in Paris, and was often seeing the Rilkes. On 22<sup>nd</sup> February, Rilke brought her a copy of the Worpswede monograph, which was finally published. In a letter dated 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1903 that she wrote Modersohn, she was very critical about it, as she felt that Rilke had written a lot of beautiful sentences, but that his was not the right way to write about art and that “the nut is hollow at its core” (*Letters and Journals* 305). However, it is evident that Becker’s sense of division concerned Rilke too, and what her relationship with him meant to her. With Modersohn she seemed to have no kind words for Rilke, as she wrote in the same letter:

Gradually I can see a great emptiness behind this sweep of rhetoric. I’ll be able to explain what I mean better when we can talk about it. In my estimation Rilke is gradually diminishing to a rather tiny flame which wants to brighten its light through association with the radiance of the great spirits of Europe: Tolstoy, Muther, the Worpsweders, Rodin [...]. All of that is impressive at first. But the more one looks into life and into the depths of human feeling and into the rushing waters of art, the more shallow his life seems to me.  
(305)

Rilke however remained unquestionably a source of inspiration for her, as she followed eagerly his recommendations for reading and very often passed them on to her husband.

Modersohn, on his part, found irresistible Rilke's praise of his painting contained in the monograph, as he wrote in his journal and then in a letter to him: "I can truly say that I have never felt so lovingly understood as in your words. Your words truly touch me like sounds from my world, as I think it and dream it, and glow with the desire to have it arise before me" (qtd. in Torgersen 151).

A few days after Becker's return to Worpswede, Rilke left for Italy while Westhoff stayed behind. In Paris Rilke felt sick all the time and – as he confided in long letters addressed to Lou Salomé – he had frequent terrors of the city's streets and a sense of inadequacy due to his awareness of his inability to meet either the demands of the principle "*travailler, toujours travailler*," or the more personal obligations of marriage and fatherhood. Lou strongly believed in the artistic value of Rilke's letters and encouraged him to incorporate them in the book that would later become *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*. She persuaded him of her own vision of the artist, who was someone who had to feel all the terrors of humanity, and overcome them in the accomplishment of his work. Once again, Rilke's relationship with Lou – even though this time it was restricted to letters only – not only became fundamental for his inner equilibrium but also, while undoubtedly sustaining him, was also distancing him both from his family and Worpswede, where in July of that same year he shortly returned with Westhoff before departing again for Italy. Rilke was already asking Lou to validate his wish to divide radically art from life, as emerged in a letter addressed to her which however did not obtain all Lou's approval:

I divide myself again and again and go flowing off in different directions, – though I would be so happy to move in *one* [river]bed and grow large. For isn't it true, Lou, that this is the way it ought to be; we ought to be one stream and not enter canals and bring water to the fields? Isn't it true, we should hold ourselves together and go rushing on? (qtd. in Torgersen 160)

In a later letter to Lou, written in November, Rilke added also that he had hoped to become more "visible, palpable, actual" with a house, a wife and a child, but it had not happened. What he now most longed for was "to be real among real things" (162). Westhoff, on her part, apparently responded to her husband's inability to provide for her and Ruth with a fatal resignation. From then on, even when they lived in the same place, they continued to live separately, on Rilke's assumption that it was necessary for the sake of their respective arts.

Rilke went for a while to Sweden, as the guest of two painters, and Westhoff accepted the separation and planned to return to Bremen. Despite Rilke's frequent lamentations of not being productive, he began *The Notebooks* and at the beginning of 1904, under the influence of classical art, he wrote the great poem "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes," which is the most important precursor of the *Requiem* for Becker and which will be discussed later on along with the *Requiem* itself.

If, as mentioned above, the Rilkes were not in Paris during Becker's third stay in 1905, when she wrote her husband sarcastic comments about Rilke, they became very important in the moment of Becker's great crisis with her art and marital life. Later that year in fact she had resumed contact first with Westhoff in Worpswede and at Christmas Rilke had visited her studio, and was very impressed by her latest pictures.

Yet it was particularly in 1906, when Becker was planning to leave her husband to go to Paris for the fourth and last time, with the intention of achieving an autonomous way of painting, that Rilke came to play the most important role in convincing her to make that difficult choice. By that time in fact he had become her main confidant, as is evident in the letter dated 17<sup>th</sup> February 1906, written just five days before Becker left for Paris. In it, she had written Rilke to tell him that she would wait for her family to leave for Rome, as she meant to try to come to an understanding with them later on, when they were apart. She also thanked him for saying in a previous letter that he rather liked her painting "of the little child" (*Infant with Its Mother's Hand*, the one Rilke had bought), and the line that follows makes clear another important reason why Becker was distancing herself from Modersohn and Worpswede: "People are happy whenever someone else likes them, especially if there is not too much competition, as in this case" (*Letters and Journals* 383). Rilke could be her ally in this very delicate moment of her life also because he *was not* a painter but a poet, whose poetics coincided very much with hers and who was convinced that to successfully fulfill her art she had to go away from her husband and Worpswede and find her way in Paris. It is therefore no surprise that part of the letter addressed to him – "I feel as if I had been presented with a new life. It's going to be beautiful and rich. If there is something inside me, it is going to be released" (383) – is quite literally evoked in her journal entry dated 24<sup>th</sup> February: "Now I have left Otto Modersohn and am standing between my old life and my new life. I wonder what the new one will be like. And I wonder what will become of me in my new life? Now whatever must be, will be" (384).

The letter to Rilke ends with a few stunning lines which represent the core of Becker's inner division at that time. Her manifest symptom of it, she was clearly aware, was represented by her uncertainty so as to how she should sign her name:

And now, I don't even know how I should sign my name. I'm not Modersohn and I'm not  
Paula Becker anymore either.

I am

Me,

and I hope to become Me more and more. That is surely the goal of all our struggles. (384)

The empty spaces between the lines, and especially the stunning isolation of the pronoun "Me" are incredibly important, as Becker seems to be reclaiming a breathing space where she can feel true to herself. With this respect, it is very interesting to notice how she signed her letters during the year 1906, as she changed signature according to her different addressees. In her letters to her husband she signed first just "Paula" and then "Paula Modersohn" (sometimes in letters to their common friends and acquaintances the signature became "Paula Modersohn-B" as if a little bit of her unmarried self was resurfacing). She equally used "Paula Modersohn" with new important acquaintances of hers – like Hoetger for example – when she wanted to keep some distance and remind herself and others that she was married, while she was just "Paula" for her mother and sisters, or respectively "Your Child" and "Your Sister." The most meaningful variations, however, are to be found in her letters to Rilke, as if she felt free to confide to him that she did not know who she was. She therefore chose not to sign in any conventional way, selecting each time the signature she felt closest to her inner self: "Me," before leaving for Paris, then "Paula Becker," and a half graphic representation, closing a letter dated 31<sup>st</sup> July 1906, "Paula – – –?"

On the other hand, her self-portraits dating from that year mainly depict her as a questioning figure, interrogating the viewer and herself about the nature of one's (as well as hers) identity. In Becker's self-portraits the feature which seems to be gradually dominating is the impossibility of defining one's individuality: her figure can equally evoke Egyptian painting and her own photographic actual image. In the same way, memories and premonitions or future projections converge in her present being. Pictures, like poems, are artistic creations which cannot disregard time as one of their unavoidable elements. What is more, art allows a layering and merging of different times in one unique but multiple time dimension.

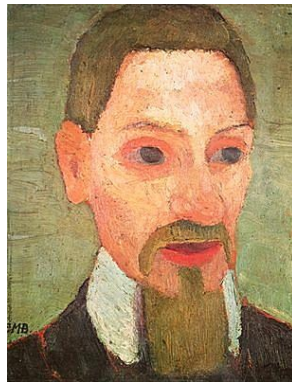
In 1906 Becker's search for her true identity seemed therefore to be one with her artistic research. She felt that only Rilke, who at the time was lecturing on Rodin in a series of German cities, could understand her deepest yearnings. In fact he replied to her and expressed thanks "that you take me with you into your new life, which I am happy to see and take part in as your friend" (qtd. in Torgersen 180). To him Becker's decision to act was evidence that he had been right all along, that she belonged to Paris while Modersohn did not. Her separation from her husband and the Worpswede colony seemed now necessary for more than one reason: due to Modersohn's fear of impregnating her, whom he thought better suited for art than for motherhood, and whom – with a strikingly prescient power – he feared losing in childbirth, their marriage in fact was still unconsummated, as Becker had confided to Westhoff; moreover, Becker deeply desired to get free from the limits that the Worpswede circle too now seemed to impose on her.

All things considered, it is more than likely that Rilke felt so content of Becker's choice also because it finally relieved him of the great pain he had felt on learning of their engagement, while confirming that his idea of the artist as totally devoted to his or her art was absolutely right. After he returned to Paris in March 1906, he tried to do his best to help Becker in her "upward path": as well as lending her some money, he tried to do his best to give her access to the world around Rodin. He therefore invited her – among others – to the unveiling of Rodin's *The Thinker* in front of the Panthéon.

Rilke was also there to share Becker's joy after Hoetger's visit, as on 10<sup>th</sup> May he wrote to her in reaction to her cry of jubilation: "Dear Friend, Life, the truly good life, has taken you by the hand; you have every right to be happy, to your very depths. By the way, I wish you to know that your Rainer Maria Rilke is happy about you and with you" (*Letters and Journals* 529). That same day however Rilke was expelled from 'Rodin's paradise' as he was suddenly sacked by the French Master. The reason given was that Rilke had overstepped his bounds as a secretary by adding a personal postscript to one letter regarding Rodin's business. According to Rodin's biographer Ruth Butler, however, he probably sacked Rilke in a moment of great stress for the unveiling of *The Thinker* and also because he was jealous of his interest in George Bernard Shaw, whose portrait Rodin at that time was trying hard to finish (in Torgersen 189).

Once expelled from Meudon, Rilke went to stay at 29, rue Cassette, where Becker had previously set her studio. In June and July of that same year he wrote many poems that were indebted to the French Master, most of which would be included into the second, expanded edition of the *New Poems*. The following period Becker and Rilke saw each other very often as they were both far from their respective families. Despite the financial difficulties they both had,

their artistic interaction became very profound and productive. Rilke was deep in the writing of his new poems and Becker was at a height of euphoric fulfilment. Partly to support her, he had agreed to sit for his portrait with Becker. She painted it between 13<sup>th</sup> May and 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1906, during a series of mornings where the two of them met in her studio. As none of their meetings is recorded in any document, the portrait of Rilke – and everything it implies – is to be considered the true space of the consummation of their encounter. Not only is it a mirror of Becker's view of him but it was also an occasion for Rilke to look closely at her latest output. Despite the very small size of the picture (ten inches wide and less than thirteen inches tall), which is one of Becker's smallest works, the room of mirrors one has entered to reconstruct their relationship at this point grows much wider.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Rainer Maria Rilke*, 1906

Especially if compared with other Becker's portraits, this one seems contained in a constricted space, as if she wanted to diminish Rilke's stature and also be in absolute control of the process of painting. Moreover, there are some traits of the face – like the big eyes and the wide mouth – which recall Becker's portraits of children, as if she wanted to hint at a certain childishness in the ambitious poet. Yet the posture is firm, and the face occupies nearly all the space of the picture, suggesting somehow a majestic bearing. It seems that Becker was trying to represent her most sincere feelings for her 'Dear Friend,' and as usual a bundle of contradictory aspects entered the picture. According to Torgersen, "Paula painted all she knew of him: weakness and strength, smallness and greatness, what she admired in him and what she did not" (199). With respect to the portrait of Werner Sombart, Rilke's face appears less human and more similar to an ancient mask. The large mouth, like an open wound, seems to give voice to a great cry of woe that was many years later to start off his *Duino Elegies*. Becker seemed therefore to acknowledge in Rilke not only the great poet that he was to become but also a fellow artist who had attained a higher level than any of the other artists she knew had reached. And yet, maybe

precisely for this reason, she saw him as a defenceless and fragile human being who felt the burden of his call and had serious difficulties in coming to terms with outer reality.

Despite the fact that Becker's portrait was not to Rilke's liking, the poem "Self-Portrait 1906," included in the *New Poems*, which he wrote doing a kind of self-ekphrasis<sup>14</sup> – shows however that he felt mirrored in it, or that at least that he could as always correct the image so as to find represented in it his fate as a poet who will speak the truth, as well as his myth of a noble descent:

Certainty there, in the eyelids' shape,  
Of some ancient, long-ennobled race.  
Childhood's anxious blue still in the eyes,  
And here and there, humility, not a fool's  
Yet a servant's though, and feminine.  
The mouth's, a mouth, large and exact,  
Unconvinced, but speaking out for  
Justice. The brow's without guile,  
Gladly gazing down to quiet shadows.

This, its context's barely suspected:  
Neither in adversity nor success  
To gather to precise penetration:  
Yet serious reality's being planned,  
As if with scattered Things, from afar.<sup>15</sup>

Becker's portrait of Rilke is unfinished, as the sittings were interrupted by Modersohn's arrival. Heinrich Wigand Petzet in his book *Das Bildnis des Dichters* reports Westhoff's account of what happened. It is therefore some third-hand information and as such it has to be taken into consideration:

Later, Clara Rilke still remembered clearly Rilke's stories about his portrait sittings, and finally about that second day of June, on which there came a sudden knock on the door of the studio. The painter went to the curtain that served as a "windbreak," looked outside –

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<sup>14</sup> The process in fact is more similar to a kind of poetic *mise en abîme*: Rilke wrote a poem describing a painting which was a portrait of him.

<sup>15</sup> Translated by A. S. Kline, <<http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/German/Rilkemorepoems.htm>>, 2004.

and gave a start. Then she pulled the curtain closed again, turned quickly back to the room, and whispered to Rilke: "It's Modersohn." (qtd. in Torgersen 198)

It is undoubtedly meaningful that there are no direct accounts of this scene, and neither is there one of the exchange Becker and Modersohn had. If one excludes Herma's letter to her mother quoted above, where she tells her of Modersohn's failed attempt to come to a reconciliation with Becker, the reader has to imagine the whole scene. What is certain is that Rilke did not resume his portrait sessions with Becker after Modersohn's arrival, and no one can know for sure if it was due to hard work he was engaged in or to other reasons. As for this part of his relationship with Becker, it is more advisable to stick to the works of art both of them produced and once again see them as mirrors allowing one to read in them more than one possible version of their intercourse. If in visual terms one has the feeling of entering a room of mirrors, the literary process accompanying such an entrance is a sort of *mise en abîme*. Becker and Rilke's respective works, in fact, not only contain references to each other's works but also to other artists' works that are probably meant as a kind of secret code that, consciously or not, they both deemed it necessary to use for very personal reasons which should remain hidden or masked from others, and which of course can be interpreted in more than one way. The space where many of these crossed references will merge is Rilke's *Requiem*, which is yet to come, as it will be written one year after Becker's death. It will be analysed in relation to some other works by Rilke and to three of Becker's stunning self-portraits. It must also be remembered that the very personal reading of *Niels Lyhne* that they shared constituted an inevitable source of inspiration for both of them at that time.

The following months Rilke and Westhoff travelled a good deal, mostly separately but keeping in touch with letters. Until 17<sup>th</sup> November, when Becker wrote a letter meant to arrive for Westhoff's birthday, they did not know that she had resumed her life with Modersohn in Paris:

I shall be returning to my former life but with a few differences. I, too, am different now, somewhat more independent, no longer so full of illusions. This past summer I realized that I am not the sort of woman to stand alone in life. Apart from the eternal worries about money, it is precisely the freedom I have had which was able to lure me away from myself. I would so much like to get to the point where I can create something that is me.

It is up to the future to determine for us whether I'm acting bravely or not. The main thing now is peace and quiet for my work, and I have that most of all when I am at Otto Modersohn's side. (*Letters and Journals* 413)



Curiously enough, Becker did not mention her pregnancy in the letter she wrote Rilke on 10<sup>th</sup> March 1907, but she just told him – in what seems to be a very sad tone – that he should not expect anything from her. In his letter of response to hers, Rilke – referring to when he had asked Becker not to join them on the Belgium coast – told her that he had felt guilty for the injustice he had done her and apologized for having “been inattentive in a moment in our friendship in which I ought not to have been so” (qtd. in Torgersen 214). He blessed her regained union with Modersohn and reassured her by saying that she would certainly not lose the inner freedom she had gained:

[...] you are bearing up bravely and have won the possibility of finding within existing arrangements all the freedom needed by that within you that must not be lost, to become all that it is capable of becoming.

For loneliness is actually an inner condition, and the best and most useful progress is to understand this and live by it.

For the rest, just leave me to my expectations, which are so great that they cannot be disappointed. (qtd. in Torgersen 214)

He was probably only trying to be kind, as the *Requiem* clearly contradicts this assessment. It was a compromise that Becker was accepting, and to Rilke it was never acceptable, as the true artist was required to have a total devotion to his sacred vocation.

Just two weeks before the birth of Mathilde, Becker, who had read the lecture on Rodin that he had published as an essay, wrote him that his writing now seemed to her “more mature, simpler” (424). She found – and she meant it as a compliment – that he was beginning to express himself with “fewer words but which have more to say” (424). The last communication between them is an indirect one, which shows how even so near to Mathilde’s birth, Becker’s head was so full of Paris and French art. As Rilke had been writing Westhoff in Berlin a series of letters about Cézanne (which would later be published as a book), Becker with a certain urgency begged her to bring them to her: “If it were not absolutely necessary for me to be here right now, nothing could keep me away from Paris” (425). Westhoff did bring the letters to her and, as Torgersen reports, she was sure that they were directed more to Becker than to her (218). In fact her painter friend had discovered Cézanne as early as 1900, when he was nearly unknown, and his painting had been influential for her work. As he had earlier done with Jacobsen and Rodin, Rilke now saw Cézanne as an example of the artist who was always working and had reached in his painting the “true poverty” that in the *Requiem* he would later

praise in Becker's gaze. What he wrote about a Cézanne self-portrait on 23<sup>rd</sup> October is also very close to what he could have said of Becker's self-portraits:

How great this watching of his was and how unimpeachably accurate, is almost touchingly confirmed by the fact that, without even remotely interpreting his expression or presuming himself superior to it, he reproduced himself with so much humble objectivity, with the unquestioning, matter-of-fact interest of a dog who sees himself in a mirror and thinks: there's another dog. (qtd. in Torgersen 219)

The fact that in the *Requiem* his appreciation of Becker's self-portraits will be expressed in very similar terms, probably confirms the hypothesis that the letters were written for her. Westhoff went with Ruth to Becker's bedside, and she saw her with her baby. As is also shown in a few photographs, Westhoff found that her friend's expression was of the utmost contentment: "she lay with her little baby girl who was only a few days old – with the happiest smile on her face" (*Letters and Journals* 426).



Paula Modersohn-Becker with her daughter Mathilde, 1907

On All Soul's Day 1907, when Mathilde was born, Rilke was on a speaking tour which took him to Prague, Breslau and Vienna. By then he was a famous poet, and was exposed to the joys and tribulations of fame. He arrived in Venice on 19<sup>th</sup> November, the day before Becker's death and it was there that a telegram from his wife giving him the terrible piece of news reached him. Notwithstanding the terrible pain he must have felt, in the numerous letters he wrote to his new women admirers he mentioned death but always in poetical terms, without referring to Becker once. More than half a year later, and a few months before the writing of the *Requiem*, he would tell the Countess Lili Kanitz-Menar, whose sister had just died, what his relation with the dead was like, and it is not difficult to perceive an allusion to Becker's fate, even though he did not mention her:

And now I stand in such a relation to death, that it terrifies me more in those I have neglected, those who have remained unclarified or portentous for me, than in those whom, when they lived, I have loved with certainty, even if they have only for a moment blazed up in the clarity of that nearness which is accessible to love. (qtd. in Torgersen 232)

It is a hidden confession he needed to entrust to someone, as he could not face the guilty feelings it conveys without transforming them into general statements. This excerpt, however, contains all the reasons why Becker would haunt him after her death, compelling him to write the *Requiem*. Now that she was dead, the room of mirrors was more than necessary for Rilke to relate himself to her burdening presence as a demanding ghost. It is therefore not surprising that the mirror of art was once again mentioned by Rilke in a letter to Westhoff where he praised her bust of Becker, which she had originally made in 1899 but which she had revised after her death: “I thought then how much greatness there must be in your early work, if such a timeless expression can call it up in one, as the mirror image of a thing, when one notices it, immediately calls up the thing itself, even if one does not see it” (qtd. in Torgersen 233).

Rilke’s role would remain fundamental after Becker’s death not only because he wrote the *Requiem* which will contribute so much to keep her memory alive, but also because his opinion was very influential with respect to the publication of his painter friend’s letters and journals. A first limited selection of them had appeared in 1913. Rilke had read them in Paris and had written Becker’s brother, Kurt, that he was so moved by the reading that he wished that a wider selection were released. However, he specified that he did not think *all* of Becker’s writings were worth publishing. In 1916 Becker’s mother then sent him a large packet of the letters and journals, asking him to edit them for book publication. In accordance with his ideal image of Becker which would come out in the *Requiem*, Rilke told Kurt that all her writings preceding 1906 – that is to say when she had decided to leave Modersohn and Worpswede – gave a conventional and untruthful image of her:

Up until February 1906, she somehow insistently clung to being “worthwhile and likeable.” This phrase which she applied to herself could stand as a motto for the entire packet of letters and notebooks. Concerned, indeed, worried, about being charming and gracious, but at the same time fundamentally obligated to being so, indeed promoting these qualities in the face of the frequently coarse conditions of her life, Becker caused a certain compromising nature to take hold of and activate her responses. In the ultimate and absolute

sense, most of what she wrote is not truthful; rather it is adapted to a way of living in which agreeableness and graciousness were the decisive qualities. (qtd. in Torgersen 240-41)

It seems that Rilke had more than one personal reason to express such a hard judgement, which has none of the objectivity that he was so ready to consider important when assessing the value of any artist's work. As the *Requiem* would confirm, it was necessary for him that Becker's effort to do justice both to life and to art should be acknowledged as an error, otherwise his own vision of the artist as a hermit devoted to his work would come loose from its foundation. Becker was not certainly the "accommodating creature" he described, and no one else around her judged her so. In the end, the papers were placed in the hands of Sophie Dorothea Gallwitz, who edited a limited edition of the letters and journals in 1917. The book, which then appeared for the trade in 1919, was incomplete, as many documents had been censored or modified. Yet it became a veritable best-seller, even though at the beginning it was more Becker's personality than her painting which stroke the eye of the readers. The popularity of the book was such that Rilke encountered it again in 1923 in his tower at Muzot in Switzerland. Only then – after he had written the *Duino Elegies* and the *Sonnets to Orpheus* – was he able to read the book "with joy and devotion," as he inscribed on the first page when he returned the book to its owner.

#### *The Requiem: an Access Code to the Relationship Between Becker and Rilke*

Becker's and Rilke's letters and journals, despite their copiousness, present many blank spaces, which are due either to censorship or to the fact that many documents have gone missing. Moreover, there might have been some chapters of their intercourse which had better be left unsaid, to avoid embarrassing other characters of the underlying novel that still waits to be written in full. Rilke's *Requiem* (1908) will therefore be explored in order to single out and decipher all the symbols and images which can be used at least to trace the general story line of the poet's most intimate relation to Becker. Elements of base intrigue and of platonic desire are equally present behind the scenes of this wonderful poem.

When Rilke, on 4<sup>th</sup> November 1908, sent the manuscript of the *Requiem* to his publisher, Anton Kippenberg, he expressly asked him that the poem could remain a small book by itself. Later that day, however, he began another requiem that he thought was part of the same current of work as the one for Paula, and it was dedicated to the young Count Wolf von Kalckreuth, the son of a distinguished painter who was a promising poet and translator but who had shot himself

at the age of nineteen. Even though this second requiem is not as intense as the one for his painter friend (in fact he had never met the young poet to whom he dedicated his second requiem), in both cases Rilke presumptuously saw the death of the artist in question as unnecessary and induced by some mistake that could have been avoided. The role of these stories he told himself was to mediate between life in the historical world, where despite himself he was compelled to live, and the other world of art where – if only he was given the chance – he would have lived exclusively.

Rilke's *Requiem* of course exists in many English versions, here however preference is granted to Adrienne Rich's translation, as her poem in Paula's voice will later on be taken into close consideration.

*Requiem (For a Friend)*

1 I've had my dead, and I have let them go,  
2 have been surprised to see them so content,  
3 so soon at home in being dead, so just,  
4 so different from our expectations. Only you,  
5 you come back; brush me; walk around; you want  
6 to touch something that could resound of you  
7 and betray your presence. Oh, don't take from me  
8 what I'm slowly finding out. I know. You're mistaken  
9 if one single thing here still can move you  
10 to longing and return. We change it:  
11 it doesn't exist, we create its reflection  
12 from our own being, in recognizing it.  
13 I thought you further ahead. I am confused  
14 that *you*, of all of them, have made  
15 the mistake of coming back, you,  
16 who brought about more change than any other woman.  
17 Yes, it stunned us that you died; or rather that  
18 your forceful death interrupted us darkly,  
19 tearing asunder the Until-then from the Since-then:  
20 that concerns us; to put that in its place will be  
21 the long labour we must give to everything.  
22 But that you yourself were stunned, and even now

23 feel terror, where terror has no meaning –  
24 that you lose one moment of your eternity  
25 and enter here, friend, here  
26 where everything's unfinished – that, scattered,  
27 scattered and divided, for the first time, in the Universe,  
28 you failed to understand the opening of Infinity  
29 as you understood each thing here:  
30 that out of the order of the spheres  
31 that already had received you  
32 the wordless pull of some inquietude  
33 draws you down to measured time –  
34 this thought often disturbs my sleep  
35 like a thief breaking in.

36 I could say perhaps you just deign to be here,  
37 come out of generosity, of over-fullness,  
38 because you're so secure, so in-yourself  
39 that you can walk, child-like, unafraid  
40 of dangerous places. But no: you beg.  
41 This cuts me to the bone and rasps there like a saw.  
42 If, as a ghost, you came accusing me,  
43 reproaching me when I retreat at night  
44 into my lungs, into my bowels, into  
45 the last and poorest chambers of my heart,  
46 such a reproach would be less cruel to bear  
47 than this entreaty. What are you begging for?

48 Tell me: shall I travel? Have you somewhere  
49 left behind a thing which is torturing itself  
50 wanting to follow you? Shall I go to a land  
51 you never saw, though it belonged to you  
52 like the other half of your senses?

53 I want to follow  
54 its rivers, go ashore, and study the old customs,  
55 talk with the women in their doorways,  
56 watch when they call their children.  
57 I want to memorize the turning of the soil,  
58 the old labor of fields and meadows.  
59 I'll ask to see their king, I'll bribe their priests

60 to lay me before their highest altar,  
61 then to withdraw, locking the sanctuary door.  
62 And finally, full of knowledge,  
63 I want to simply watch the animals  
64 till the essence of their movement glides into my bones;  
65 I want to resist briefly  
66 where their eyes hold me and slowly let me go,  
67 quietly, without judgment.  
68 I want to ask the gardeners  
69 the names of many flowers, so in the shards  
70 of those beautiful names I can bring back  
71 the traces of hundreds of scents.  
72 And I want to buy fruit, fruit that englobes  
73 the land rising up into the heavens.  
74 For that you understood: the fruits in their ripeness.  
75 You set them in bowls before you,  
76 balanced out their heaviness with color.  
77 And, just like fruit, you saw the women, too,  
78 and saw the children so, pressed from within  
79 to find the contours of their being.  
80 And last of all you saw yourself like fruit,  
81 peeled yourself out of your clothes, carried yourself  
82 to the mirror, entered into it.  
83 Only your looking stayed outside, large,  
84 and did not say: This is me; but This is.  
85 And by the end your look was neither  
86 curious nor possessive, and of such pure poverty  
87 it finally wanted to possess  
88 not even yourself: holy.  
89 I want to recall you so, as you placed yourself  
90 in the mirror, deep into it,  
91 away from everything.  
92 Why have you come back so different?  
93 Why do you contradict yourself?  
94 Are you trying to tell me that in those beads  
95 of amber round your neck was still some heaviness  
96 of weight unknown in the other world

97 of becalmed images?  
98 Why does your posture speak with such foreboding?  
99 What makes you arrange the contours of your body  
100 like the lines of a palm  
101 so I must see them as your fate?  
102 Come here into the candle-light. I'm not afraid  
103 to face the dead. When they return  
104 they have a right to be within our view  
105 like other things. Come here.  
106       Let us be silent for a while.  
107 Look at this rose here on my writing-table:  
108 isn't the light surrounding it as timid  
109 as that which falls around you?  
110 The rose shouldn't be here either.  
111 It should have stayed out in the garden,  
112 or died, should not have been involved with me.  
113 Now it remains like this:  
114 what does my awareness mean to it?  
115       Don't be afraid if now I understand:  
116 Oh, it wells up in me –  
117 I can't help it, I have to understand  
118 even if I die of it –  
119 understand you are here. I understand.  
120 As a blind man encircles with his touch  
121 the surfaces of things and understands – I feel your fate  
122 and cannot name it.  
123       Let us grieve together that you were taken  
124 out of your mirror. Can you still shed tears?  
125 No, you cannot. You transformed  
126 your tears' power and force  
127 into your mature gaze.  
128 You were about to change  
129 your every juice into a strong being  
130 that rises, circles, balanced and unseeing.  
131 And just then chance, your final accident,  
132 pulled you back from your furthest transformation,  
133 back into a world where juices *reign*.



134 Not all at once: pulled just a piece at first.  
135 But when, day after day, around that piece  
136 reality kept growing, making it heavy,  
137 you needed yourself completely.  
138 And so you went and tore yourself away,  
139 painfully, in fragments, from the law,  
140 needing yourself. You took yourself away  
141 and pulled out of your heart's night-warm earth  
142 the still-green seeds from which your death was meant to grow –  
143 yours, your own death, the end of your own life.  
144 And these you ate, the seeds of your death;  
145 Like all the others;  
146 ate its seeds and had their after-taste  
147 of unintended sweetness, had sweet lips,  
148 you, already sweet yourself within your senses.  
149 O let us mourn. Do you remember how your blood  
150 returned from its incomparable circling  
151 with hesitation and reluctance when you  
152 called it back? How it took on again, confused,  
153 the body's brief cycle; how amazed, mistrustful,  
154 it entered the placenta,  
155 suddenly tired from the long journey back?  
156 You drove it on, you pushed it forward,  
157 you wrenched it to the fire as you would drag  
158 a herd of animals to sacrifice;  
159 and you expected it to rejoice.  
160 And finally, you got your way:  
161 it was glad, came up, and gave itself to you.  
162 Used as you were to timelessness,  
163 you thought all this would last only a little while;  
164 but now you were in time again, and time is long.  
165 And time goes on, and time expands,  
166 and time is like a relapse after long illness.  
167 How short your life, when you compare it  
168 with all those hours you sat silently  
169 turning the many forces of your unbounded future  
170 upon the new seed in you

171 which became fate again.  
172 O painful toil, O toil beyond all strength!  
173 Day after day you did the labor, dragged yourself there,  
174 pulled the lovely weaving out of the loom  
175 and used all your threads differently. And finally,  
176 you still had courage to celebrate.  
177 For when it was done, you wanted  
178 to be praised like a sick child for swallowing  
179 the bitter-sweet liquid which might cure you.  
180 So you rewarded yourself: for you were still too far  
181 from all else, even then;  
182 No one could have guessed the right reward  
183 for you. But you knew. You sat up  
184 in child-bed, and before you was a mirror  
185 that gave all back to you.  
186 That was all *you*, all *outside*,  
187 and inside it just illusion, the lovely illusion  
188 of any woman trying on her jewels,  
189 combing her hair in a new way.  
190       And so you died as women used to die  
191 in olden times, old-fashionedly you died  
192 in the warm house, the death  
193 of women after birth, who want to close themselves  
194 again but can't, because  
195 that darkness they have also given birth to  
196 comes back again, and prods, and enters them.  
197       Wouldn't it have been better to have found  
198 wailing women, those who mourn for money,  
199 whom one can pay to sob all night  
200 when all is quiet? Rituals, come back!  
201 We are poor in rituals. Everything  
202 is talked into extinction.  
203 That's why you come here, dead,  
204 so we can make up for all the lamentation  
205 left undone. Can you hear me mourning?  
206 I'd like to cast my voice like a cloth  
207 over the shards of your death

208 and tear it into shreds, till everything I say  
209 walks freezing in the tatters of this voice:  
210 if mourning were enough.  
211 But now I accuse: not Him who took you from yourself  
212 (I can't single him out, he's like them all)  
213 but in him I accuse all of them: Man.  
214       If somewhere deep in me is rising  
215 a sense I'm unaware of yet  
216 of having been a child  
217 perhaps the purest childness of my childhood:  
218 I don't want to know it.  
219 I want to make an angel of it, without looking,  
220 and hurl it into the front rank of howling angels  
221 who keep reminding God.  
222       For this suffering has gone on too long,  
223 no one can bear it, it's too hard for us,  
224 the twisted pain caused by a false love  
225 which counts on getting-off through lapse of time,  
226 through habit; claims to be just,  
227 although unjustly grown.  
228 Where is the man with right of ownership?  
229 Who can own what can't possess itself,  
230 what can, from time to time,  
231 just joyfully catch and fling itself away  
232 like a child playing with a ball?  
233 Does the sea-captain still possess the figurehead  
234 at his prow, when the mysterious lightness  
235 of her god-like self lifts her high into the bright sea-wind?  
236 No more can one of us call back the woman  
237 who does not see us any more,  
238 who walks away from us as by a miracle,  
239 on a narrow strip of her own being, without mishap;  
240 unless guilt were indeed his calling and his pleasure.  
241       For *this* is guilt, if anything is guilt:  
242 not to enlarge a loved one's freedom  
243 with all the freedom we find within ourselves.  
244 Where we love, there can be only this: let go of one another;

245 for holding-on need not be learned, it's natural to us.  
246 Are you still there? Which corner shelters you?  
247 You know so much of this, could do so much  
248 as you walked along, open to everything,  
249 like a day breaking.  
250 Women suffer:  
251 to love means to be alone, and artists  
252 suspect sometimes in their work  
253 that loving means transforming.  
254 You started both: and both will now  
255 become distorted by your fame,  
256 which takes them from you.  
257 Oh, you were remote from any fame.  
258 You were inconspicuous, had drawn your beauty  
259 inside you, gently, as one takes in a flag  
260 on a grey workday morning.  
261 You wanted nothing but a long piece of work,  
262 which remains unfinished, in spite of all,  
263 not finished.  
264 If you're still here, if in this darkness  
265 there is some place where your spirit  
266 vibrates acutely with the shallow sound waves  
267 set pulsing by a voice alone at night  
268 in the air of a high-ceilinged room –  
269 then hear me, help me.  
270 See, we slide back, not knowing when,  
271 from our advances, into something we don't mean,  
272 getting caught there as in a dream  
273 in which we die without awakening.  
274 No one goes further. It can happen  
275 to anyone who has lifted his blood high  
276 into a long piece of work – he can't  
277 sustain it there, it falls  
278 by its own gravity, and fails.  
279 For somewhere there is an old enmity  
280 between life and the great work.  
281 Help me recognize it, help me say it.

282 Do not come back: if you can bear it,  
283 stay dead, with the dead.  
284 The dead have things to do.  
285 But help me, still, some way that won't distract you,  
286 as what is furthest off can sometimes help me:  
287 within myself.

1908

*Translated by Lilly Engler and Adrienne Rich.*

*“torna, non tornare più  
qui, nella nostalgia dei viventi, torna,  
non tornare, ritorna, mai, più.”*

*Milo de Angelis, Tema dell'addio*

The very beginning of the *Requiem* makes it clear that at least one great difference between Paula and the other dead lies in the fact that she – in Rilke's view – had made the “mistake of coming back” (15) while all the other dead were content with their condition. Long after finishing the poem, Rilke said to Katherina Kippenberg, the wife of his publisher and author of two books about him, that “She [Paula] is the only one of the dead who burdens me” (Torgersen 9). What is certain is that, exactly as in a ghost-story, the poet is haunted by Paula's ghost, while he has been able to let the other dead go. Yet, as Torgersen says, “the ghost-story [the poem] tells is strangely incomplete” (8). The *Requiem* does not say why she haunted him so, or what unfinished business *he* might have had with *her*. The use of the personal pronouns and possessive adjectives does not help in clearing up Rilke's relationship with Becker. In fact, the first person ‘I,’ with which the poem begins, frequently changes to the plural ‘we,’ apparently without any reason. Let us take the beginning to see more closely the shift from ‘I’ to ‘we’:

I've had my dead, and I have let them go,  
have been surprised to see them so content,  
so soon at home in being dead, so just,  
so different from **our** expectations. Only you,  
you come back; brush me; walk around; you want  
to touch something that could resound of you

and betray your presence. Oh, don't take from **me**  
what **I**'m slowly finding out. **I** know. You're mistaken  
if one single thing here still can move you  
to longing and return. **We** change it:  
it doesn't exist, **we** create its reflection  
from **our** own being, in recognizing it.

**I** thought you further ahead. **I** am confused  
that *you*, of all of them, have made  
the mistake of coming back, you,  
who brought about more change than any other woman.  
Yes, it stunned **us** that you died; or rather that  
your forceful death interrupted **us** darkly,  
tearing asunder the Until-then from the Since-then:  
that concerns **us**; to put that in its place will be  
the long labour **we** must give to everything. (vv. 1-21)

Rilke's vision of the poet, who should transcend himself and get out of himself in order to convey objective and universal truths, could explain a sort of distance that he wanted to interpose between himself as Paula's friend and the 'we' of the poet as part of mankind. Even though this could be his programmatic intent, it seems that there is a lot more at stake, especially if one considers that the *Requiem* ends with an imploration to Paula's ghost in the first person. Rilke, who had reproached her for coming back, and for begging for something from him that he could not understand, then ended the poem by begging himself, asking Paula to teach him how to avoid the "old enmity / between life and the great work" (vv. 280-81), precisely because he thought that her death had been caused by that conflict.

The fact that Paula's ghost kept haunting him is not only due to their intense personal and artistic intercourse in Worpswede and, even more, in Paris in the following years. It seems that Paula's ghost could not refrain from coming back to Rilke because, according to his view, she did not seem to have completed in her life the development which Rilke himself, more than his painter friend, considered necessary to become a true artist: "I thought you further ahead. I am confused /  
that *you*, of all of them, have made / the mistake of coming back, you, / who brought about more change than any other woman" (vv. 13-17).

The shift from the 'I' to the 'we' could therefore also be explained as Rilke's unconscious device to control his fear of losing his absolute devotion to art and yield to a "false love" which

would surely undermine the artist's "long piece of work." Should that happen, the poet would lose his privileged relationship with death, the revealing death, and would be tempted to fall – or rather to plunge – into life again. The price for this mistake would be the highest in Rilke's opinion: the loss of his work of art, of his existence as a poet, that is to say everything in his eyes.

As well as the shift of the personal pronouns, one can notice also a contrast between two temporal dimensions: the "Until-then" and the "Since-then" (v. 19). Yet such a difference concerns the 'we,' which maybe here refers to Rilke and the people who loved Paula. It is worth recalling that in the 'golden age' of the Worspwede artists' colony, the painters – and respective spouses – defined themselves collectively as 'The Family.' Yet, as emerges in the following lines, Rilke himself as a poet is more interested in is another temporal contrast:

But that you yourself were stunned, and even now  
feel terror, where terror has no meaning –  
that you lose one moment of your eternity  
and enter here, friend, here  
where everything's unfinished – that, scattered,  
scattered and divided, for the first time, in the Universe,  
you failed to understand the opening of Infinity  
as you understood each thing here:  
that out of the order of the spheres  
that already had received you  
the wordless pull of some inquietude  
draws you down to measured time –  
this thought often disturbs my sleep  
like a thief breaking in. (vv. 22-35)

The *Requiem* shows that Rilke had been troubled not only by Becker's death but also by her life. The story between them could be summarized as such: Rilke had been in love with her once, but she had married Modersohn, a man he considered unworthy of her. Rilke therefore had married the woman who was Becker's best friend, Clara Westhoff. Later on, in their friendship, Rilke had finally been able to appreciate Becker's art, and recognize her remarkable achievements as a painter. Yet, as the *Requiem* shows, he never escaped a sense of having failed her. Moreover, she had only partially embodied his absolute ideal of art, in whose name marriage and familial obligations had to be transcended. When she had decided to leave her

husband, Becker had seemed to him on the right path, and he had even conspired in her departure, but he blamed her death on her return, and in the *Requiem* – where Paula is there just like a ghost which cannot counter his opinion – he tried to reaffirm what he thought would have been right for her.

In the poem Rilke seems to tell her that she was wrong with a certain decision: the thought of Paula coming back disturbs his sleep “like a thief breaking in” (v. 35). Her presence sounds like an unwelcome invasion and the poet is troubled in particular by the fact that she is begging for something:

I could say perhaps you just deign to be here,  
come out of generosity, of over-fullness,  
because you're so secure, so in-yourself  
that you can walk, child-like, unafraid  
of dangerous places. But no: you beg.  
This cuts me to the bone and rasps there like a saw.  
If, as a ghost, you came accusing me,  
reproaching me when I retreat at night  
into my lungs, into my bowels, into  
the last and poorest chambers of my heart,  
such a reproach would be less cruel to bear  
than this entreaty. What are you begging for? (vv. 36-47)

This passage is particularly interesting as Becker was often reproached for being too proud and rarely begged for anything from anyone. Maybe it is a sort of mild revenge on the part of Rilke, as if on one hand Becker responded deeply to him, on the other she always went the way of resistance. It must be said that probably this is also the reason why he considered her a more essential fellow artist than his wife (and Becker's friend) Clara. This is evident in lines 15-16, where Rilke says to her “you, / who brought about more change than any other woman.” In his vocabulary, ‘transformation’ is the highest praise for the artist, who can create only by transforming. As Paula *was* a such a creator, she should never have gone back to her family, and now she should not come back to him.

Paula now belongs to eternity or Infinity – the time that for Rilke was unique to poetry, where everything is still whole – and she comes back not so much to Finite Time but to the Unfinished, as she does not seem to appreciate such a wholeness. This is why she still feels human feelings. From this point of view she is the opposite of the mythological figure of



Eurydice, of whom Rilke felt the need to talk in his famous poem “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes.” He wrote it at the beginning of 1904, when he was much under the influence of classical art, and it is rightly considered by Torgersen “the single most important precursor of the Requiem” (163).

### *Paula versus Eurydice*

To understand Rilke’s fascination with the figure of Eurydice, as well as his identification with Paula, it is useful to know a few details of his biography. Born on December 4, 1875, into the dominant German-speaking minority in Prague, then a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Rilke was the son of an unfortunate marriage. His father, Joseph Rilke, was a military man who retired after only ten years of service, disappointing his wife Sophie, who had dreamed of rising from her middle-class origins. Rilke’s fascination with nobility seems to have been an extension of the fantasies with which his mother consoled herself in her disappointment. There is however one event that explains some traits of Rilke’s complex personality: a year before his birth, his mother had borne a daughter who lived only a few weeks. When Rainer (whose name at first was René) was born, it seems that at least in part as compensation, Sophie clothed him in dresses, encouraging him to play for her the role of the lost daughter. Rilke later on constructed his identity as a poet around these games, which also helped to define what in his eyes was his extraordinary relation to women. From a poetic point of view, the buried connection to his dead sister seems evident in the recurrent subject of dead girls in his first poems.

As chance would have it, not only was Becker born just two months after Rilke, but in a letter to him dated 25<sup>th</sup> October 1900, she confided to him what was the one event which had scarred her as a child. After advising Rilke to go and see her cousin (Maidli) and aunt who lived in Berlin – where Rilke was at that moment – she wrote:

Maidli’s older sister, when she was eleven years old, was playing with six other children (I was one of them), and was buried in a large sand pit near Dresden. The rest of us were able to save ourselves. [The death of] this child was the first real event in my life. Her name was Cora and she grew up in Java. We got to know each other when we were nine years old and loved each other very much. She was mature and intelligent. The first glimmer of self-awareness entered my life with her. At the moment of her death, Maidli and I were hiding our faces in the sand so as not to see the horrible thing that we sensed was happening; I said to her, “You’re now my legacy.” (*Letters and Journals* 203)

It seems that Becker and Rilke were not just united by an early and so intimate experience of death but also by a sense of identification with someone who had disappeared from this earth – and maybe a sense of guilt at having survived, having escaped death. It is in accordance with these considerations and the writing of the *Requiem* itself – as well as of course with Rilke’s mythology of himself as a poet – that one can interpret his queer habit as a young poet of spending All Souls’ Day in the cemeteries of Prague, “writing death-tinged poems,” as Torgersen reports (13).

With reference to the episode narrated by Becker to Rilke, it seems very proper to quote an observation by the Russian poet Joseph Brodsky in his wonderful essay “Ninety Years Later,” entirely dedicated to “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes” by Rilke. After saying that the poem is about estrangement, Brodsky explains that it is a journey in the netherworld undertaken by the first traveller, Orpheus, “the ur-poet.” Then the author tries to identify the origins of such a round-trip story: “They have to do, I believe, with the fear of being buried alive, sufficiently common even in our own time” (Brodsky 378).

In the first lines of the poem, Rilke likens the netherworld’s domain to an abandoned mine:

That was the strange unfathomed mine of souls.  
And they, like silent veins of silver ore,  
were winding through its darkness [...] (379)<sup>16</sup>

What Brodsky observes in the exposition, is the substantial emphasis on colour, which in his opinion is influenced by the Worpswede painters:

Its bleached pastel tones of gray, of opaque porphyry, all the way down to Orpheus’ own blue mantle are straight out of the Worpswede-soft bed of Northern expressionism, with its subdued, washed-out sheets wrinkled by the pre-Raphaelite-cum-Art-Nouveau aesthetic idiom at the turn of the century. (388)

What is very strange is that later on, after quoting the first two stanzas, Brodsky affirms that, despite Rilke’s work as a secretary for Rodin and his passion for Cézanne, the poet remained fundamentally “a stranger to the visual arts, and his taste for them was incidental” (390).

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<sup>16</sup> Brodsky here quotes from an English translation of Rilke’s poem that he considers not only very good but also – precisely for the fact that it *is* a translation, particularly useful for his analysis of the poem: “Translation is the father of civilization, and as translations go, this is a particularly good one. It’s taken from *Rainer Maria Rilke: Selected Works, Volume II: Poetry*, published in 1976 by the Hogarth Press in London” (381). This translation was done by J. B. Leishman.

Considering the fact that little for Rilke was incidental, and how careful and attentive he was in selecting the artistic expressions that were interesting and useful to nourish his identity as a poet, it seems unlikely that his use of an “anticlimactic palette” – as Brodsky defines it – is fortuitous. Just two years earlier, in 1902, Rilke had written his monograph about the Worpswede painters, and therefore he was used to describing their paintings by making use of his poetic taste. Moreover, he had been exchanging a lot of letters with Becker, and discussing painting and poetry with her. It is therefore more likely that, in setting the scene for his exposition, he had not necessarily some particular pictures in his mind, but that he was somehow painting verbally the landscape that he needed in order to tell the story of Eurydice, Orpheus and Hermes.

The first stanza goes on to describe a landscape which is abstract and concrete at the same time. Rilke apparently felt that it was the proper way to represent the realm of death as it is experienced by someone like Orpheus, who is still alive but is a poet – and therefore ready to face the dark side of life: its end.

[...] Between roots  
welled up the blood that flows on to mankind,  
like blocks of heavy porphyry in the darkness.  
Else there was nothing red.

But there were rocks  
and ghostly forests. Bridges over voidness  
and that immense, gray, unreflecting pool  
that hung above its so far distant bed  
like a gray rainy sky above the landscape.  
And between meadows, soft and full of patience,  
appeared the pale strip of the single pathway,  
like a long line of linen laid to bleach. (388-89)

Here “the poem ceases to be a painting and becomes a story” (392), Brodsky says, and Rilke can start moving his figures. As far as the structure of the poem is concerned, opening with the setting of the scene and then prompting the action, “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes” is quite traditional. What completely breaks with the convention is the treatment of the subject. Rilke in fact is reinterpreting and transforming the myth, which after his poem will not be the same anymore, and will be rewritten by other important writers mostly according to his new version.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> See the introduction by Maria Grazia Ciani to the volume *Orfeo. Variazioni sul Mito* (2004).

Ovid narrates that Orpheus was so grief-stricken by his wife's death, that he implored the gods of the netherworld to let him have Eurydice back. The gods were so moved by his song that they called Eurydice, who came up from Hades. The pact with the gods was that Orpheus could have his wife back, as long as he took her by the hand without turning back to look at her before they had left Hades. However, he was so anxious to see her, that he turned and Eurydice started sliding back into the netherworld. She tried to cling to her husband with all her forces, but there was nothing to do: they had to say goodbye and she fell again into Hades. Love, as this myth represents it, is the greatest force of all and can attempt to defy death, but it is also the most disruptive force when it is not deprived of the sense of possession of one's beloved.

In Rilke's version, Orpheus, a "slender man in the blue mantle," is waiting for Eurydice on that "single pathway," but she will not come alone. Hand in hand with a third character, Hermes – "the god of faring and of distant message" – she comes. Orpheus is so impatient that he is "no longer conscious of the lightsome lyre," a detail which is very important to notice, especially if one considers that poetry for Rilke counted above anything else. Eurydice in his poem treads the earth with a peculiar step: "her paces circumscribed by lengthy shroudings, / uncertain, gentle, and without impatience" (384-85). By describing her "without impatience," Rilke already hints at a transformation she has undergone: she does not seem to be part of the mortals anymore, she is already one with the gods. There is one single sentence in the poem that makes this clear: on the road ascending into life she wanders all wrapt in herself, and – adds Rilke – "her deadness / was filling her like a fullness" (385). In other words, death is not a condition to be despised but seems to be a source of interior peace and knowledge. Or rather, only thanks to death can one attain a state of selflessness which is difficult, if not impossible, to reach in life. Orpheus too, being a poet, would like to share this condition, were it not that – as he is alive – he cannot but imperfectly fulfil it. Yet Rilke here starts opening for the reader the orphic mystery which is frightening because, as Blanchot says, it goes beyond rationality:

Il faut que ma mort me devienne toujours plus intérieure: qu'elle soit comme ma forme invisible, mon geste, le silence de mon secret le plus caché. J'ai quelque chose à faire pour la faire, j'ai tout à faire, elle doit être mon œuvre, mais cette œuvre est au delà de moi, elle est cette partie de moi que je n'éclaire pas, que je n'atteins pas et dont je ne suis pas maître.  
(Blanchot 160)

From this point of view, Eurydice is not only Orpheus' dead wife whom he wants to be rejoined to, but also the extreme point towards which his duty as a poet inevitably attracts him: the final impossibility of his work. The myth seems to say that going down in the netherworld is

necessary to accomplish the work of art, but such depth cannot be faced directly, without submitting to a limit which separates humanity from divinity: the taboo for Orpheus of turning around to see Eurydice until they are ascended to the earth.

The following comparison to describe Eurydice's new state is not only particularly moving for the reader but also illuminating for the mysterious content of "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes" and the blurred image of Paula that comes out of the *Requiem*:

Full as a fruit with sweetness and with darkness  
was she with her great death, which was so new  
that for the time she could take nothing in. (412)

The imagery of pregnancy combined with Eurydice's apparent total withdrawal is highly mysterious and makes one wonder about her state, "her great death, which was so new." Yet if one looks more closely, Eurydice is the perfect embodiment of Rilke's idea that death should be carried inside as part of one's life. The more one is able to face this dark side of life, and the more life will disclose its obscure but extremely powerful forces. Rilke said: "Qui ne consent à l'effrayant de la vie, qui ne la salue pas avec des cris d'allégresse, celui-là n'entre jamais en possession des puissances indicibles de notre vie, il reste en marge, il n'aura été, quand tombe la décision, ni un vivant ni un mort" (qtd. in Blanchot 165).

As Brodsky observes, Rilke does not say anything about the heroine's physical beauty, as a more traditional rewriting of the myth would have required. The fascination that Eurydice exerts on the reader as well as on Orpheus does not therefore derive from her exceptionality as a beautiful woman but rather from an effect very subtly described by Brodsky:

This is Rilke at his best. He is a poet of isolation, and isolating the subject is his forte. Give him a subject and he will turn it immediately into an object, take it out of its context, and go for its core, inhabiting it with extraordinary erudition, intuitions, and instinct for allusion. The net result is that the subject becomes his, colonized by the intensity of his attention and imagination. Death, somebody else's especially, certainly warrants this approach. (414-15)

Curiously enough the "isolation of the subject" that is turned into an object, recalls Cézanne's composition of images in his paintings, which Becker promptly applied to her pictures after being so impressed by the French master's work. The encounter with Cézanne's pictures for Rilke was a turning point in later years, in autumn 1907, just a short time before Becker's death,

when he wrote a series of letters to his wife that were later collected under the title of *Letters on Cézanne*.

The following stanza further depicts Eurydice as a very special woman, clearly coinciding with Rilke's (maybe more than Opheus') ideal image of a woman, which is related to the goddess Venus:

She had attained a new virginity  
and was intangible; her sex had closed  
like a young flower at the approach of evening,  
and her pale hands had grown so disaccustomed  
to being a wife that even the slim god's  
endlessly gentle contact as he led her  
disturbed her like a too great intimacy. (385)

The traditional myth is here overcome by Rilke's personal myth of the woman as eternally capable of becoming virgin again after each sexual encounter. Eurydice seems to be complete in herself, with no need for Orpheus, as – like all gods – she is exempted by the author from the standard principles of causality binding mortals. She is more alive than other women, precisely because she *is* dead. She is forever and ever renovating herself because her sex can close “like a flower at the approach of evening.” According to Brodsky's interpretation which seems very well placed, Rilke, in this poem, is “practically promoting Eurydice to the divine status, and infinity to sensual pleasure” (416).

It will be worth remembering those observations in comparison with the *Requiem* and the figure of Paula as a ghost haunting Rilke, and therefore not fulfilled by her status as a departed, but rather disquieted by eternity. Moreover, this description will come to mind when looking closely at one of Becker's most famous and shocking paintings, *Self-Portrait on Her Sixth Wedding Anniversary*, which she did two years after Rilke had completed “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes” and which will be later analysed in relation to the *Requiem*.

The end of the stanza signals a particular effect of Eurydice's death that Orpheus did not seem to expect: oblivion. Eurydice is so “disaccustomed / to being a wife” that even the contact with the god disturbs her. Rilke avoids making Hermes a possible object of Orpheus' jealousy. What seems more important at this stage of the story is that the narrator and Orpheus' perspective on Eurydice now are totally divergent: Orpheus is grief-stricken by his wife's death, and would like to have her back, while the narrator sees in her death a further development of

her being that he considers favourable for her and for himself. As Brodsky says: “our poet is far more interested in the forces pulling the heroine away from life than in those that might bring her back to it. In this, however, he doesn’t contradict the myth but extend its vector” (417).

The query that now should be posed, is what personal reason could Rilke have to rewrite the myth of Eurydice according to this unconventional vision? Brodsky cannot detect it but perceives that the following lines certainly suggest a personal response to the myth on Rilke’s part:

Even now she was no longer that blonde woman  
who’d sometimes echoed in the poet’s poems,  
no longer the broad couch’s scent and island,  
nor yonder man’s possession any longer. (385)

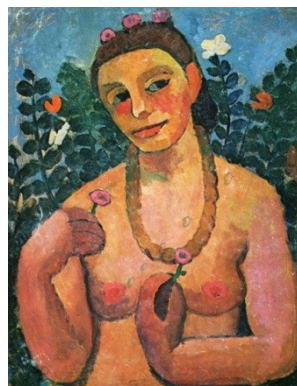
One cannot tell for sure that the blonde woman is a reference to Paula Modersohn-Becker, and yet Torgersen, at the beginning of his cross biography, following the track of Rilke at his first encounter with Clara and Paula, reports: “As his [Rilke’s] journal progresses, it becomes clear that one of them, ‘the blonde painter,’ had caught his fancy in a particularly stimulating way” (26). A further confirmation of a possible identification of Eurydice with Paula is contained in the line “nor yonder man’s possession any longer.”

Going back to the *Requiem*, in fact, when Rilke starts inserting Paula’s paintings, he clearly refers to her still lifes, but the image of the fruits immediately shifts and comes to define Paula herself. Rilke is ready to acknowledge Paula’s ‘ripeness’ as an artist. For him it meant that the artist had to become so real as to be a selfless thing among other things, capable of a pure gaze. His painter friend had succeeded in this, as the following passage of the *Requiem* says:

For that you understood: the fruits in their ripeness.  
You set them in bowls before you,  
balanced out their heaviness with color.  
And, just like fruit, you saw the women, too,  
and saw the children so, pressed from within  
to find the contours of their being.  
And last of all you saw yourself like fruit,  
peeled yourself out of your clothes, carried yourself  
to the mirror, entered into it.

Only your looking stayed outside, large,  
and did not say: This is me; but This is.  
And by the end your look was neither  
curious nor possessive, and of such pure poverty  
it finally wanted to possess  
not even yourself: holy. (vv. 74-88)

Coherently with his fascination with mirrors and reflections, where Rilke says “you saw yourself like fruit ...,” he was probably thinking of one of the many nude self-portraits that Becker painted: *Self-Portrait as Half-Nude with Amber Necklace* (1906).



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait as Half-Nude with Amber Necklace*, 1906

In this painting, behind the figure there is a still life of flowers, and “the sense of flesh as fruit [...] is summoned and the painting comes to resemble most markedly some of the still lifes of fruit that Paula was painting at the same time” (Torgersen 192). The bright red of the lips, cheeks and nipples gives a touch of eroticism to the painting, but the painter’s gaze is pure, impersonal and turned inward. Besides being typically female, such a gaze inevitably recalls the one “neither curious nor possessive” mentioned in the *Requiem*.

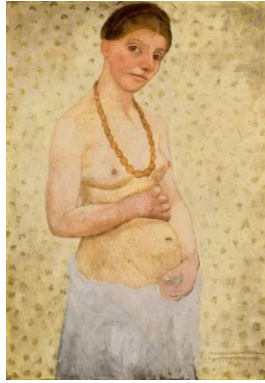
It seems that Rilke in the *Requiem* wanted to fix Paula in this image: a fruitful life seems to be everywhere immanent, and she is addressing a confident gaze to the viewer. Moreover, she is one with nature, like a flower among flowers, nearly included in the natural surroundings, as the light contours of her figure hardly mark her separateness from the rest of the image. It is a great piece of art, where Paula achieved a deep representation of her unity with her inner nature. A sense of fulfillment emanates from this picture, and Rilke chose to remember Paula framed in that freedom, when he – as in a passage of *Niels Lyhne* they both knew so well – loved her most: “I want to recall you so, as you placed yourself / in the mirror, deep into it, / away from everything” (89-91).



Yet one would say that in the *Requiem* there is something that escapes the poet's understanding:

Why have you come back so different?  
Why do you contradict yourself?  
Are you trying to tell me that in those beads  
of amber round your neck was still some heaviness  
of weight unknown in the other world  
of becalmed images?  
Why does your posture speak with such foreboding?  
What makes you arrange the contours of your body  
like the lines of a palm  
so I must see them as your fate? (vv. 92-101)

Paula haunts him in the poem because she refuses to reappear with the image that Rilke selected as her best one. In this passage of the *Requiem* there is a clue – “those beads of amber round your neck” – which clearly indicates what other picture he was referring to. It is the *Self-Portrait on Her Sixth Wedding Anniversary*, which was done on her sixth wedding anniversary, May 25<sup>th</sup> 1906, that is to say in the middle of Rilke's portrait sittings. The picture can be dated so precisely because Becker wrote on it the inscription “I painted this at thirty years of age on my sixth anniversary, 1906” (Torgersen 193). She also initialled the inscription “P.B.,” that is to say “Paula Becker,” her maiden name, which meant that at that moment she stood outside her marriage. As one can infer from the inscription, the picture does not represent its author mirrored or transfigured in an ideal world of art, but it is prompted by a family occasion (Becker's wedding anniversary). The subject, therefore, is not portrayed for its beauty or for its metaphysical or divine relevance, but just as a human being – and a woman to be precise – caught in her link with time. The breasts are not erotic as they were in the *Self-Portrait as Half-Nude with Amber Necklace* but they are simply a woman's breasts, and the abdomen is depicted as a part of her body deprived of any esthetical relevance. Becker's long upturned nose, together with her closed mouth, maybe hint to a faint, perhaps ironic smile. Moreover, the painter blushes as a shy young woman could do in response to half-nakedness in the presence of another. If the inscription refers to the more manifest temporal connection of the wedding anniversary, the subject's hands and gaze seem rather to point at a more symbolic reference to time.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait on Her Sixth Wedding Anniversary*, 1906

In the painting Becker is draped only at the hips and her abdomen – framed by her hands – is so prominent as to indicate a state of real (or wished for or just dreamed) pregnancy. Her only adornment is the amber necklace which also appeared in the *Self-Portrait as Half-Nude with Amber Necklace*. Yet, if one compares the two self-portraits, not only in the *Self-Portrait on Her Sixth Wedding Anniversary* is the body paradoxically slenderer, but the face conveys a much more ambiguous feeling, which cannot be easily interpreted. Far from emanating pure contentment, it seems rather to indicate a mixed and questioning expression: Becker in fact seems to interrogate herself and the viewer about the nature of her state. One should remember that the age of thirty was the deadline that she had imposed herself for “becoming someone,” as she had obsessively written in her letters and journals. On the other hand, as she had confided to Westhoff, she had lived unmarried for six years now, and she must have been reconsidering her wish to have a child.

If this is widely esteemed one of Becker’s most striking paintings, it is not only because she portrayed herself as pregnant when she clearly was not, but rather because, as Anne Higonnet says, no one before her had dared “to connect the natural creation of babies with the artistic creation of paintings” (“Making Babies, Painting Bodies” 15). In other words, in this wonderful work of art Becker had tried to give voice to her personal dilemma that was consuming her so much at this point of her life: how can a woman wish to bear the fruit that is a child *and* the fruit that is art?

That is why this picture troubled Rilke to the point that he was haunted by Paula’s ghost which appeared to him in the *Requiem* with a different countenance from the one he would have liked to superimpose on her in his memory. While Becker had tried to bear a child *and* achieve her art, Rilke thought that she had committed the great mistake which had cost her life: the two wishes could not coexist, but necessarily excluded one another. Yet Rilke seems to be so anguished in the *Requiem* also because somehow he felt personally addressed, as if he were the

only one who could read Paula's fate inscribed in the painting, and decipher the secret message her hands are pointing at. Maybe the amber beads around Paula's neck, which he finds conveying "some heaviness / of weight unknown in the other world / of becalmed images" can open another layer of references to the reader, who can at least try to understand why they are described by Rilke as the emblem of failure.

Becker in the *Requiem* is visiting Rilke in a double shape: as a ghost and as a painted image. Her appearance in the poem therefore is also to be considered an example of *ekphrasis*, and as such it is no surprise that the poet feels relieved *and* frightened by Paula's picture coming back to him as, according to Heffernan,

ekphrasis is a mode of writing in which the male poet ambivalently responds to an image typically viewed as female: an image that excites both "ekphrastic hope" – the desire for union – and the "ekphrastic fear" of being silenced, petrified and thus unmanned by the Medusan "other" (Mitchell, "Ekphrasis"). [...]

This Medusa model of ekphrasis can be plausibly invoked wherever the conflict between word and image demonstrably becomes a conflict between male authority and the female power to enchant, subvert, or threaten it. (108)

Moreover, the revelations contained in the poem take the form of the *mise en abîme*: the *Requiem* refers to Becker's self-portraits and her self-portraits hint at *Niels Lyhne*. Nearly at the end of the novel in fact Niels and his friend Erik's wife, Fennimore, have become lovers and are seeing each other frequently as Erik, now a failed painter and a drunkard, often stays out for his drunken escapades. One night Fennimore is alone in the house and is waiting for Niels, who has promised to come as soon as the moon comes out and there is light enough for him to avoid the holes in the ice out on the fjord. This is how Jacobsen describes Fennimore while she impatiently paces up and down waiting for the moon to come out:

She was humming, and both her hands were holding on to the pale yellow necklace of large amber beads around her neck, and whenever she lost her balance on the red stripe, she would stop humming but continue to hold on to the necklace. Perhaps she was devising a charm from her steps, telling herself that if she could just walk so and so many times across the floor without stepping off the stripe and without releasing her grip, then Niels would come. (Jacobsen 155)

Niels however does not arrive and Fennimore receives a telegram saying that Erik is dead: the horses of his carriage had bolted and he was flung headfirst into a wall. Fennimore feels so guilty and starts hating Niels, who goes wandering alone abroad and dies in extreme loneliness. According to Torgersen, the hidden reference to *Niels Lyhne* does not necessarily imply that Rilke and Becker were lovers too, as for Rilke “it might well be less important that such consummation take place in the outer world, in Paula’s studio or his apartment, rather than in the mirror of *Niels Lyhne* or of Paula’s painting” (198). What is certain is that both of them were striving to attain their ideal of art and had not found in the respective marriages the sense of unity and completeness that they expected. Such a deep exchange involving their art could in fact be the complementary part they still lacked to feel whole. Their intercourse however was interrupted by Modersohn’s arrival, after which Rilke made himself scarce. He apologized to Becker by giving the reason that he had entered one of his periods of extraordinary productivity, and in fact – whether it was an excuse to avoid her or not – it was true.

As for Paula’s part, what is certain is that in the *Requiem* she is the mouthpiece of a contradiction: there is something in her which refuses to become the embodiment of the “holy look” that Rilke considers an unfailing quality for the artist:

[...] Your transformed  
your tears’ power and force  
into your mature gaze.  
You were about to change  
your every juice into a strong being  
that rises, circles, balanced and unseeing.  
And just then chance, your final accident,  
pulled you back from your furthest transformation,  
back into a world where juices *reign*. (vv. 125-33)

In order to attain such a “holy look,” Rilke believed that the artist had to devote himself or herself only to his or her art. In the same way, true love required the avoidance of any form of possession. Here again it is necessary to refer to Rilke’s famous statement, already mentioned above, that “each one should keep watch over the solitude of the other” (*Letters and Journals* 270). The same concept is translated into verses in the *Requiem*: “Where we love, there can be only this: let go of one another; / for holding-on need not be learned, it’s natural to us” (vv. 244-45). Rilke’s vision of love, here, is so different from Becker’s. In her letter to Westhoff quoted above, prompted by her jealousy and disappointment for having been distanced from her after

her marriage with Rilke, she conveyed her idea of love as “thousandfolds” and “all embracing,” therefore inclusive. While Rilke’s was exclusive, and solely exclusive as far as art was concerned.

In his questionable view, Rilke put down Becker’s death to her wish to have a child instead of finding her personal fulfillment as a woman artist alone. Moreover, he blamed her husband – and all men with him! – for his craving for possession:

But now I accuse: not Him who took you from yourself  
(I can’t single him out, he’s like them all)  
but in him I accuse all of them: Man. (vv. 211-13)

One should not be tempted to see Rilke as a feminist, defending women artists’ rights. In Becker’s ghost he was finding a mirror of his own uncertain and troublesome artistic way. Becker’s artistic trajectory was incomplete just because she had died too young. As she had told her friend Clara, she would have liked to have a child and had struggled to find a balance between her family life and artistic yearnings. It is Rilke who felt the need to justify himself for having chosen to live far from his wife and their child Ruth, in order to pursue his absolute ideal of art, which would not allow of any compromise.

In other words, Paula in the *Requiem* does not want to become pure spirit, but takes what Rilke considers a step back (while in life it was for her a step forward) from the realm of art to life. Again, it is a passage from infinite to “measured time.” This is why Paula is the contrary of Eurydice. Not only she does not want to leave this earth, but she is not so self-contained as the mythical woman who has descended into Hades: she hopes to create offspring as well as works of art. She does not want her love to be transcended in some divine and abstract feeling but, quite the contrary, she wishes it to be incarnated in a child. She would therefore like to dwell with the mortals, not with the immortals.

Rilke’s ideal of women, as he expressed it in the *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, induced him to admire most those women whose love was not returned:

Women who are loved live poorly and in danger. If only they could surpass themselves and become women in love. Around women in love there is sheer security. No one is suspicious of them any more, and they aren’t in a position to betray themselves. In them the mystery has become inviolate; they cry it out whole, like nightingales; it is no longer divided. They lament for one man; but the whole of nature joins in with their voice: it is the lament for an

eternal being. They hurl themselves after the man they have lost, but even with their first steps they overtake him, and in front of them there is only God. (qtd. in Torgersen 229-30)

In “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes,” the turning point comes when Orpheus turns back to look at Eurydice, breaking the divine taboo and definitively consigning her to the realm of death:

And when, abruptly,  
the god had halted her and, with an anguished  
outcry, outspoke the words: He has turned round! –  
she took in nothing, and said softly: Who? (Brodsky 385)

Rilke is a great poet here because the most stunning point in this scene is the exclamation “Who?” more than the breaking of the taboo. With this meaningful monosyllable the estrangement between Orpheus and Eurydice becomes total alienation. Orpheus has behaved like a human lover, while Eurydice seems to have completely forgotten her human feelings and is willingly swallowed again in Hades. The poem ends with a long shot, showing that neither Eurydice, nor Orpheus, are relevant figures anymore. Their paths diverge forever: he remains in finite life, she goes back to infinity. What matters is that the two realms have intermingled just for a short time, after which human beings and gods remain separate. Orpheus here has the same function that Hölderlin attributed to the poet: he must equally resist the power of attraction which the disappearing gods exert on him and the temptation to abandon himself to a mere survival on the earth. His duty consists in maintaining separate the divine sphere from the human sphere, in becoming himself the empty territory marking this separation which in the end is where the sacred is revealed (in Blanchot 370-71).

Despite the variations that Rilke brings to the myth, its quintessential core is respected: even if Orpheus, by turning round, seems to have betrayed not only Eurydice but also the extreme force that his work of art could have drawn from a confrontation with the realm of death, the truth is that, even if he had respected the taboo, it would not have been a lesser betrayal on his part. In fact, Eurydice, as well as the power of darkness and eternal night that she incarnates, had better remain hidden and buried and obscure. Like all unconscious forces, she must be looked for, but not seen from too close, nor taken to the surface of diurnal life.

Eurydice must therefore remain an invisible force: the eternal feminine power of renovating its fertility and wholeness which must be contemplated from afar, and never brought to the apparently reassuring intimacy of homely life. Only provided that she remains a stranger to all earthly concerns can she continue to dispense her gifts. In later rewritings of the myth, as for

example in Cesare Pavese's *L'inconsolabile*, the loss of Eurydice for Orpheus is a necessary step to find himself, which was his secret aim from the start; while in Gesualdo Bufalino's *Il ritorno di Euridice*, Eurydice herself has the painful revelation that Orpheus surely has deliberately turned round to look at her (in *Orfeo. Variazioni sul Mito*).

At this point one can hardly avoid the temptation to see in the poem "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes" a premonition of what would happen to Becker two years later, in 1906, when she decided to separate from her husband and fled to Paris to pursue her own art. For a while she seemed to have found the right conditions to dedicate herself to painting with all her strength. On 8<sup>th</sup> May 1906 she wrote to her husband: "[Dear] Otto. I'm getting there. I'm working tremendously, I believe I am getting there" (*Letters and Journals* 395). On May 15<sup>th</sup> to Vogeler she communicated even stronger confirmation about the rightness of her choice: "The past weeks I have been working harder than I ever have in my life. I think I'm getting somewhere. And that makes me feel wonderful" (400). At last, Becker *was* a painter. She painted with great intensity from the deepest sources of her creativity. A series of wonderful pictures was being originated from the undercurrents of her soul. What Rilke appreciated very much was the fact that she was not Modersohn's possession anymore but she was pouring herself into her art. She seemed to have attained the same orphic space that Rilke called 'the open,' and was reachable through the writing of the poem. It was for him the innermost dimension that, precisely for its intimate nature, allowed the poet (or the painter) to have access to the outside, with great willingness to explore it and represent it in its inner projection. The poet – like the painter – does not possess a sure key of access, as that space can be entered only if he or she is willing to disappear and leave space to the work of art only, transforming the visible into the invisible. Becker was well aware of this, as she often wrote in her letters and journals of that exciting year when she thought she had found her way into painting. She worked as if she were dreaming, with almost no restraint, without imposing her vision but accepting what her pictures were telling her of her inner story, of her deep relationship with the outside world and the people surrounding her.

On May 26<sup>th</sup> of the same year, however, Becker wrote down a very short entry in her journal with which she seemed to superimpose herself on the mythical figure of Eurydice:

*Journal*

When I read Otto's letters they are like a voice from the earth. And I seem to myself like someone who has died and now dwells in the Elysian Fields and hears this cry from the earth. (401)

Becker read a lot of Rilke's works in progress, but only when their relationship was at its closest stages. The year 1904 was a bad one for Becker – she did not work much and she was starting to feel the need of external stimulus again. She wrote just a few letters, and seemed to have lost contact with Rilke that year. No trace of her having read the poem “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes” can be found either in her letters or journals of the following years. One can only infer that, as Becker was a great reader, maybe in the most decisive moment of her accomplishment – which was also a difficult turning point in her family life – she must have felt the need to resort to a literary image to better shoulder the uncertainty of her present state. What is interesting to notice is that Otto – being her husband – plays the role of Orpheus, even though he was a painter and not a poet. In Becker's journal entry he cries because he wants his wife back, exactly as Orpheus did with Eurydice. There is no trace of Rilke then, neither is there a hint to the presence of Hermes. Maybe Hermes is an invisible Rilke, expressly supporting Becker in her choice but trying to stay out of the scene. Becker's words do not specify whether she felt dead only in her relation to her husband or also as a favourable condition for her art, allowing her to free her deepest creative forces. What is certain is that, once she resumed her marriage, and later on got pregnant, she wrote a letter to Rilke in March 10<sup>th</sup>, 1907 (that is to say eight months before dying), which is striking because her sense of having accomplished her art is weaker than a few months earlier and her satisfaction with her present life seems sincere yet strangely death-tinged:

Paris, 49, bd. Montparnasse

March 10, 1907

Dear Rainer Maria Rilke,

I am a bad correspondent; in fact I'm one of those people who move very slowly and make people wait for them, and who also wait themselves. Just don't expect anything from me. Otherwise I'll probably disappoint you, because it may still be a long time before I am somebody. And then, when I am, perhaps I won't be the somebody you thought I would be. I would so like to do something beautiful, but one must wait now to see if the good Lord, or fate, also wants me to. I think the best thing for one is to go one's own way as in a dream.  
[...]

Paris continues to be the same. Nevertheless, I'm happy to leave it at Easter. I shall return to Worpswede. I hope everything will be all right this way.

Please give my best to Clara. It is lovely that the trip is so rewarding for her.

I think so often of her.



If only we can all get to heaven.  
I wonder where you will be when next summer is in bloom.  
I believe that I am satisfied with my life.

Your Paula Modersohn  
(418)

Following the poem and the journal entry it is as if Becker had refused to remain engulfed in Hades but had decided to go back to the earth (and Otto-Orpheus, and life), refusing to be guided by Rilke-Hermes and abandoning the immortals.

Of course this letter – significantly signed Paula Modersohn as she had gone back to her marriage again – recalls the one quoted above,<sup>18</sup> dated 26<sup>th</sup> July 1900, when she was very young and wrote: “And if only now love would blossom for me, before I depart; and if I can paint three good pictures, then I shall go gladly, with flowers in my hair.”

Unlike Eurydice, Becker (the real one, not her ghost inhabiting Rilke’s poem) had gone back to the earth, to her family life and had given birth to a daughter. She had therefore become a mother as well as an artist. She felt she had disappointed Rilke by choosing to go along a mortal way. Unfortunately this turn in her life had brought about a hostile fate which resulted in her death.

In the *Requiem* as well she finally resists transfiguration on the part of the poet, who is ready to use all the devices at his disposal to spark such a metamorphosis. But even Paula’s ghost has a will of her own, and does not give her consent to be used as a superfine poetical material. Even though she is now a departed being, she remains nevertheless a woman, not a goddess.

In this sense, Rilke in the *Requiem* does not actually have the last word. He cannot turn Paula’s story into his own myth. While he could do it in “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes,” as Brodsky puts it: “Whatever it was that possessed him to write this poem must have had an aspect of myth, a sense of infinity” (418).

Paula’s ghost is therefore the embodiment of Rilke’s own wishes in a negative reflection. He needed to confront her to confirm to himself his own choices:

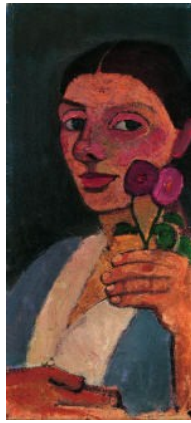
Come here into the candle-light. I’m not afraid  
to face the dead. When they return

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<sup>18</sup> See p. 52.

they have a right to be within our view  
like other things. Come here. (vv. 102-105)

In fact she was the only woman he met who always resisted and sometimes even mocked his absolutist devotion to art. Yet, later on, not only had Becker decided to go back to her marriage and to Worpswede, but she had finally attained her dream of motherhood. In *Self-Portrait with Two Flowers in her Raised Hands*, she depicts herself as ostentatiously pregnant and very happy to be so, as her irresistible smile directed at the viewer shows. The same aura of flesh as fruit that Rilke saw in the *Self-Portrait as Half-Nude with Amber Necklace* was not metaphorical anymore but was now wholly embodied. As Torgersen says, “What Rilke saw as an inner truth has been made flesh” (217).



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait with Two Flowers in her Raised Hands*, 1907

And what is more, the reconciliation of art and life, that Rilke believed impossible, now seemed an attained dream for Becker. The two flowers, which are with all probability a symbol of the two hearts beating inside her, may also hint at her contentment at having fulfilled her double wish, as she had two flowers also in the *Self-Portrait as Half-Nude with Amber Necklace*.

She had therefore nearly successfully reunited her divided nature – as a woman artist and a mother – which in Rilke’s opinion, as he will say in a letter to Hugo Heller on 12<sup>th</sup> June 1909, could not but result in an inner insoluble conflict in the woman artist, due to the physical consistency of her soul:

The destiny I attempted to relate and to lament in the *Requiem* (the inevitable fate of which you too recognized at painful proximity) is perhaps the real conflict of the artist: the opposition and contradiction between objective and personal enjoyment of the world. That

is all no less dangerously and conclusively demonstrated in a man who is an artist by necessity, but in a woman who has resolved upon the infinite transpositions of the artist's existence, the pain and danger of this choice increases to an unforgettable visibility. Since she is physical far into her soul and is designed for bringing forth living offspring, something like a slow transformation of all her organs must take place in her so that she may reach a vital fruitfulness of soul. (qtd. in Torgersen 234-35)

It is nearly impossible to put an end to this extremely suggestive exploration of Rilke's poems in relation to Becker as a woman he probably loved but also as an alter-ego who in painting was pursuing a similar research aimed at catching and portraying objects and people in their purest essence. From this point of view, Brodsky is absolutely convincing when, at a certain point of his analysis of the poem "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes," he speaks about the inevitable autobiographical content of it, as if it was a portrait which in the end turns out to be a self-portrait:

In short, a poem generates rather than reflects. So if a poem addresses a mythological subject, this amounts to a reality scrutinizing its own history, or, if you will, to an effect putting a magnifying glass to its cause and getting blinded by it.

"Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes" is exactly that, as much as it is the author's self-portrait with that glass in hand, and one learns from the poem a lot more about him than any life of him will offer. What he is looking at is what made him; but he who does the looking is far more palpable, for you can look at something only from the outside. (Brodsky 387)

Yet, as this part of the dissertation is aimed at reconstructing the real and imaginary connections between Rilke and Becker, it can be useful to see what kind of transformation in Rilke's poetics takes place in the *Requiem*, probably suggested by Paula's ghost – that is to say by Rilke's projection of her inside the poem. The sense of urgency prompting the poem in fact derives not only from a sudden emergence of memory, with all its burden of unsaid things, but it is also due to the sense of a possible transformation, announced by the poem. The *Requiem* foreshadows a development in Rilke's thought that will occur to him in more definite terms at least fifteen years later.

The end of the poem in fact is stirred by conflicting forces: on one hand the author would like to use it as an occasion to state his version of Becker's story, and he singles out what he thinks were the mistakes which forbade her to pursue her research and dedicate herself exclusively to her art. On the other, he cannot but yield to a sense of uncertainty about his own affirmations

and the poem itself opens a space for doubt which undermines the principles that he has just affirmed. The narrator therefore is overcome by the overwhelming urge to ask for help precisely from Paula's ghost, as if the truths which have just been stated were not enough to put his mind at rest. From this point of view, it is probably correct to single out two voices within the *Requiem*: one is the voice of the author, Rilke, while the other is the voice of the narrator-Orpheus, who is less interested in affirming his point of view than in listening to what the poem has to tell him. He is like Orpheus as he cannot keep his individuality but must consent to die to himself in order to let the poem speak.

The poem in fact imposes on the narrator-Orpheus its own need to come to terms with another truth which seems unbearable to its author:

If you're still here, if in this darkness  
there is some place where your spirit  
vibrates acutely with the shallow sound waves  
set pulsing by a voice alone at night  
in the air of a high-ceilinged room –  
then hear me, help me. (vv. 264-69)

In other words, the voice of the narrator-Orpheus widens the potential of doubt inhabiting the poem, and calls into question the author's answers and explanations. This is clearly a request for help, which is addressed to Paula precisely because she *is* dead. There is something the narrator-Orpheus can learn from her death. Yet the author's voice seems again to prevail in the next lines, where once again he affirms what he sees as "an old enmity / between life and the great work":

See, we slide back, not knowing when,  
from our advances, into something we don't mean,  
getting caught there as in a dream  
in which we die without awakening.  
No one goes further. It can happen  
to anyone who has lifted his blood high  
into a long piece of work – he can't  
sustain it there, it falls  
by its own gravity, and fails.  
For somewhere there is an old enmity  
between life and the great work.

Help me recognize it, help me say it. (vv. 270-81)

Rilke is repeating himself here: art is in conflict with life, and Paula has died because after pursuing “the great work” with all herself, after the separation from her husband, she has been unable to sustain her choice and she has gone back to life, vainly looking for a balance between family duties and art. Yet the truth could be different, as the narrator-Orpheus – who does not seem so frightened by Paula’s ghost – had previously suspected in the *Requiem*:

Don’t be afraid if now I understand:  
Oh, it wells up in me –  
I can’t help it, I have to understand  
even if I die of it –  
understand you are here. I understand.  
As a blind man encircles with his touch  
the surfaces of things and understands – I feel your fate  
and cannot name it. (vv. 115-22)

The truth that the narrator-Orpheus senses here is beyond words and must be attained with the help of the other senses. Curiously enough, the image of the blind man touching the surfaces of things to see them, is used by Anne Michaels too in her poem “Modersohn-Becker” to describe the French sculptor Rodin at work.

Knowing what is not knowable is precisely the artist’s duty. The author of the *Requiem* does not seem to be ready to acknowledge another version of truth from his own and at the end of the poem he addresses Paula’s ghost as if she were Eurydice, inviting her to slide back to Hades and trying to transform the end of the *Requiem* in the end of “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes”:

Do not come back: if you can bear it,  
stay dead, with the dead.  
The dead have things to do.  
But help me, still, some way that won’t distract you,  
as what is furthest off can sometimes help me:  
within myself. (vv. 282-87)

Yet, if Paula, like Eurydice, had better stay with the dead and return forever to the netherworld, the narrator-Orpheus in the last lines still challenges the possible conclusion of the

poem by asking anyway to be helped. Not with her physical presence can Paula be of any assistance to him, but by instilling or illuminating in him from afar the interior knowledge that he still lacks to further develop his growth as a poet. Blanchot's poetical synthesis of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is perfectly suitable to define the emotional content of the *Requiem*: "Oui, cela est vrai: dans le chant seulement, Orphée a pouvoir sur Eurydice, mais, dans le chant aussi, Eurydice est déjà perdue et Orphée lui-même est l'Orphée dispersé, l'infiniment mort' que la force du chant fait dès maintenant de lui" (227).

What appears to be Orpheus' mistake, however, does not precipitate the myth into a meaningful issue, quite the contrary. He is driven by an irresistible force towards his failing attempt to bring Eurydice back to earth and to sing what he has experienced. Yet, his failure is the condition for his authenticity and for the following inspiration inhabiting his verses, as from then on he will find the right language to sing in his poetry the mystery of death (and love). The lesson that Orpheus learns from his suffering is the same that the poet acknowledges when he writes: the poem must not aim at recovering any human wholeness, but rather at celebrating the imperfection of creation and restoring the limit that has been exceeded. The poem is necessary because it is the only way to show once more the inalienability of that limit. The reader can have a glimpse beyond, but forcedly perceives the mortal danger of proceeding any further. By losing Eurydice, Orpheus goes back to the origin of poetry, and it is from there and not from the netherworld that he will start to sing again. Therefore Orpheus does not actually fail in his task, it would have been much worse if the poet-Orpheus had not attempted the task of journeying in the netherworld.

It is hardly surprising that Rilke's *Requiem*, as well as many of his other works of art, are very often built around contradictions, or paradoxes. The reader feels that real mysteries cannot be solved, at the most they can be illustrated. The verb 'to illustrate' seems particularly proper for a poem like Rilke's *Requiem*. When attempting to explore the realm of death, and the relationship between the living and the dead, the language we have at our disposal usually fails. One of the poet's task is to create each time a new language, very rich in images, which can hint to what resists any explanation.

In particular, the presence of what has been defined a double voice in the *Requiem*, the author's and the narrator's, should not be seen as a limit of the poem. On the contrary, it is a mark of its depth, of the inexhaustibility of its meaning. It is very enthralling to think that, as in the *Requiem* Rilke-Orpheus in the end implored Paula to stay dead, so that he could continue to sing, the dramatic monologues by Michaels, Bhatt and Rich are to be considered similar attempts to call Paula temporarily back from the netherworld. And yet, if at a first glance their

poems seem to be aimed at letting Paula speak with her voice as a living woman painter, it will be interesting to notice if traces of the forever dead Eurydice are left in the different portraits that they have drawn of her.

### *The Poet as Orpheus*

“Mais si plus abondamment que les pures sources  
L’or ne ruisselle et quand au ciel la colère s’aggrave,  
Il faut qu’entre jour et nuit  
Une fois apparaisse une vérité.  
Dans une triple métamorphose transcris-la,  
Pourtant toujours inexprimée, telle qu’elle est,  
Innocente, telle elle doit rester.”

Hölderlin, Germanie<sup>19</sup>

“I have to understand even if I die of it,” says the narrator in the *Requiem*. Rilke here has the premonition of the great and slow transformation which will take him to end in 1922 the *Duino Elegies* and the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, two of his greatest masterpieces. The anguish of death, of the “impersonal death,” has not been overcome but just transformed into the origin of the poet’s song. The awareness of being mortal is not to be escaped, not even to be transcended by art, but is welcomed by the poet who is there precisely to sing the caducity of life. If the angels in the *Duino Elegies* are beyond death, Orpheus – as Blanchot says in a wonderful passage of *L’espace littéraire* – has not defeated death but is eternally dying to free his song. Not only he – but also the poem itself – incarnate the possibility of a perpetual metamorphosis:

Il y a, à la vérité, une ambiguïté essentielle dans la figure d’Orphée, cette ambiguïté appartient au mythe qui est la réserve de cette figure, mais elle tient aussi à l’incertitude des pensées de Rilke, à la manière dont il a peu à peu dissous, au cours de l’expérience, la substance et la réalité de la mort. Orphée n’est pas comme l’Ange, en qui la transformation est accomplie, qui en ignore les risques, mais en ignore aussi la faveur et la signification. Orphée est l’acte des métamorphoses, non pas l’Orphée qui a vaincu la mort, mais celui qui toujours meurt, qui est l’exigence de la disparition, qui disparaît dans l’angoisse de cette disparition, angoisse qui se fait chant, parole qui est le pur mouvement de mourir. Orphée meurt un peu plus que nous, il est nous-mêmes, portant le savoir anticipé de notre mort, celui qui est l’intimité de la dispersion. Il est le poème, si celui-ci pouvait devenir poète,

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<sup>19</sup> Qtd. in Blanchot 373.

l'idéal et l'exemple de la plénitude poétique. Mais il est en même temps, non pas le poème accompli, mais quelque chose de plus mystérieux et de plus exigeant : l'origine du poème, le point sacrificiel qui n'est plus la réconciliation des deux domaines, qui est l'abîme du dieu perdu, la trace infinie de l'absence [...] (184)

Death is necessary, and the poet not only will die like all the other mortal beings but will also anticipate his own end in his song, because only this way will death become a transforming force, capable of perpetuating all perishable things. Even in the light of the later development of his thought that occurred with the writing of the *Duino Elegies* and the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, Rilke did not retract his aversion for an "impersonal death," as his vision of death remained anyway a very personal and idealized one, holding such a strong power of change, and therefore never conceived as an end in itself.

In his later years Rilke undoubtedly attained a mystic experience of living, which for him became one with the artist's striving to reach that particular gaze of one who has already gone far beyond and looks back and sings to save things on the verge of disappearance. It must not be forgotten that the *Sonnets to Orpheus* are dedicated by Rilke to another figure of a woman who died very young: Wera Ouckama Knoop. He did not know her very well but her mother had written to him a long report of her suffering and death because of leukemia. It seems that Rilke paralleled her with Eurydice, as the critic August Stahl claims. Be that as it may, Wera was an elective orphic figure, not only because she died so young, when she was only nineteen, but also because she was a dancer, and therefore reunited in her many references to Orpheus: death within life, dance and music. It is of no secondary importance that Rilke, by acknowledging Wera's death, started as early as 1923 to recognize the symptoms of the leukemia that doctors diagnosed in him only later on and which was to cause his death in 1926. If the *Sonnets* are conceived as a funeral monument to Wera, it is the attempt – on Rilke's part – to see death as a frightening trespassing which is also an accomplishment, as he states in I, V:

Erect no monument. Just let the roses  
blossom every year as his reward.  
For that is Orpheus. His metamorphoses  
to this and that. We shouldn't strive too hard  
  
to find another name. Once and for all  
it's Orpheus if there's song. He comes and goes.  
Isn't it enough that sometimes he'll  
survive a few days longer than the rose?



And though he also worries at his passing,  
he has to fade, for you to understand!  
For when his word expands beyond existence,  
  
he is already, where you can't go with him.  
The lyre's bars do not constrain his hands.  
And he obeys the best, when he's trespassing.<sup>20</sup>

The image of the “lyre's bars” which “do not constrain his hands anymore,” inevitably recalls “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes” where the narrator says that Orpheus is “no longer conscious of the lightsome lyre.”

It seems that for Rilke, in the final development of his thought, the figure of the poet is Orpheus who carries Eurydice in himself. After he has left her in the netherworld, he becomes the two of them. Once he has attained this wholeness continually menaced by fragmentation, the poet, as Blanchot says, is absolutely defenceless and cannot but direct his gaze to everything he encounters without retreating in front of anything:

Le poète, s'il ne veut pas se trahir en trahissant l'être, ne doit jamais se “détourner”, aversion par laquelle il rendrait ses droits à la mauvaise mort, celle qui limite et délimite. Il ne doit en rien se défendre, c'est essentiellement un homme sans défense. (195)

It is in particular in II, V, that Rilke – like Orpheus – thinks that more than one life is necessary to yield to this open gaze:

Flower-muscle, that opens the anemone  
meadow-mornings little by little,  
until the light of heaven's loud polyphony  
pours into its womb of petals,  
  
in the flower-aster's silence,  
tense muscle of endless receiving,  
sometimes overcome by *such* abundance,  
that the sleep-sign of evening

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<sup>20</sup> Translated by Howard A. Landman, <[http://www.polyamory.org/~howard/Poetry/orpheus\\_index.html](http://www.polyamory.org/~howard/Poetry/orpheus_index.html)>, 2003.

is hardly able to give the widely-sprung  
petal-edges back to you, then:  
you, so *many* worlds' power and directive!

We last longer, we the violent ones.  
But in which of all our lives, oh *when*,  
will we at last be open and receptive?<sup>21</sup>

The poet does not use the first person singular 'I' but the first plural 'we.' Rilke, who at first had undertaken his poetical search to look for himself, in later years, by identifying with Orpheus, discovered that his most intimate voice was not his own and did not belong to him. The use of 'we' is the trace of such transformation, which here and there had already interfered with the 'I' in the *Requiem*. The orphic poet does not properly *say* anything but celebrates, glorifies with a language which is so capacious because it is also made of silence.

#### *The Poet as Orpheus, the Poem as Orpheus*

Rilke's idea of the poet as Orpheus and the poem as Orpheus invites us to read the poem in general as a concrete space for transformation and metamorphosis. Considering how shocked Rilke was by Becker's death, and how they were united by a close relationship, it is legitimate to infer that she was fundamental for this meaningful development of his art, towards which he tended all his life long, and which was so revealing for other poets who were his contemporaries or came after him.

In a very interesting exchange of forty-nine letters, between Rilke and Marina Tsvetayeva, and between Rilke and Boris Pasternak, all written during summer in 1926 – that is to say four years after Rilke had completed the *Duino Elegies* and the *Sonnets to Orpheus*, and just a few months before his death, which occurred on 29<sup>th</sup> December 1926 – not only is the figure of Orpheus recurrent, but Rilke himself is seen as the Orpheus of his time by the two Russian poets. As Tsvetayeva wrote to Anna Tesková at the beginning of 1927, a couple of weeks after Rilke's death, she reaffirmed that to her he was the very incarnation of poetry: "The German Orpheus, that is, Orpheus who *this time* has made his appearance in Germany. Not *Dichter* [A poet] (Rilke) – *Geist der Dichtung* [The Spirit of Poetry]" (Pasternak, Tsvetayeva, Rilke 25).

As she wrote in her first letter to Rilke, dated 9<sup>th</sup> May 1926, Tsvetayeva was convinced that poetry is the timeless, immortal, transcended spirit made manifest in the temporal realm by its

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<sup>21</sup> Translated by Howard A. Landman, <[http://www.polyamory.org/~howard/Poetry/orpheus\\_index.html](http://www.polyamory.org/~howard/Poetry/orpheus_index.html)>, 2003.

'bearers' – the poets. Orpheus, the school's poet and prophet, was Rilke's and Tsvetayeva's chosen hero, and Pasternak too at first was attracted by the concept of immortality of the soul caught in a cycle of births and deaths, as it was adopted by the romantics from the Orphic school.

Tsvetayeva's expression was so congenial to Rilke that he instantly recognized in her a kindred spirit. As she said in quite an exalted tone, Rilke to her was "poetry incarnate":

Rainer Maria Rilke!

May I hail you like this? You, poetry incarnate, must know, after all, that your very name – is a poem. Rainer Maria, that sounds churchly – and kindly – and chivalrous. Your name does not rhyme with our time – stems from earlier or later – has always been. [...]

You are not my dearest poet ("dearest" – a level), you are a phenomenon of nature, which cannot be mine and which one does not so much love as undergo, or (still too little) the fifth element incarnate: poetry itself or (still too little) that whence poetry comes to be and which is greater than it (you).

It isn't a question of Rilke the person (personhood: that which is forced upon us!), but of Rilke the spirit, who is still greater than the poet and who is what really bears the name of Rilke to me – the Rilke of the day after tomorrow. (81-82)

Moreover, if one reads the poem "Eurydice to Orpheus" by Tsvetayeva, it becomes evident that Rilke as Orpheus had finally found the perfect Eurydice for him. In Tsvetayeva's poem in fact Eurydice, who is content with her death and freed from any passion by immortality, not only does not want to go back to the earth, but asks to Orpheus to forget her and leave her alone in the darkness. Yet it is so striking that, while superimposing Rilke on a mythological figure, and addressing him with tones of the utmost passion precisely because of the distance which was separating them and hindering their actual encounter, Tsvetayeva failed to notice that Rilke was mortally ill. More than that, she was offended by Rilke's repeated attempts to draw attention to his condition, and was so self-absorbed that she thought he was trying to resist her impulsive outbursts of emotion and love. In the end, he was so exhausted by her lack of understanding that he stopped answering her letters several months before he died of leukaemia.

In going to and fro from art to life as far as some precise authors are concerned one runs the risk of being strongly disappointed, as the ideal pervading their artistic works often has as a counterpart their inability to face reality or to adjust to a lesser image of themselves which is only more human and therefore closer to that of other common mortals. Maybe it is not by sheer

chance that Pasternak, in his first letter addressed to Rilke, on 12<sup>th</sup> April 1926, made a digression on the contradictions which always intervene not only when great historical changes happen, but also when personal fates accordingly take a certain shape:

There is one lesson, though, which our life experience here alone teaches everyone who is willing to learn: a great thing is most full of contradictions when it takes an *active* form; in its reality, it is also *small* within its magnitude, and sluggish within its activity. Such is our revolution, which is a contradiction in its very appearance: a fragment of gliding time in the form of an *immobile*, fearful tourist attraction. Of such a nature are our personal fates, too, *immobile* temporal subjects of the somber and exalted historical portents, tragic even in its smallest, even ludicrous detail. (53-54)

According to John Bayley this is precisely the reason why at a certain point the novel was felt as a necessary literary genre, as it allowed “the enjoyment of perceiving the difference between an ideal state of affairs and a down-to-earth one, and in presenting two separate versions of reality” (*Characters of Love* 57).

Maybe so many dramatic monologues needed to be written by Michaels, Bhatt and Rich at the end of the last century to cover the same function of as many novels, that is to say of giving a similar *and* different image of Paula Modersohn-Becker from the one which was depicted by Rilke: a ‘would-be Eurydice’ who unfortunately had renounced her divine immortality and slid back to an “impersonal death.” A fair query at this point could be: why did they write poems and not novels? It is true that Bhatt and Rich are mainly poets, but Michaels – whose dramatic monologue seems to be the most convincing and far more involving for the reader – is also a novelist. *Fugitive Pieces* (1996) is a poetical novel, and the same form could therefore be used for penetrating the complexities of a character like Paula Modersohn-Becker without giving in to any discursive analysis. A possible explanation is that Michaels in this case was interested in condensing a woman artist’s search for truth by fragments, as a more extensive reconstruction of her life and the necessity to build an even minimal plot would have probably led her to be drawn away from the essence of what in her eyes was first of all a spiritual search. Paula had to be revealed by her own words, not described or seen in any other way by other characters. Becker loved her research with all her being and the reader – through Michaels’ love for her character – experiences the same boundless love for what transcends the limits of the self and yet does not necessarily have to find comfort – like Rilke with his *Requiem* – in any immortal realm.

The dramatic monologue therefore seems to be a suitable form to give body and soul to a certain manifestation of love. Even if the gods and the sphere of the immortals are not felt anymore as suitable subjects for poetry, and even if divinity is not the proper word for that inner dimension which instead is continually looked for even by contemporary poets such as Michaels, Bhatt and Rich, there always remains a territory for the sacred to be encircled and given voice by the works of art of any age. As a form of embodiment of some other artist – as is Paula Modersohn-Becker’s case – belonging to a different time and sensitivity, the dramatic monologue undoubtedly aspires to become such a space of revelation: even though it is not anymore a confrontation between the gods and the mortals that can take place within its boundaries, it is anyway an available territory where a possible communication between the living and the dead can be found, as well as an advisable and fruitful compromise between a certain ideal of life and its concrete fulfillment. Imagination and rationality play an equally important role in giving shape to someone who becomes alive on the page. Absence and silence are two precious irrational sources that can be exploited by the dramatic monologue to attain some knowledge of the dark side of life that normally remains in the shade.

And yet, precisely because Michaels’, Bhatt’s and Rich’s works *are* poems and not novels, they cannot but be – more or less consciously – influenced by Rilke’s poetry. Depending on the particular form of dramatic monologue chosen by each poet, the poem becomes not only the space for reopening Becker’s death and entering her life, but also a chance for transformation – of her life but also of the three poets’ vision of their own position in relation to Becker’s life. The poems are therefore as many possible embodiments of Paula, allowed by Rilke’s idea of the poet and the poem as Orpheus, speaking with a different voice from his own.

A close reading of Rilke’s *Requiem* was necessary to single out the deep reasons why Michaels, Bhatt and Rich probably decided to plunge into her story again and give their own version of it. Yet, if a dramatic monologue can certainly be prompted by a strong emotional impulse, a convincing character and voice speaking in the poem – as later will become evident – can only be based on a whole embodiment of feelings, thoughts and facts.

If Rilke’s *Requiem* failed to serve him as an exorcism, since, as reported above, several years after Becker’s death he confessed that he still felt burdened with her death, his poem certainly helped – together with his letters and the recollections of her that he confided to his lovers, friends and acquaintances – to keep Becker’s memory alive. As was typical of him, he was particularly devoted to a sort of mythologized figure, as he saw in his painter friend the brave (but also mistaken) woman artist who had made the noble attempt to unify life and work. Becker

had striven to be productive not only as an artist but also as a woman, but unfortunately – as he told Katharina Kippenberg – she “was chastised for this by death – when she was not prepared for death – by a wrathfully negating God” (qtd. in Torgersen 238).

And yet, according to Torgersen, between the *Requiem* and the story of its author and Becker there’s “a void, a vacuum, an absolute gulf, for the poem exists in an art space whose coordinates do not engage those of the historical world of the story” (3). Rilke would be the first to insist that such was the difference between the real world and the realm of poetry. This aspect is particularly interesting especially if one considers that the poems by Michaels, Bhatt and Rich seem to be originated exactly from that “void” which they apparently try to cross by creating a resonance, a sympathetic vibration. As for the protagonists of the historical world and those of the poems, what Torgersen observes about the *Requiem* is also true for the other three poetic embodiments: “Even though we find it irresistibly right to call them by the same names, knowing as well as we can this man who was a poet and this woman who was a painter is not the same as knowing the poem and the figures, one said to be living, one said to be dead, who move through it” (3).

Having said that, there is at least one great difference between the *Requiem* and the other three poems: Rilke was the co-protagonist of the story with Paula, and therefore did not give voice to her but addressed her as a ‘you’<sup>22</sup> with his own voice – as well as with the contrasting voice of the narrator. On the contrary, Michaels, Bhatt and Rich are outside the story, and therefore feel the urge to give voice to Paula, each of them according to her own vision of her. Yet it is always a ‘self-portrait as a woman artist’ which comes out from each poetic embodiment.

What can be said of all the poems (*Requiem* included) is that the characters appearing in them are all ‘characters of love,’ as Bayley defines them following a lesson that Henry James derived from Balzac and took deeply to heart in his later years. Talking of Balzac’s characters, James said: “‘It was by loving them that he knew them’, [...] ‘not by knowing them that he loved’” (*Characters of Love* 217). The observation is of the utmost importance as it explains at least two strong impulses prompting the poets to write either to Paula or in her voice: on one hand the love for her as a person and an artist; on the other the need to try to know a certain truth, which perhaps concerns art (and love as a complex combination of reality and imagination) more than life. As Bayley observes when talking about Shakespeare’s *Othello*, this truth has something to do with the nature of love, which is so involving and sometimes troublesome in life: “Although

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<sup>22</sup> Even though, as Torgersen explains, the familiar *Du* that Rilke used only in the *Requiem* and the love poems – but avoided in person or in the letters addressed to Becker – gets lost in the English translation (in Torgersen 4).

love is by its nature absolute, its working out must be contingent on the relative and imperfect nature of human minds and human dealings” (170).

Absoluteness of art and love are continually undermined by the “imperfect nature of human minds and human dealings” in all the poems. The difference between their authors maybe consists in whether or not they try anyway to impose their own version of the story or if they come to consider the final imperfection and incompleteness of art (and love) as a kind of force, the force of uncertainty.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Still Life Translated Into Poems: Embodying Paula Modersohn-Becker*

*“It’s interesting for me to observe  
how my judgement has gradually been formed,  
even though I am still far from saying that it is complete.  
What is complete? When is one complete? Never, I hope.  
That’s the way I feel about all fixed points of view.”*

*Paula Modersohn-Becker, letter to Milly Becker, 27<sup>th</sup> May 1900<sup>1</sup>*

One could say that quite luckily Rilke’s *Requiem* failed to free him from Paula’s memory. It is precisely because of the inability of his poem to work as an exorcism that Paula’s ghost continued to ask to be given life and still inhabits poems by contemporary women poets such as Anne Michaels, Sujata Bhatt and Adrienne Rich. Why cannot she be put at rest? And is she coming back in a different shape with respect to the one that was given her in Rilke’s *Requiem*?

This chapter will try to answer these questions by entering the poems these three poets wrote and see what kind of character emerges from them. It was necessary to outline the novel which lies behind the poems as they inevitably present discrepancies and deviations from Becker’s biography, either because they try to fill the blank spaces with imagination or because they instinctively change the real and documented facts. One hardly needs be surprised by such alterations, as they very coherently reflect Rilke’s and Becker’s poetics that reality should be transformed in the work of art. It is exactly the power of transformation that Rilke praised in his painter friend in his *Requiem*. And, as emerged from her earlier letters, Becker was often reproached by Mackensen for not painting what “she really saw in the nature of reality.” The growing autonomy of the work of art undoubtedly marked the beginning of the twentieth century and Cézanne had contributed very much to affirm such a principle. As seen in the previous chapter, his influence was deeply felt far beyond the exclusive range of painting but was inevitably perceived and applied in all arts. Rilke’s yearning to avoid a subjective perception of objects in his poems is certainly borrowed from the French painter, as stated by Els Jongeneel in his essay “Rilke’s Speaking Gods (On ‘Early Apollo’ and ‘Archaic Torso of Apollo’)”: “In imitation of Cézanne’s painterly techniques – the colours in his pictures expressing the ‘essence of things’ – Rilke tries to capture, in the *New Poems: The Other Part*,

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<sup>1</sup> *Letters and Journals* 190.



the ‘Dinghaftigkeit’ (object-ness) of things. As a ‘seeing poet’, he wants to be open to the object (‘sich ausgeben’)” (*Pictures into Words* 166).

But there is more to it, and it is the reason why this research into the rendering in poetry of Paula Modersohn-Becker’s life and art cannot but develop as a ghost story. As underlined by Louis Marin in his essay “Mimesis and Description,” included in his book *On Representation*, the poet and the philosopher – like Narcissus – can be seen as victims of the fascination of a double desire:

initially, the desire for a language of words so transparent to the world of things that description, which would be its most perfect realization or phantasm, would serve to effect a kind of generalized translatability of the imaged figures of a picture into names in language. But, secondarily, the condition of this desire itself is its other, which resembles it like a brother and could also be its inverse: the desire for a painted picture so transparent to the perceptible world that the picture would be its mirroring reverie, the reflecting phantasm of a mirror. (254)

Therefore, representation is “the operation of a generalized transposition of the things of the world into painted images” (254). Yet this desire for transparency between images and things and between names and images can deny or hide a substantial difficulty in perpetuating such sameness. A thing exactly reproduced, as in a trompe-l’oeil, is perforce a *ghost* of the original, possessing all the disturbing familiarity of its forms and colours. And here one comes to understand not only the inevitable emergence in Rilke’s *Requiem* of a different image of Paula from the one he wanted to evoke, but also the discrepancies and deviations from her biography which intervene in Michaels’, Bhatt’s and Rich’s poems:

It could well be that, far from finding the fulfillment of its goals in the doubles of trompe-l’oeil, the art of painting, through the graceful play of its always somewhat dissimilar similarities, has no purpose but to use the innocent magic of representation *to conjure away the disturbing return of doubles in the image*, to fend off the return of the unnamable, indescribable being because it would put one’s eyes out with its presence. (255 my emphasis)

As in painting the oxymoronic “dissimilar similarities” have the aim of averting the disquieting return of the doubles, the same effect is looked for both in Rilke’s *Requiem* and in the dramatic monologues where voice is given to his painter friend. In the *Requiem* Rilke found

it impossible to represent Paula Modersohn-Becker as she really was, not only because it was the poet's task to transform her and give a vision of her which was partly unaccomplished in her life, but also because it would have been more frightening and unsettling for him to see her reproduced faithfully on the page. If the principle of *mimesis* is equally avoided by Becker in her painting as in the poems where she is given voice, it is due to an identical aesthetic urge which derives from an unconscious fear of seeing the identical reproduced.

This is why the affirmation that "Figures bear absence and presence, pleasure and displeasure," by the historian of baroque art, Pierre Charpentrat, quoted by Marin in his essay "Representation and Simulacrum," is particularly pertinent, as far as the creation of the character Paula in the poems is concerned. Maybe due to her early death, one can sense that each poet feels the urge to reopen her life as if poetry could give her another chance, but as Paula becomes alive on the page, the poet cannot feel only the pleasure of having given life to her, as the relief of having recreated her is immediately accompanied by the sad acknowledgment that it is not the real Paula speaking and breathing in the poem but a sort of simulacrum of her. These contrasting emotions aroused by representation are well explained by Marin:

What does it mean to represent, then, if not to convey an absent object into presence, to bear it into presence as absent, to *master* its loss, its death by and in representation, and, by the same token, to *dominate* the displeasure or the anguish of its presence in the pleasure of a presence that takes its place, and in that deferred appropriation – "reality excludes absence and displeasure" – through transitive reference and recognition, to enact the reflexive movement that is constitutive of the subject itself, of the theoretical subject? (Marin 311)

In this passage it becomes strikingly clear that, if one wants to bring to presence someone who is not there anymore, not only is identification necessary, but also a consequent detachment allowing one to find the way back from a total confusion with the missing person. In poetry the path for returning can be found either by distorting at least a little the speaking subject's story, and so transforming it into a different version, as Michaels and Rich do in their dramatic monologues, or by inserting the 'I' of the poet, or the viewer, in the poem so as to create a necessary detachment from Paula's life (as Bhatt does in her collection).

This is therefore why Michaels, Bhatt and Rich not only avoid representing Paula's ghost exactly, but also need to circumscribe the embodiment taking place in the poems to a partial identification with her. This necessary detachment also applies to the way Paula's paintings enter the poems. Her pictures in fact are hardly ever inserted following a process of absolute *mimesis*, but they rather become vehicles confirming a certain vision of art and of the artist (as

in Rilke's *Requiem*) or the figurative and sometimes inexact landscape for Paula's life (as in Michaels' case) or the starting point for a narration, half imagined and half real, as in Bhatt's case, while Rich is more concentrated in depicting just a concise background at the service of her ideological purpose.

In other words, Paula in the poems not only sees her real pictures and speaks about them but mostly sees and speaks *through* them. The poems – or parts of poems – where she seems truest to life are precisely the ones where she cannot refrain from using images to convey her most intimate thoughts or feelings as if they were objective and not subjective elements of her consciousness. Such transition from *seeing* into *knowing* reveals the unquestionable – even though possibly unconscious – influence of Rilke's *poiesis* in the poems written in Paula's voice. In fact, as reported by Jongeneel, Rilke was somewhat envious of visual artists, who could create concrete objects. As he wrote to Lou Andreas-Salomé about Rodin's craftsmanship, "I suffered because of the overwhelming example that *my* art did not allow me to imitate; the impossibility of creating corporal objects hurt me" (qtd. in *Pictures into Words* 156). And to appease his anguish, Rilke's poems written after the year 1907 (which curiously is the year of Becker's death), and later collected in the *New Poems*, would strenuously try to create "an 'internal' space (which he calls the 'Welt-Stelle', because of its general experiential character), where things are endowed with an autonomous and timeless significance" (159-60).

However, what happens in Michaels', Bhatt's and Rich's dramatic monologues, is that Rilke's gaze, striving to attain the core of the world, so as to transform seeing into knowing, is embodied in Paula as a speaker within the poem. In his *Requiem* written for Becker, Rilke had praised her "holy look," which allowed her to look at herself as an object "and stayed outside, large, / and did not say: This is me; but This is." The three poets therefore, while embodying Paula Modersohn-Becker in their poems, seem to learn her selfless look on the outside world as well as on herself, and absorb it so as to transform it into their own. As Jongeneel says, the "absorbing gaze" constitutes "Rilke's conception of the foundation of poetry" (*Pictures into Words* 164) as it appears manifestly in the metaphor of drinking that closes "Early Apollo," one of his most ekphrastic picture-poems:<sup>2</sup> "Significantly, 'drinking' expresses the only real action of the poem; the other verbs denote static situations or hypothetical developments. Like Cézanne, Rilke strives for total abandonment to the object, for a situation of extreme concentration 'so that the contemplator focuses wholly on that which is outside and surrenders

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<sup>2</sup> "[...] only later from his eyebrows' arches / will the rose garden lift up tall-stemmed, / from which petals, turned loose one by one, / will drift down along the tremors of his mouth, // which now is still quiet, never-used, and gleaming, / and only drinking something with its smile / as though its song were being infused in him" (qtd. in *Pictures into Words* 158).

unconditionally as an open vessel where the images flow in” (164). It is interesting to notice that Michaels too, in a passage from her essay “Cleopatra’s Love” which will be quoted later on, while trying to define the poem as a physical object will refer to the poetic line as “a vessel.”

### *A Visual Frame Inside the Poem*

*“Neither a microscope nor a telescope  
is a good instrument with which  
to observe human emotion.”*

*Erwin Panofsky, Early Netherlandish Painting, I: 182*

Painting is therefore present in Michaels’, Bhatt’s and Rich’s poems not as the main focus of attention around which their writing evolves but as one of the most important aspects of Paula’s personality and life. Giving voice to her necessarily includes *ekphrasis*, but is not certainly limited to it. The poems never aim to describe the pictures but simply cannot elude them if they want to portray Paula as a living woman painter. Most of the times they contain instances of *notional ekphrases*, that is to say verbal representations of pictures which however are not mimetically reproduced with the aim of imitating Becker’s real paintings but are rather more or less faithfully evoked so as to cut out a visual frame inside the text, which represents either a *window* or a *mirror*. Caught in a constant double process of reflecting and self-reflecting, the painter through the pictures looks at the outside world and at herself. As any *representation*, according to Marin, is also a *self-representation*, the poems themselves are to be intended as verbal representations both of Paula’s and the poets’ yearnings.

Michaels makes this particularly clear in her essay “Cleopatra’s Love,” which contains a concise vision of her poetics: “The successful poem is a window through which not only do we see and re-see, but are seen and re-seen, as both writers and readers. It’s as if the poem recognizes us” (15). This conception of the poem as an artefact which can look back at the reader, inevitably recalls one of the most famous of Rilke’s ekphrastic poems, “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” the peculiarity of which is that, despite its fragmentation – as it offers an incomplete object, a body without a head – the torso “still glows like a candelabra, / in which his gazing, turned down low, // holds fast and shines” (qtd. in *Pictures into Words* 165). And were it not for the torso’s gaze, the fragmented statue could not be the emanation of such perfection and power of transformation, as “there is no place” in it “that does not see you. You must change your life” (165-66). The aesthetic experience therefore culminates in an ethical *réveil*, and this is evidence

of what Rilke saw as “the umbilical relationship between art and life” (167). Not only the seer of the torso, but the reader of the poem too, are therefore called to redefine their personal experience in consonance with a more universal – even though paradoxically fragmented – ‘wholeness,’ like the Archaic Torso of Apollo bursting “forth from all its contours // like a star” (166).

The necessary attitude for the reader to assume in order to welcome the transformation induced by the poem, is that same continual oscillation between closeness and distance from it which Marin, following Panofsky, deems indispensable for the viewer who wants to perceive the totalizing power of the painting:

“The beholder,” Panofsky writes, “is compelled to oscillate between a *position* reasonably far from the painting” – a distanced position of the subject that is not only gaze but point of view, not only strength of fiction but power of totalization; not only does it constitute wholes by assembling things in the opening of its angle of vision, but it reduces them to the ordered unity of a synthesis whose geometric, linear legitimate perspective defines the operative conditions – and “*many positions* very close to it.” (247)

As Michaels, Bhatt and Rich are not simply looking at Modersohn-Becker’s paintings but they write poems to embody her as a character, it is necessary that the subject each time speaking in the poems has something of a painter’s consciousness and gaze. And it is here that Marin’s questioning around the nature of the subject in painting seems equally valid to detect the subject speaking in the poems:

The thrust of such questioning is to benefit a multiple, fragmentary subject, bearer of a plural gaze, or else to favour the one that I myself had identified in my research on utopia and modes of cartographic presentation in the seventeenth century, a *nonsubject*, at once everywhere and nowhere, but *one whose disappearance has the paradoxical result of animating things themselves in their representation of a visual self-presentation, of a sort of “thing-consciousness”* [...] (251 my emphasis)

The subject, however, does not disappear in the same way in Michaels’, Bhatt’s and Rich’s poems, and the “thing-consciousness,” which seems so close to Rilke’s idea of the voice speaking in the poem, is not equally attained in their writing. Moreover, one could say that in the dramatic monologues written in Paula’s voice the subject cannot completely disappear as the visual representations contained in the poems are always mediated by verbal language, which

always bears trace of the speaker's subjectivity, even when words are modelled on the silence of the image.

## *How Ghosts Enter the World*

“Language is how ghosts enter the world”

Anne Michaels, “What the Light Teaches”<sup>3</sup>

Anne Michaels<sup>4</sup> published the collection *Miner’s Pond* – which includes the poem “Modersohn-Becker” where she gives voice to the painter – in 1991. As in 1996 she published her first novel, *Fugitive Pieces*, which, in the author’s words, took her ten years to complete,<sup>5</sup> the writing of the poems and of the novel obviously went in parallel. In the meantime Michaels also wrote two very intense essays, “Unseen Formations” (1992) and “Cleopatra’s Love” (1994). During that decade she was so involved in her writing, that recurrent themes are to be found both in her creative and critical writing, in prose and in poetry. Her poems, first novel and essays therefore illuminate one another, allowing the reader to become familiar with Michaels’ most cherished concerns. As the focus here is her poem giving voice to Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Fugitive Pieces* and the two essays will be evoked in those points where they seem to cast light on the poem.

The first thing to be observed is that Michaels, while talking about her poetry-writing in her essays, often refers to *painting* to explain the creative process. In “Unseen Formations” she needs to parallel her writing to painting when she explains that a poem takes a huge amount of time to emerge from experience:

For me, it takes an average of four years for a long poem to reveal itself; one must wait for every connecting image and metaphor to rise organically from the themes; large themes are revealed through small details: these details either push up or the landscape they’re embedded in, erodes; the poem emerges. As in painting, whether one is applying pigment or gouging, each stroke is for depth. [...] And just as every landscape continues to form itself, the writer fantasizes that the poem continues to change, in the reader’s experience. (97)

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<sup>3</sup> *Miner’s Pond* 113.

<sup>4</sup> Anne Michaels was born in 1958 in Toronto, where she lives with her family. Besides being the author of three highly praised poetry collections, *The Weight of Oranges*, *Miner’s Pond* and, most recently, *Skin Divers*, she wrote two novels: *Fugitive Pieces* (1996), a long time #1 national best-selling and winner of many international prizes, and her latest book, *The Winter Vault*, which was published in 2010.

<sup>5</sup> She personally told me this, during a conversation we had in 2001 in Castel Goffredo, a small village close to Mantova where she was awarded a prize for *Fugitive Pieces*.

Jakob Beer, the Polish protagonist of *Fugitive Pieces*, a survivor of the Holocaust who hid in the ground of the flooded archaeological site of the city of Biskupin, and was then saved by the Greek archaeologist Athos Roussos, becomes a poet and his first collection is called *Groundwork*. His verses, dedicated to his parents and sister Bella, who were killed by the Nazis when he was a child, similarly emerge from the soil: “My love for my family has grown for years in decay-fed soil, an unwashed root pulled suddenly from the ground. Bulbous as a beet, a huge eye under a lid of earth. Scoop out the eye, blind the earth” (*Fugitive Pieces* 206). Sinking concretely into the ground, which is salvific for Jakob as a child when he escapes the Holocaust, is also nearly a concrete way for Michaels to plunge into poetry, as she hints when she explains the title and content of *Miner’s Pond*:

Not surprisingly, I explore events through geology, natural history as well as biography, history. At any given moment – say, in the elusive dream stillness of an August afternoon – the ground could give way and you could find yourself tumbling down a primeval mine. The title of my last book, *Miner’s Pond* – tries to hint that being able to see the water’s surface and down to the bottom at the same time – the present moment and the past – are of equal importance. (“Unseen Formations” 96-97)

The attentive reader here can also be reminded of Rilke’s “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes,” and the “strange unfathomed mine of souls” where he sets the scene of his poem. Michaels’ description of the partly unconscious process of poetry writing, where “you could find yourself tumbling down a primeval mine,” seems to reunite both Orpheus and Eurydice in one same figure, as if the poet aimed at a double gaze, allowing to see “the water’s surface and down to the bottom at the same time.” As if the poet could contemporarily stay in death’s kingdom and surface from the ground to sing. The netherworld contains all the secrets and mysteries of life, and words are needed to bring them – as far as possible – to light.

It is interesting to notice that landscape description, as well as the many references to geology, which in *Fugitive Pieces* are so relevant and connected to Athos Roussos’ studies and Jakob Beer’s poetry writing, in the essay “Cleopatra’s Love” are related by Michaels to the art of painting: “We carry the futile hope that by attempting to represent experience, we’ll capture what’s there, even if it’s hidden; that we will somehow be able to render the invisible visible, like the painter who learns the geology of the landscape before he attempts to paint it” (14). Therefore it is not by sheer chance that both in *Fugitive Pieces* and in “Cleopatra’s Love” Michaels quotes the same passage of The Zohar which says “All visible things will be born



again invisible” (*Fugitive Pieces* 48 and “Cleopatra’s Love” 14). The process of giving birth to a subject in a poem where a woman painter speaks is to be taken literally, as a similar ‘generative principle’ characterizes ekphrasis according to Heffernan: “Traditionally, [...] ekphrasis is dynamic and obstetric, delivering from the pregnant moment of visual art the extended narrative which it embryonically signifies” (Heffernan 113). What is ‘embryonically signified’ in ekphrasis can be said to take full human shape in the dramatic monologue written in Paula’s voice. Poetry writing and painting are therefore equally devoted to the task of delving into the unknown and finding the suitable way to convey its essence while giving it back to the darkness. Strokes of colour and words are both limited mediums, and therefore bound to failure:

A real power of words is that they make our ignorance more precise. Writing is negative aspiration: to work strenuously towards the moment when failure is confirmed. For minutes, sometimes even months after ‘completing’ a poem, the writer can believe she’s glimpsed knowledge larger than her own experience. [...] Writing is a desperate act, in the sense that one always knows it will end in failure. What’s on the page is only an entry point for what’s still buried in ourselves. A shred, a shadow. Truth is guided by the impeccable security system of the uncertainty principle: the poem is the trail in the cloud chamber. (“Unseen Formations” 97)

Yet, what Michaels here detects in poetry-writing seems more to recall that same “duality of failure and perfection” (*Pictures into Words* 163) that Rilke conveyed in his poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” as the totalizing experience of the work of art is allowed precisely by what is missing or still unknown.

With reference to Coleridge’s distinction between two kinds of creative imagination discussed by Bayley in *The Characters of Love* (“that of Shakespeare, which enters into living things and reveals their own life; and that of Milton, which draws them into its own ego and gives out its own unique version of them” 19), Michaels’ creative imagination in giving life to Becker and the other characters in *Miner’s Pond* is certainly closer to the first kind. The Miltonic imagination in fact is typical of most romantic poets, who “give us a view of the subject whose success depends not on authority or profundity but on their confidence in themselves, and the extent to which they can make us share their view” (21-22). Michaels’ awareness of the inevitable failure undermining the poem which nevertheless needs to be written is more in line with the poet Bayley defines, rather surprisingly, as the most unromantic poet of his generation, that is to say John Keats, who – according to Bayley – “echoed the idea of the

Shakespearian imagination in his phrase ‘negative capability’ – the power of creating without having a vision of one’s own” (19).

In *Miner’s Pond*, there is another poem besides “Modersohn-Becker” that gives voice to a painter,<sup>6</sup> and precisely to Pierre-Auguste Renoir, who is not named but is unmistakably evoked by Michaels through the biographical details. Even though the poem, unlike “Modersohn-Becker,” is not pervaded by a sense of failure, it nonetheless concludes with an image of incompleteness: “One day, without lifting a hand, / the form in my head / will be exactly what I see” (*Miner’s Pond* 97). It is however in “Modersohn-Becker” that Paula, as embodied by Michaels, continually collides with the limits of painting (“Every day, failure boiled up into my throat / and stayed there” 79). Yet the concrete limit, which Michaels equally identifies with the ‘line’ in the poem and in the painting – where it contours the image so as to give it substance –, is the necessary boundary to contain the potentially infinite consistency of the object of creation:

Language is artificial, of course, relying on juxtaposition to represent the world, just as the artist draws the imaginary line around the apple to create the illusion of its shape to give the illusion of its depth.

The poetic line is a boundary, a vessel; it can be made well and sing its tension.

But ultimately the poem itself is a loose net, a sieve, both unviable and durable as a physical object: a web of molecules that gives the illusion of wholeness. A net of densities.  
 (“Cleopatra’s Love” 15)

Rilke’s anguish over the inability of poetry to create “corporal objects,” is replaced by Michaels’ awareness that the poem *is* “a physical object.” In the same way, the embodiment of the painter’s voice is an accomplished creative process in “Modersohn-Becker,” as Michaels does *become* Paula in the space of the poem. There are no specific technical devices sustaining the poet in her willingness to be invaded by another’s personality. What one can infer is that Michaels has sunk into the mine of the biographical facts of Becker’s life, and from her writing the painter has emerged, surprisingly bringing with her knowledge of indescribable things, together with images and silence. Such identification is undoubtedly mysterious and partly unconscious but, as Michaels herself explains in a wonderful passage of “Unseen Formations” worth quoting in full, it is certainly supported by a good deal of research and finally allowed by the recognition of some personal reason for finding oneself so involved in another’s life:

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<sup>6</sup> There is another poem, “Stone,” dedicated to Modigliani, but he does not speak in the first person, as the voice in the poem belongs to Lunia Czechowska, a Russian émigrée.

In keeping with my sense of the poem as a slice of time, I've tried several ways of exploring the ways in which a life can embody an age, historically and geologically, including writing biographical 'monologues.' An attempt to collapse time. A poem about Johannes Kepler finding his faith in the 1600s: the result of a dozen years' research into the mathematician's life, waiting to understand fully my fascination with him, waiting for the discovery of where our experience could cross paths – separated by 350 years, gender, religious belief, his genius, an ocean! A voice that reaches you over a great distance of time and space, calls to you for a reason. And only after that personal motive is discovered, perhaps after years, can the 'universal' motive be discovered; and only then can the poem emerge, sometimes seeming sudden and casual as a conversation recalled. Complicated intimacy takes time; and this slowness is pleasurable. Memories begin to acquire meaning. (98)

The fact that Becker is much closer to Michaels in time, and that she is a woman artist, only apparently makes the task easier with respect to her embodiment of Johannes Kepler, as the biographical information learned through research is useless without a boundless sharing of the most inscrutable interiority: "The quest to discover another's psyche, to absorb another's motives as deeply as our own, is a lover's quest. But the search for facts, for places, names, influential events, important conversations and correspondences, political circumstances – all this amounts to nothing if you can't find the assumption your subject lives by" (*Fugitive Pieces* 222). Michaels' double involvement with her characters, as a lover as well as a researcher, undoubtedly recalls Bayley's analysis of contrasting approaches to the theme of love which he undertakes in *The Characters of Love*:

What I understand by an author's love for his characters is a delight in their independent existence as other people, an attitude towards them which is analogous to our feelings towards those we love in life; and an intense interest in their personalities combined with a sort of detached solicitude, a respect for their freedom. (7-8)

Part of Michaels' attraction for Becker as a character is probably due to the painter's tendency to equate art with love, as reported in the passage of her husband's journal quoted in the first chapter<sup>7</sup> and also in a journal entry dated 8<sup>th</sup> March 1906, where Becker reflects upon her own previous annotation about art: "Last year I wrote: the intensity with which a subject is grasped, that is what makes for beauty in art. Isn't it also true for love?" (*Letters and Journals*

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<sup>7</sup> See p. 61.

386). In a very similar way, Michaels cannot but see poetry-writing as a physical as well as mental act of love:

The poem enters the body through the brain: it is a taste crushed open in the mouth as sound; vowels of light in our eyes; it summons bodily experience universal and yet intimate to each of us; can fill us with longing for a different, unspoken name known to each reader alone.

The poem, by continually seeming to know more than we do, and by its continual embrace of the protean world, is like Cleopatra's love: making hungry where most it satisfies.

The poem, like love, is consciousness made flesh. It quietly wakes us: across brain, across skin, the wet line of the tongue. ("Cleopatra's Love" 15)

As for Michaels' definition of her own poems as "biographical 'monologues'" with the last word in inverted commas, it is possible that she calls them this as often more than one voice speaks within them, and her monologues are to be considered "biographical" because the 'dramatic' aspect is less relevant if one compares them to the ones written by Robert Browning. The voice that speaks in "Modersohn-Becker" could easily be a written translation of the painter's thoughts or a series of imaginary entries in her journals. But she is not certainly speaking aloud and there is no audience in the poem listening to her words. Michaels attains the interesting paradox of giving the painter a 'silent voice,' which is the more convincing and involving precisely because the reader cannot say for sure whether she is actually speaking or not. In fact, as one can learn from some episodes reported in Becker's letters or from biographies on her life, she was not usually very talkative,<sup>8</sup> nor did she talk with anyone about the experiences which were most meaningful for her. As seen in the first chapter, for example she never mentioned either in her letters or her journals having seen Cézanne's paintings at Vollard's gallery, but later on in a letter to Clara confessed how he was one of the few artists whose work had affected her "like a thunderstorm."

The semiology of painting has something to say with regard to this, especially when this science is seen in an aesthetic light. As Omar Calabrese states in *Semiotica della pittura*, for the viewer of the work of art, silence is the "statuto superiore dell'ammirazione" ("the superior statute of admiration" 44). And René Passeron in his essay "Sull'apporto della poetica alla

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<sup>8</sup> As she wrote to her aunt Marie Hill on 29th January 1903: "If you feel that you have not gotten many letters from me this year, please blame it on a certain taciturnity in me which I think I've always had, in conversation as well as in my letters. Sometimes I hardly ever speak at all, and Elsbeth has to keep bombarding me with new and clever questions to get more than just a yes or a no. Perhaps it comes from the fact that my thoughts, consciously or unconsciously, are always directed toward my one goal. I can't explain it any other way" (*Letters and Journals* 289).

semiologia del pittorico,” contained in the same volume, states something which is very coherent with Becker’s taciturnity with respect to painting and Michaels’ representation of her as a character, that is to say that looking at a painting is an aesthetic experience which reaches its apex in a silent contemplation. In many passages of her journals, Becker profusely described the pictures she would like to paint as if she were already seeing them before really doing them, while in some cases she would never actually get round to doing them. What is actually revealing in Passeron’s essay is when he states that one starts reading and analyzing a painting only when one is not moved by it anymore. That is to say when emotion does not link the spectator to the work of art anymore. Silence is therefore the most direct language to convey absolute possession by the work of art. Passeron goes even further and affirms that a painting is like a dear person, like a psychic nourishment where some food for the mind can be found daily (44). The only difference between a person and a painting is that this latter is less mortal, more permanent and definitive, eternal in the present time, and it is done by human hands.

Michael’s poem is so impressive precisely for the fact that, as Marin would say about a painting, a person is brought from absence into presence. Poetry is therefore empowered as a means of reviving someone who is not there. One could hardly have a more creative conception of art.

A similar task is spontaneously undergone by Jakob Beer when he starts writing the poems dedicated to his family which, in his dear friend Maurice Selman’s opinion, “aren’t poems, they’re ghost stories” (*Fugitive Pieces* 163). Any poet, like Beer, must rely on the most mystic power of incantation of poetry if his or her verses are intended to give life to someone, that is to say “to carry experience”:

I became obsessed by the palpable edge of sound. The moment when language at last surrenders to what it’s describing: the subtlest differentials of light or temperature or sorrow. I’m a kabbalist only in that I believe in the power of incantation. A poem is neural as love; the rut of rhythm that veers the mind. (*Fugitive Pieces* 163-64)

If Beer tries “to reconstruct events in minute details” to give his parents’ and sister’s death a place, in “Modersohn-Becker” Michaels revives Paula so as to try to bring her briefly back to life in a way to suspend a moment from finite time and consign her to the eternal time of art as if the painter could continue to live there, if not in real life. It is the same kind of creative process that Rilke strove to attain in his *New Poems*, where he tried to re-create the world through metamorphosis and, as Jongeneel says, “positing his own objects in an altered, unsettling presence. By resuscitating lived experience and confining it to a poetical form, the poet wrests

the experience from time and creates eternity” (*Pictures into Words* 159). In Michaels’ case, however, it is a woman painter and not an object that is to be re-created within the poem. This is why “Modersohn-Becker” also seems prompted by the need – on Michaels’ part – to give her a second chance, as Becker died so young that, despite the many hints at her early death contained in her letters and journals, she could not actually have expected it to happen so soon. Moreover, in a letter written to Martha Hauptmann at the beginning of 1907 – that is to say the same year of her own death – Becker noted down a few stunning lines about her ‘incompleteness,’<sup>9</sup> which, if read nearly one century after her early death, cannot but leave the sympathetic reader with the wish that something could be done to grant her that ‘wholeness’ which unfortunately was denied to her in real life.

Michaels therefore enters that reign of art where, thanks to imagination, she can give meaning to a life so soon interrupted and leave it suspended at the end of the poem, where apparently it can never end. It is the same ‘mending duty’ that Beer assigns to himself as a poet not only concerning his family but also the victims of the Holocaust who “were torn from mistakes they had no chance to fix; everything unfinished. All the sins of love without detail, detail without love. The regret of having spoken, of having run out of time to speak. Of hoarding oneself. Of turning one’s back too often in favour of sleep” (*Fugitive Pieces* 147). Poetry, as Michaels intends it, can therefore become redemptive:

Some writing redeems lost chances. What a private grace – that in the white dimension of the page, there’s room thick with the weather of irony, loud with words never spoken; where ideological or metaphysical or physical passions have been pulled taut over time, significant moments eternally fraying thin with intensity. (“Unseen Formations” 99)

Michaels’ idea of the poet’s task is strangely coincident with the nineteenth-century theory on the nature and function of poetry, as discussed by Robert Langbaum in *The Poetry of Experience*, where he explains that the poet “is neither ‘the creator’ of one traditional poetic theory, nor yet the ‘mirror’ or ‘imitator’ of another. For while he works only with extant facts, his meaning is not quite there for imitation; he must find his meaning by restoring to the facts a concreteness they have lost in the process of becoming facts, of being abstracted from their original human and historical situations” (134). If this is still valid at the end of the twentieth century, and still finds the dramatic monologue as its privileged means of expression, it is also due to historical reasons.

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<sup>9</sup> “I am still an incomplete person and should so like to become someone. I still lack things inside and out, but I have private hopes that someday I’ll become something whole” (*Letters and Journals* 414).

As Michaels too has underlined in “Cleopatra’s Love” but also in *Fugitive Pieces*,

if language can be enriched, it can also be poisoned: if language is a repository of memory, it is also a repository of history. The simple absorption of events without ethical consideration can be devastating. The most obvious example is the euphemism: the exploding bomb referred to as “energy release,” the dangerous breakdown of equipment in a nuclear plant that “fails to meet functioning criteria as per design requirements.” At its most extreme, this abuse of language is perpetuated precisely in order to render the immoral, moral. As we well know, the fact is not always the truth. While metaphor uses “fabrication” to get at a truth, euphemism uses fact in order to mislead.

Meaning isn’t truth, though we long for it to be. (“Cleopatra’s Love” 15)

Such a relativist conception of truth is certainly not a twentieth-century invention, as Robert Browning already in *The Ring and the Book* (1868-69) attempted to replace the objective view of events of traditional drama and narrative with points of view offering different versions of truth. The dramatic monologue becomes such a useful genre of poetry precisely when the poet wants to filter the reality contained in the poem through a character’s eyes. In Langbaum’s words, “such a method can be justified only on the relativist assumption that truth cannot be apprehended in itself but must be ‘induced’ from particular points of view” (109). This is why Langbaum’s portrait of the poet undergoing a projection into one or more characters is in perfect consonance with Michaels’ vision of the redeeming power of poetry:

the poet as “resuscitator” is the superlatively effective psychologist and historian, the arch-empiricist who works toward greater concreteness and not, as in traditional poetic theory, toward general truths. His talent lies in the “surplusage of soul” which enables him to project himself into the facts, apprehend them sympathetically in other words, and thus apprehend their life. His poem establishes a pole for sympathy, so that the reader, too, can project himself into the facts and apprehend their life. For both poet and reader, to “see into the life of things” is to see their meaning. Meaning comes not from theoretical interpretation but from the intensest concreteness. (*Poetry of Experience* 134)

Yet, as Beer soon discovers in *Fugitive Pieces*, when imagination is somehow exploited so as to reconstruct the dynamics of a massacre like the Holocaust, and to allow one to remain close to someone who has disappeared from the earth, it can also be a blasphemy. Imagining seems to him like the luxury of the survivor who does not want to let the dead go and that is why he asks

to be forgiven: “Forgive me, you who were born and died without being given names. Forgive this blasphemy, of choosing philosophy over the brutalism of fact” (168).

At a stunning point in the novel, Beer can remind the reader of Orpheus, who so strongly wants Eurydice (his sister Bella) back, that he exhausts himself with imagining and dreaming of a possible encounter with her:

It’s a clear October day. The wind scatters bright leaves against the blue opalescence of air. But there’s no sound. Bella and I have entered a dream, the animate colour surrounding us intense, every leaf twitching as if on the verge of sleep. Bella is happy: the whole birch forest gathers itself in her expression. Now we hear the river and move towards it, the swirls and eddies of Brahms’s Intermezzo No. 2 that descend, descend, andante non troppo, rising only in one final gust. *I turn and Bella’s gone; my glance has caused her to vanish.* [...] It’s dark; dogwood becomes her white dress. A shadow, her black hair. The river, her black hair. Moonlight, her white dress. (125 my emphasis)

Here Beer has committed the same mistake as Orpheus, as he has turned to look at Bella-Eurydice, thus breaking the taboo, and he undergoes the same punishment: he loses his closeness to her and she suddenly disappears from his dream. However, like Eurydice, she will come back in his poems. He will be able to write so as to sing in a paradoxical mixture of absence and presence of his beloved family.

It is thanks to writing that Beer discovers in his own life what Orpheus ascertains after descending into the netherworld:

*To remain with the dead is to abandon them.*

All the years I felt Bella entreating me, filled with her loneliness, I was mistaken. I have misunderstood her signals. Like other ghosts, she whispers; not for me to join her, but so that, when I’m close enough, she can push me back into the world. (170)

In the same way Michaels gives life to the painter within her poem, and by ending it she abandons her – not to death but to the realm of art, where she will be perpetually alive. This is the orphic task of the poet, who has to descend into the netherworld to give someone back to life. Apparently, though, due to the poet’s mortality, he or she will be inevitably overwhelmed by the human desire to turn back. The poet’s actual task therefore consists in the sad and lonely return to the surface, where, in a double dimension of eternity and finite time, he or she will give voice to the lost soul that has been reconquered by the shadows.



*“Modersohn-Becker” Part One: Containing Two Souls*

MODERSOHN-BECKER

(from *Miner’s Pond*, 1991)

I.

It did not free me to leave him.

All day at Worpswede rain stretches to the ground,  
air like wood grain; burls of cloud.

Bark puckers on thin trees:  
fingers too long in water.

By the end of the path, my sweater is beaded  
with mist, a silver armour.

Where road wedges forest,  
workhorses stagger like bodybuilders.

Snow is messy with spring, mud stains  
under trees, like pools of shadow.

These are days when day doesn’t arrive;  
at night the same darkness falls into place.

I could smell pipe smoke in his hair.

Before I left,  
in the peculiar quiet of a winter house,  
windows startled dumb with ice –  
we sat together on the stairs.

His head leaned on the banister.

Everyone said I was selfish.

Fear is selfish.

From Paris I wrote his name on a year of envelopes  
until I finally saw

the shape of it: Otto – two bodies, two mouths.

The gutter ran with lights  
and in the empty street I heard our loneliness

in a dog's throat.

Every way into myself  
fills up with blood.

The joy that's close to terror; colour,  
the hot pulse that hurts through veins.

In this light his eyes are clotted with oil.  
The studio smells of wood smoke.  
The birds ask their same questions.

My hands are stained with his face.

Anne Michaels' choice to give the title "Modersohn-Becker" to the poem written in Paula's voice is highly meaningful, as it does not mention Paula's first name but just her double surname as a married woman. For Michaels what is important is not so much the painter's decision that to find her way she has to return to Paris and leave her husband, as the moment in which she decides to go back to her marriage.

The poem is composed of three numbered sections, which are like three different chapters of a condensed novel. The facts and events which take place in them do not aim to narrate Paula's story but the reader gets the impression of overhearing her thoughts, memories, wishes and secret feelings. As in the poem Michaels tries to reproduce the actual working of the painter's mental associations, a linear temporal structure is carefully avoided. A close observation of the tenses in the first section, show that time is fragmented not only with a continual alternation of past and present, but with a further differentiation within the present. Émile Benveniste, in his essay "Les relations de temps dans le verbe français" (Benveniste 237-50) observed a difference between "*l'énonciation historique*," that is to say the narration of past events usually in the past simple, and "*le plan du discours*," either in the present tense or present perfect (linking past and present).<sup>10</sup> Yet in "Modersohn-Becker" the reader immediately perceives that besides a present referring to the 'here-and-now' ("In this light his eyes are clotted with oil. / The studio smells of wood smoke. / The birds ask their same questions." 75), there is another present, which seems to be eternal ("Every way into myself / fills up with blood. // The joy that's close to terror; colour, /

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the use of verbal tenses in Michaels' "What the Light Teaches," see my essay "Giving Voice to Silence: Fugitive Figures in Anne Michaels' Poems."

the hot pulse that hurts through veins.” 75). If the former recalls Paula’s actual surrounding space of the studio, the latter seems to refer to a truth perceived by her which, precisely because it is so intimate, is universally meaningful.

In other words, the present of her life does not totally coincide with the present of her art. The use of the deictics is extremely revealing here: “In *this* light” in fact refers to Paula’s here-and-now while the other verses taking the reader to the perpetual present of painting are not set in any actual space surrounding Paula but spring from her body. “My hands are stained with his face,” is therefore a highly meaningful verse, which is however impossible to locate in time and space. As in the first section there is no precise time reference, the reader just perceives that it is a moment that belongs to Paula’s present. Otto is not there, yet the mark of his absence, the “stains” of his face on his wife’s hands, just imply that her body, while it is involved in the process of painting, contains two souls, her own as well as her husband’s. The fact that Becker needed to be distanced from her husband to feel their intimate union is frequently echoed in her journals. When Modersohn was temporarily absent from Worpswede, Becker wrote to him on 4<sup>th</sup> November 1902:

Coming back to our birch trees was lovely. I saw everything through the gentle veil of your absence. I guess we really are, each of us, already a part of the other. I can feel how very much I live inside you. But I also love this separation because it transforms this living inside each other into a spiritual thing. I love it when my body steps back occasionally – I change back and forth from a brittle avoidance of your physical presence to the most passionate desire for the next physical union. (*Letters and Journals* 285)

As seen in the first chapter, however, one should remember that until 1906 Becker’s marriage was unconsummated, a very important biographical detail which is never mentioned by Michaels, who instead later on in the poem mentions Paula’s marriage as a source of physical knowledge and happiness.

In the poem the shape of her intimate unity with her husband is represented by his name, Otto, which is “two bodies, two mouths” because of the two vertical lines of the double ‘t’ and the two circles of the two ‘o.’ Curiously enough, in Italian *otto* is the number eight, which contains two symmetrical shapes too. The poem makes it clear that Paula, despite her loneliness, is not alone when she paints. Maybe she needs to be lonely to be invaded by images of landscape and people. Only in that condition can she distil her reality into painting. During her third stay in Paris, on 17<sup>th</sup> February 1905, Becker wrote to her husband: “When I try to picture you, it’s as if I were looking through fog, as if into another life” (*Letters and Journals* 348).

This cannot but confirm that painting for her was making use of memory and imagination to give shape to her innermost experience. Memory and imagination are precisely the two forces and creative sources which sustain Michaels' writing not only in her poetry but in *Fugitive Pieces* as well.

Louis Marin's assumption of a reflecting mode and a self-reflecting one, which are equally present in any work of art, is undoubtedly confirmed here. If Paula needs to be alone to be invaded by reality and then transfix it into images, Jakob Beer in *Fugitive Pieces* cannot but feel the same loneliness when his need of words is closer to desire: "This hunger for sound is almost as sharp as desire, as if one could honour every inch of flesh in words; and so, suspend time. A word is at home in desire. No station of the heart is more full of solitude than desire which keeps the world poised, poisoned with beauty, whose only permanence is loss" (163). Michaels' words on poetry, as well as her poem "Modersohn-Becker," seem in fact instances of the "poetry of arrest," which Bayley discusses in *The Uses of Division*, concerning various poets, and in particular John Keats and Philip Larkin. The effect of "arrest" is created when all action or progression is suspended in the poem, and the character yields to contemplation. "Happiness is a still life," (175) writes Bayley commenting on Larkin's poetry, and such an expression seems stunningly suited to Paula as a character in Michaels' poem. Her memories and visions inside the poem, in fact, now and then are stilled into verbal pictures. And in those moments Paula feels one with herself, as if she did not lack anything, or rather, as if she could eventually disappear into her art by leaving space to her creative self and so give shape to absence.

In this first section, the image of Worpswede, for instance, is recreated through an alternation of movement and stillness, until the small village is finally suspended in total absence of time, as if it were perpetually enveloped in an unchangeable and obscure rhythm which excludes the light ("These are days when day doesn't arrive; / at night the same darkness falls into place" 74). The landscape is not depicted in one precise moment. Or rather, the beginning of the poem opens with what seems to be an habitual atmosphere, to make way for the painter's presence within it ("By the end of the path, my sweater is beaded / with mist, a silver armour"). Paula seems to be there like a visual image that interrupts the landscape on a par with the trees and animals animating it. All the details are finally collected in the final absence of light as if in a frame.

The quotation from Fyodor Dostoevsky that Michaels affixes to the poem ("*There are many degrees of power in the world, and nowhere is the difference in degree greater than in the case of human will and human desire, just as water boils at one temperature, and molten iron at another*" 74), underlying the difference between "human will" and "human desire," clarifies

why one present is not enough to represent Paula's life and art. According to Louis Marin in his essay "Critical Remarks on Enunciation," in fact,

certain texts, certain forms of writing, attempt and reveal – through the very impossibility of succeeding at them – the *expression* (and I do mean expression) of the here-and-now of desire that I have tried to circumscribe by these philosophical reflections on enunciation: an example might be what I have elsewhere called the utopian structure of figurative or literary texts that seem indeed to develop their representation only as a space or a scene of play where the present, atemporal instant of desire blazes forth, where time and space come together and cancel each other out inside discourse in the immediate and singular intensity of reading or viewing. (Marin 140)

"Human desire" not only finds expression in an "atemporal present," but that perpetual time in Paula's case is the dimension of painting, which is apart from daily life and requires a good deal of energy to be nurtured. This is why the opening line of the poem, "It did not free me to leave him," which seems to respond to Rilke's belief that lovers had "to let each other go," is a kind of correction of that absolute statement. Paula's freedom to dedicate herself to her art does not depend entirely on her separation from her husband. There is much more to it than that. Rilke's vision of art is a simplification, and his painter friend finds it somehow sterile. As the poem goes on, fragment by fragment, alternating images of Worpswede with memories of Paris, the reader does not even know where Paula is at the moment of speaking, but this fact is not particularly relevant. Michaels' stunning poem seems in fact to recreate the mental and spiritual space where Paula is painting, and in that boundless space alone can she find her freedom. More than the possibility of being entirely herself, she seems to give herself the chance of being selfless so as to become one with her work. It is an extremely hazardous journey which demands all the artist's energy. And it is for this reason that the required concentration – as in Paula's case – is often mistaken by other people for egotism ("Everyone said I was selfish. / Fear is selfish").

If this notation could easily come from her journal commenting the reproofs that were often made to her by her family, it is interesting that Michaels in the poem changes a very important biographical detail. Before Becker's fourth departure for Paris, she never sat with her husband on the stairs, for the simple reason that, as Torgersen reports, she left the night after Otto's birthday, while he slept. And, what is more, her escape was carefully planned in advance without her husband's knowing, as is evinced from the letter Becker wrote to her sister Herma

on 9<sup>th</sup> February 1905 which is reported in the first chapter.<sup>11</sup> What difference does this detail make in the economy of the poem? Quite a relevant one, as in Michaels' poem there is no hint that Becker was disappointed by her marriage either and that the reason why she wanted to separate from her husband was not only to pursue her art more devotedly. Michaels, who however in her note to the text<sup>12</sup> mentions the "wrenching struggle" in the painter between family duty and her art, either through ignorance of this fact or from a wish to show Paula under a more respectful light, depicts her family duty as much more strongly felt than it actually was at that precise moment.

It seems closer to the truth that Paula's devotion to her art, in the poem as it was in her life, requires that she lives in between different worlds. This is why Paris, or rather, the recollection of Paris, in Paula's mind became superimposed over images of Worpswede and the people she loved there. Worpswede here is evoked in a way which is not realistic at all, and in the following lines Paris appears as if it were just the place where she fled to feel the real breadth of her relationship with Otto more strongly ("From Paris I wrote his name on a year of envelopes / until I finally saw / the shape of it: Otto – two bodies, two mouths" 74-75).

The superimposition of different times and places is recurrent also in *Fugitive Pieces*. The numerous passages where the mysterious sentence "Every moment is two moments" is repeated in the novel probably helps in understanding the complicated structure of "Modersohn-Becker." In *Fugitive Pieces*, the duality of time is certainly due to the existence of two dimensions, profoundly different, yet secretly dependent upon one another: *history* and *memory*. If in the novel, having the Holocaust as its main theme, it is an ethical difference that divides them ("History is amoral: events occurred. But memory is moral: what we consciously remember is what our conscience remembers" *Fugitive Pieces* 138), one cannot say that the poem is directly concerned with "History" with a capital 'H.' That is why the difference between history and memory acquires a slightly different meaning. In "Cleopatra's Love," Michaels reaffirms the two concepts, but in an expanded way which clarifies the superimposition of times and places in "Modersohn-Becker":

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<sup>11</sup> See p. 64.

<sup>12</sup> "MODERSOHN-BECKER

German painter Paula Becker (1876-1907) regarded both commitments – family duty and her art – with equal seriousness; her short life was marked by a wrenching struggle between the two. She left the artists' colony of Worpswede, where she'd been living with her husband, the painter Otto Modersohn, for Paris. She returned to the marriage and later that year, at age thirty-one, she died suddenly, shortly after giving birth to their only child" (*Miner's Pond* 121).

The distinction between knowledge and “poetic knowing” resembles the distinction between history and memory.

Knowledge/History is essentially amoral: events occurred. “Poetic Knowing/Memory is inextricably linked with morality: history’s source is event, but memory’s source is meaning. Often what we consciously remember is what our conscience remembers. (15)

“Poetic Knowing,” which is closer to memory, would therefore register just what is deemed meaningful by one’s conscience. Einstein’s relativity certainly contributed to give an explanation of this kind of perception. As reported by Michaels in *Fugitive Pieces*:

Einstein: “... all our judgements in which time plays a part are always judgements of simultaneous events. If, for instance, I say the train arrived here at seven o’ clock, I mean: the small hand of my watch pointing to seven and the arrival of the train are simultaneous events... the time of the event has no operational meaning...” The event is meaningful only if the coordination of time and place is witnessed. (160-61)

To go back to the poem, the fact that Paula is a painter is reflected in her way of perceiving outer and inner reality. If the simple past signals *history* – that is to say just something that happened – the present or the present perfect is often the mark of the painter’s consciousness being at work so as to select from that history those meaningful aspects that she considers important for her art. This is very clearly expressed in Becker’s letter to her aunt Marie Hill dated 20<sup>th</sup> April 1903:

It is strange; what people usually call “experiences” play such a small role in my life. I believe that I had some of them, too, but they don’t seem to be the most important things in my life at all. What lies between these so-called experiences, the daily course of events, that’s what makes me happy. And that is also why I seem to have so little to say in my letters – for these small, mostly private things can probably be captured in writing only by a more knowing hand than mine. In that same sense, my trip to Paris simply passed by, and now I really don’t think much about it. I am often amazed about it myself. But while I was there it did bring me new insights, and now I’m already busy again building on that foundation. *I believe that I live very intensely in the present.* (*Letters and Journals* 316 my emphasis)

Michaels here is perfectly able to enter Paula’s creative process in painting also because the same elaboration of experience is at the base of her poetry-writing considered as an expression

of consciousness. As she writes in “Cleopatra’s Love,” “Whenever I attempt to utter experience, words turn it to dross; language is broken, bulky, dissolute. Fraudulent, inaccurate. Drunken. Too reverential, too referential. Lusterless or too lustrous. We labor over sounds in the attempt to reclaim experience. A line that works is a seizure. Suddenly the skin surmises” (14).

In *The Poetry of Experience*, Langbaum observes the same shift from the past to the present that can be found at the opening of “Modersohn-Becker” in Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem “Windhover,” and comes to a similar deduction:

The shift from the past tense of the octave to the present tense of the sestet suggests that the whole poem takes place during the moment of understanding; while the language catches the immediacy of the moment before conventional syntax has through its analysing function separated subject from object, thus turning experience into memory. (69)

One can say that in “Modersohn-Becker” experience, and memory as well, are turned into painting. Paula’s consciousness works this way in the poem. To feel her intimate unity with her husband, she needs to turn it into an image. And she hears her own and her husband’s loneliness “in a dog’s throat.” It is true that this last image is a sonorous one, and yet it confirms Paula’s need of outer reality to perceive her inner reality. This was also the same urge that drove Becker to Paris, because – as seen in the first chapter – she considered the French capital a chance for external, active life compared with the inner one which was possible in Worpswede.

Painting is for Paula like a sixth sense reuniting all the others, among which sight is nevertheless dominant. What she feels is often contradictory, and this confirms Bayley’s claim that usually the most successful poems are pervaded by a divided voice and conscience. For instance, the mysterious annotation that “Every way into myself / fills up with blood” could hint at a necessary injury – or death – that has to take place before her body can give way to painting. Yet it could equally depict the utmost vitality of her body, which when creating is invaded by a rush of blood giving her strength and energy. It is interesting to notice that emotions or feelings are not usually the object of an interpretation on Paula’s part. Synaesthesia, a word which can be used either in terms of psychological or linguistic analysis, is curiously at the base of her perceptions. Joy is colour, the red blood flowing into veins. What is already evident in these first lines of the poem is that Paula as created by Michaels sees painting as a physical activity, springing from the body. This is in perfect harmony with Becker’s approach to painting, as her journals report. For example, on July 3<sup>rd</sup> 1900, in Worpswede, she wrote: “All morning long I was among the trees around Bolte’s factory. Blue sky and great ballooning clouds. I felt every brush. Perhaps I shall also paint an abandoned factory, sometime” (*Letters and Journals* 193).



Michaels' approach to poetry writing, on the other hand, is intensely physical, and it is not surprising that, in explaining how a poem takes form, she refers to two visual artists – Paul Cézanne and Auguste Rodin – who, as seen in the first chapter, were so important for Becker's growth as a painter:

The senses bypass language: the ambush of a scent or weather, but language also jump starts the senses – sound or image sends us spiraling into memory or association, like Cézanne's hope that we would smell his still life; or Rodin's, that he could create the momentary illusion his sculptures were moving.

The sensual mirage is the heart of the poem. It's the moment, however brief, we take the poet's experience as our own. This connection can be so buried as to be completely mysterious (like the instant longing evoked by the rhythmic repetition in Yeats's line "I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree") or overt as an image overwhelming in its familiarity. And if the poem is able to forge an intellectual bond in the guise of the sensual illusion, the seduction is complete. ("Cleopatra's Love" 14)

Here one certainly finds one of the keys to read "Modersohn-Becker" but this passage also explains how a poet can give life to a character like Paula Modersohn-Becker. Language becomes most powerful when it yields to the other senses, and this happens when the poet (and the speaker with her) are equally overcome by some experience which is so strong as to remain beyond words. This is why the poem cannot be said to be completely successful either when it conveys through its speaker a purely intellectual experience, or when it is mainly a sensual emotion. What makes the poem work is the attained balance between the physical and the intellectual dimensions. Bayley in *The Uses of Division* once again cites Keats as the poet who was most able to attempt such a delicate equilibrium and turn the 'thought' of the body into poetry:

For when Keats explored consciousness, as Wordsworth and Coleridge had done, he explored the hinterland of mental fantasy and physical sensation, the 'falling from us, vanishings' of the sentient as well as intellectual being. He made words into adepts of previously unexpressed internal movements, the 'thought' of the body. This was never put better than by Aubrey de Vere in 1849, who remarked that 'his body seemed to think, and on the other hand he sometimes appeared hardly to know if he possessed aught but body.' (146-47)

To be successfully conveyed, such an experience of physical and mental revelation, as Langbaum underlines, necessarily requires a combination of abstraction and concrete details: “By moving away from the general truth toward the eccentric particular, the dramatic monologue communicates with the precision and concreteness the most general and tenuous ideas – making tangible such intangibles as the ‘spirit’ of an age, of a work of art, of a world-view” (144).

This is why metaphor is crucial to Michaels’ poetry writing:

If a poem can be thought of as attempting to clone an emotional, intellectual, and visceral event, then it’s the metaphor that serves as the genetic key to the whole organism; that’s one way poems can seem to contain ‘everything,’ cloned from the single cell of a present moment. (“Unseen Formations” 96)

These few intense lines explain not only the recurrence of metaphors in her poem but also Michaels’ choice of the form of the dramatic monologue, which – according to Langbaum – is particularly suited to contain some exorbitant experience within the limits of the poem. One could probably go further and affirm that the dramatic monologue as a poetical genre corresponds to metaphor as a rhetorical figure, as it allows the poet not just to talk about someone else, or feel as if she were someone else, but precisely *to become* someone else, by disappearing into the speaker’s personality within the space of the poem. Such a form of embodiment, taking place in the dramatic monologue “Modersohn-Becker” too, could not more properly reflect Becker’s attitude towards her art in its most inspired moments when she felt literally engulfed by it, as she told her aunt Marie Hill in June 1899: “The only thought I have in my mind now is to immerse myself in my art, to merge completely with it until I can begin to express what I really feel – and after that to be consumed *even* more by it” (*Letters and Journals* 135).<sup>13</sup> The same kind of total absorption is at the base of Michaels’ poetical perception, which is one with the lover’s desire to dissolve into the skin of the loved one:

We desire what we’ve lost as well as what we’ve never known. We look and look with our bodies, dissolve into places and loves, into earth and light. We look into present moments to enter what has passed there before us, to take apart a moment like a landscape –

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<sup>13</sup> It is interesting that in the previous English version of Becker’s letters and journals, dating back to the year 1980, the same letter is translated by J. Diane Radycki by emphasizing more the painter’s disappearance in her art: “At present I have only one thought, to lose myself in my art, to *disappear* in it, until I can express approximately what I feel – perhaps in order to *disappear completely*” (*The Letters and Journals of Paula Modersohn-Becker* 93-94 my emphasis).

geologically, anthropologically, atomically. When we embrace, we hold all those who have held our lover, left their scent and sensibility in their skin, who have made them see as they see, touch as they touch.

We disappear into all the details of love; the body can't get enough of specifics. The poem has the same capacity: details, down to breath. ("Cleopatra's Love" 15)

Once again, it was Keats who thought – as reported by Bayley in *The Uses of Division* – that “the poet must ‘die into life’,” (139) and that is why in Bayley's opinion he was able to attain such a perfect combination of abstraction and concreteness: “I would emphasize how wholly dramatic [in *The Evening of St Agnes*] is the balance it makes between the particular and the general, the real persons and the universalizing vision” (139).

*“Modersohn-Becker” Part Two: the Silence of the Image*

2

In 1900, Cézanne’s paintings were stacked against a wall  
in Vollard’s basement. I couldn’t believe  
those secret squares of colour, fermenting in the dark,  
unrecognized.

Paris wasn’t the same after that.

And watching Rodin shape thought,

like a blind man learning a face,

I saw what it means to merge with work.

Rodin, who felt the sculptor Clara could become,  
cut away the excess.

My friend emerged in his hands.

Watching him gather hair like flowing water

from a stone scalp,

pulling the face open

into love –

breasts like leaves dripping with rain,

legs taut as roots –

I suddenly understood that painting too

never let you escape

awareness of the human hand:

the source of light

is the painter’s body.

I thought that finding my own hot centre

would teach me colour.

Clara circled her clay while I stared so long at the canvas

I was dragged under.

Even the spirit has limits,

humility rising like silence,

the silence of light, gold rising from the fields.

•

The second very long section can be considered the ‘body’ of the poem. Even though Michaels is not following any strict structure in the development of her poem, one can say that the first section *is* a kind of exposition. It is certainly not traditional like the start of Rilke’s “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes,” and yet it is a self-presentation of Paula, the speaker of the dramatic monologue, who depicts the landscape of Worpswede surrounding her as well as the city of Paris, where she hoped to improve her art. Of course everything is filtered through her personality as created by Michaels. This is why the images she refers to not only aim to set the scene of the poem – as it was in Rilke’s “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes” – but mainly to give voice and life to her as a painter. While Rilke the poet had the beginning of his poem under control, in “Modersohn-Becker” the reader is under the incantation of Paula’s consciousness, which cannot follow any linear or logical order in the exposition of thoughts, facts and memories. The ghost who had disquieted Rilke in the *Requiem* is now given back to life in the space of the poem and speaks with her own voice (as translated by Michaels on the page).

The beginning of this second part is a narration in the simple past: some facts are revived by Paula’s memory. Those memories are particularly important for her conception of art, therefore from the simple past once again the poem shifts to the present time. As far as this particular episode is concerned, one can really say that Michaels’ poem gives voice to Becker’s silence, as in real life the painter never told anybody how impressed she was by Cézanne’s paintings when she saw them at Vollard’s gallery in 1900. As seen in the first chapter, this fact was later on reported by Clara Westhoff, who witnessed her painter friend’s reticence concerning her most intense experiences as an artist, which “could only be transformed in her work.” The poem therefore enters Becker’s silence, not to explain its meaning, but – paradoxically – to give it voice, as in silence only can the truest spiritual revelations be contained.

How can silence speak in a poem? Though the use of images, and the translation of visual arts into verbal language, as the spirit can never define itself but always needs something *other* than itself to be circumscribed. This is wonderfully expressed in Michaels’ *Fugitive Pieces*, when the young Jakob Beer finds himself at home in silence:

At night, a few lights marked port and starboard of these gargantuan industrial forms, and I filled them with loneliness. I listened to these dark shapes as if they were black spaces in music, a musician learning the silences of a piece. I felt this was my truth. That my life could not be stored in any language but only in silence; the moment I looked into the room and took in only what was visible, not vanished. The moment I failed to see Bella had disappeared. But I did not know how to seek by way of silence. So I lived a breath apart, a

touch-typist who holds his hands above the keys slightly in the wrong place, the words coming out meaningless, garbled. Bella and I inches apart, the wall between us. I thought of writing poems this way, in code, every letter askew, so that loss would wreck the language, become the language. (111)

And further on, when Michaela, Beer's second wife, after having listened to his experience of Tomas' (Maurice Selman's son) soul when he was born premature, affirms: "I don't know what the soul is. But I imagine that somehow our bodies surround what has always been" (176-77).

This is why the importance of the body in Michaels' poetry is perfectly reflected not only in Becker's research as a painter but also in Becker's need to fuel her art with other artists' experience. At the beginning of the twentieth century art was far from being considered merely an aesthetic experience; artists such as Cézanne, Rodin and Rilke himself intended it as a way of giving a concrete, and sensual, manifestation to the innermost self. Back from her second stay in Paris, Becker attempted to reunite her experience of the great capital of art with her beloved surroundings in Worpswede and the great "biblical simplicity" of its peasants, and noted down in her journal:

Yesterday I sat with old Frau Schmidt near the Hürdenberg for an hour. With earthy philosophy she told me about the death of her five children and her three winter pigs. Then she showed me the tall cherry tree her daughter had planted, the one who died when she was eight. "Well, as the saying goes:

When the tree is grown,  
The planter is gone."

From Rodin, Cottet and Paris I brought back a great craving for nature. And that is probably the healthy aspect of the whole trip. Something urgent burns in me: in simplicity to become great. (*Letters and Journals* 316-17)

Very coherently, Paris for Paula in Michaels' poem is above all represented by two artists: Cézanne and Rodin. If, as seen in the first chapter, Cézanne deeply influenced Becker's painting, the discovery of Rodin – whose studio she visited in 1903 – equally meant encountering "a giant's" works which "captured one's whole being with their greatness" (*Letters and Journals* 176). Becker welcomed such an overwhelming experience with the same taciturnity with which she had contemplated Cézanne's painting. In fact, after visiting Rodin's studio she would attempt to narrate to her husband her experience of visioning his drawings to

discover immediately that it was beyond words: “The impression he and his work make, I can’t write about it in words” (309).

If Becker was impressed by Rodin’s sense of form and movement,<sup>14</sup> which was so stunning that one needed to contemplate his works more than once,<sup>15</sup> Paula in Michaels’ poem is overwhelmed by Rodin’s creative power as if he were a Pygmalion not only giving life to the sculptures he made but also giving life to women as if they had to be sculpted out from the stone of their being to reveal their most intimate essence. Rilke, in the two picture-poems previously mentioned, “Early Apollo” and “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” is fascinated by the same mythical figure, who in his eyes, as Jongeneel observes, incarnates the truest artist: “The Pygmalion-effect of giving speech to the art object symbolizes for Rilke the highest ideal attainable in poetry” (*Pictures into Words* 168). The artist who feels the need to “merge with work” strives to reach that extreme of artistic creation where the object is not reproduced in a mimetic way but given life and animated by the artist’s hands. This was Becker’s aim, and Michaels’ Paula coherently tries to learn how to attain the most hidden core of her art by observing one of the artists who was most able to make his creatures breathe and pulsate with life. The privilege of living in close contact with the great French Master was equally fascinating for Rilke, who – in Jongeneel’s words – “observed how Rodin, through manipulation of concrete material, continually discovered new modes of representation” (*Pictures into Words* 158-59). As seen in the first chapter Rilke, as well as his wife, were convinced by Rodin’s motto “*toujours travailler*,” and that as far as the creative process is concerned, craft itself is more important than the mental activity which is normally identified with the source of inspiration. This is why “Just as Rodin shaped the marble with hammer and chisel, Rilke sought a ‘hammer’ with which to make his own objects – to forge a ‘reality that develops through working with one’s hands’” (*Pictures into Words* 158-59).

During her stay in 1903, Paris for Becker mainly meant the discovery of Rodin. When she visited his studio she immediately noticed that he was surrounded by his sculptures<sup>16</sup> as if they were living beings, and – as mentioned later on in Michaels’ poem – she would do the same with her paintings during her last stay in Paris in 1906. It is worth noticing that, while Becker in her letters to her husband lamented that her friend Clara was being ‘moulded’ by Rodin’s strong

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<sup>14</sup> “What a sense of form he has, and the movement of every limb, and how the whole thing just reposes there, calm and isolated” (*Letters and Journals* 187).

<sup>15</sup> “The impression Rodin makes is a very great one. It is hard for me to talk about any single work of his because one must keep coming back to it often, and in all one’s various moods, in order to completely absorb it” (*Letters and Journals* 303).

<sup>16</sup> “You must get an impression of this man and of his life’s work,” Becker wrote her husband on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1903, “which he has gathered together in castings all around him” (*Letters and Journals* 303).

personality<sup>17</sup> (as earlier on she had been completely under the spell of Rilke), in Michaels' poem Paula feels that Rodin has given birth to Clara like a god, as her friend "emerged in his hands."

As James A. W. Heffernan recalls in his book *Museum of Words*, the "struggle for mastery between word and image is repeatedly gendered" (6). To understand what he means it is necessary to know the definition and explanation he gives of *ekphrasis*:

We do well to remember the root meaning of ekphrasis: "speaking out" or "telling in full." To recall this root meaning is to recognize that besides representational friction and the turning of fixed forms into narrative, ekphrasis entails prosopopeia, or the rhetorical technique of envoicing a silent object. Ekphrasis speaks not only about works of art but also *to* and *for* them. In so doing, it stages – within the theatre of language itself – a revolution of the image against the word, and particularly the word of Lessing, who decreed that the duty of pictures was to be silent and beautiful (like a woman), leaving expression to poetry. In talking back and looking back at the male viewer, the images envoiced by ekphrasis challenge at once the controlling authority of the male gaze and the power of the male world. (6)

It must be said that Michaels' dramatic monologue "Modersohn-Becker" does contain some instances of *ekphrasis*, which however are reported by the speaker, Paula, who is an external observer of this scene. As such, Paula redirects Rodin's gaze and power on Clara as if she too were a sculpture, and not only does she absorb them but she also transfers them to Clara's and her own creations. In fact, it is through Rodin's sculpture that Paula understands that "painting too / never lets you escape / awareness of the human hand: / the source of light / is the painter's body." The male gaze therefore is mirrored into a female gaze concentrating either on sculpture (by Clara) or painting (by Paula), with all the necessary variations that these changes require. Both Clara and Paula want to find their "hot centre," which is the source of all creations. While Paula just stares at her canvas, Clara circles her clay. In his book *The Dream of the Moving Sculpture*, Kenneth Gross well describes the different kind of aesthetical experience that the viewer of sculpture undergoes with respect to the viewer of painting, due to the life-likeness of the statues: "Unlike paintings, statues occupy the space of bodies, compete with bodies for that space, share the same light and atmosphere" (in *Pictures into Words* 177). The contrast between

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<sup>17</sup> See Becker's letter quoted on page 57, where she wrote: "we shall see how she plans to avoid becoming a little Rodin herself. She already draws exactly in his most original way, but she has also accomplished some good things with it" (*Letters and Journals* 295).



stillness and movement is due to the fact that sculpture, as Gross explains, requires an “animation fantasy” which “is not a projection of perfected mimetic illusion,” but

responds to the way one moves around or glances at the thing; the way the statue one regards accommodates one’s body, or demands that one’s body accommodate it; the fantasy reflects the way one models, attacks, or touches the statue, copes with its silence, or supplies its lacks; the idea of its coming to life is shaped by the manner in which the statue plays against one’s perception or memory of other statues, not to mention other bodies. (177-78)

Moreover, Rodin’s accentuated eroticism and domineering force, which is evident in the poem too, from the way he carves out women’s figures full of love (“pulling the face open / into love –”) is turned by an overwhelmed Paula into her own humility: “Even the spirit has limits, / humility rising like silence, / the silence of light, gold rising from the fields.”<sup>18</sup> Yet limits also represent the necessary conditions for visibility, and they fix the distance allowing the object to be perceived as such, as Marin says quoting two universal principles articulated by Nicolas Poussin: “Nothing is visible without boundaries,” that is, without lines circumscribing the figures and delineating their structure; “Nothing is visible without distance,” that is, without a background, without an interval, without a gap between the figures” (376). Silence therefore not only implies an attitude of helpless contemplation but is also the sign of the ecstasy allowing the painter to turn inward paradoxically by contemplating outside landscapes (“gold rising from the fields”) which in that moment are probably recalled or just imagined by Paula. Michaels’ ability to recreate in words this innermost pictorial process once again recalls Rilke’s high conception of poetical language: “For Rilke,” says Jongeneel, “possessing the core of language meant possessing the essential knowledge of things, which is attained through seeing and contemplation” (*Pictures into Words* 159).

It is interesting that American poet Richard Howard – who, as it happens, is the author of a poem, “Contra Naturam,” where he gives voice to Rodin – in his essays “Fragments of a ‘Rodin’,” defines Rodin’s creative force as “an interior rapture, no longer the assertion of selfhood but rather the collection of an identity (motionless or moving, rapt or reft, suggestive or stark) from the very lineaments of what is *other* [...] an identification with what is not the self but seen, the making of an inwardness from what is outside – as I have said, an *ecstatics* of art...” (196). Even the powerful force emanating from Rodin’s sculpture can therefore be the result not of “the assertion of selfhood” but of quite an opposite attitude of selflessness.

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<sup>18</sup> One here can be reminded of Rodin’s famous statement about his beloved sculptress Camille Claudel: “Je lui ai montré où elle trouverait de l’or, mais l’or qu’elle trouve est bien à elle.”

If Michaels in her poem enters Rodin's atelier through Paula's voice and sensibility, and therefore as a painter looking at a sculptor at work, in her essay "Cleopatra's Love" she seems to be attracted by another aspect of Rodin's creative process which is probably more useful to her as a poet and is explanatory of the peculiar way "Modersohn-Becker" is structured. From Rodin's extraordinary ability of giving the illusion of movement Michaels in fact derives a revelation about time in the poem. While continuing to explain the importance that metaphor has in her own poetry as a "sensual mirage," Michaels needs to shift to the visual arts to get to her point:

The metaphor is the mechanism that creates the mirage. It joins disparity; electric as a filament. It's almost as if, by augmenting language's limitations, we make it work: the mathematical computation in which two errors cancel each other to produce the correct result. This reminds me of Rodin's realization: if he presented head, limbs and torso in their true positions at any given instant of a single step, the figure appeared – ironically – static; the moment had been frozen. But if he perceived each body part at a separate instant of a single step, he could create a sense of movement; this revealed time, rather than arrested it. (Rodin's remark is famous: "it's the artist who is truthful while the photograph is mendacious; for, in reality, time never stops cold.") This is why fictive juxtapositions often seem closer to the truth. (14)

If metaphor, by joining "disparity" creates the "sensual mirage" allowing the reader to take the poet's experience as his or her own, in the same way, the dramatic monologue, to recreate a character's life on the page, has to be made of "fictive juxtapositions" to give the illusion of moving across time. Otherwise time in the poem would be frozen and Paula could not be a living character in it. The 'juxtapositional effect' which is usually typical of sculpture is therefore transferred to the verbal language of poetry so as to convincingly give voice to the painter. This is why Michaels in "Modersohn-Becker" alternates fragments coming from different times of Becker's life which, however, in Paula's consciousness appear to be like nearly contemporary experiences. And it is precisely this apparently random recollection of memories which can create the illusion of the "complex whole" of the character's life which cannot be transferred onto the page in its entirety.

We left Paris, the Pont des Arts  
still lined with violets.

At Worpswede, the hills burned under September's glass.  
Clara and I wore white to soak up the last light,  
like bread the last bit of soup.

We first saw Rilke pushing furniture  
through a doorway. I named the scene:  
Struggle, With A Table;  
later learned the truth of it.

By the fire, listening to a chamber concert,  
the kind of music where loss wears gloves.  
Rilke's eyes were on us.  
That night he said things like "let me stay in the storm!"  
and "give me autumn!"  
Everyone was aware of him.

He followed me outside;  
we washed our faces in the cold air.

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What was missing in me, Rilke knew.

Nights together, midnight tea  
in my studio, where, he said,  
"everything becomes mysterious."

He talked about Tolstoy, and how we must earn  
death. From Rilke you can learn about love  
just watching him hold a cup or peel an orange.

Black roofs bled through thin snow,  
words on a page. At the window, our legs  
long against each other, grass in a current.

But his kind of love deepens  
only with loss. He smells what's burning  
better than what's fresh.  
Rilke, don't be a "writer," stay  
a man who writes!  
"What do you know about it, Paula?"

That's how it was. To him, I was Paula.  
But he was always "Rilke."

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Skating on the Christmas pond;  
lamps like owls in the trees.  
I crushed fans of spruce and buried my face in my hands  
as if in a book. While Rilke read inside,  
his beautiful head bent from his body  
like a stem "broken" by the line of water in a vase.

He married Clara and soon she was moving horizontally,  
a figurehead on a ship, pregnant with their daughter.  
His invisible barrier between them;  
birds hitting glass.

•

Back in Worspwede, presumably after Becker's first journey to Paris in 1900 – as Paula's reference to violets still blooming would confirm<sup>19</sup> – Rilke arrives on the scene of the poem. Becker's first mention of Rilke's presence in Worspwede dates from 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1900, when he came to the Barkenhoff to read his poems. The time reference in Michaels' poem seems therefore realistic. More uncertain is the detail of Paula's and Clara's white dresses. If the image is highly evocative, due to the magic suggestion of the two young artists trying to catch light with the pure colour of their dresses, as if to convey their everyday relation with the respective arts, one can wonder why Michaels focuses on this detail, and whether she drew it from biographical material or not. In *The Letters and Journals* there is one reference to Becker's and

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<sup>19</sup> See p. 52 of the first chapter.

Westhoff's white dresses, and it is contained in a letter which Becker addressed to her mother, dated 13<sup>th</sup> August 1900, therefore a few days earlier than Rilke's arrival. In that letter, Becker wanted to tell her mother a "funny thing" that had happened to Clara and her. A few days before, on Sunday, the two of them were strolling together, thinking about what to do, and then as usual starting talking about art again. Westhoff was doing some angels' heads for the local church and off they went to see them. As the church door was locked, and they found only the door of the tower open, they climbed up together and suddenly were "inspired" to ring the bells. Westhoff grabbed the rope of the big one, while Becker got hold of the rope of the small one, and the bells began to go up and down, and the two young women swung along with them, until "everything begins to ring and sound and resound out across the Weyeberg" (196). Just at that moment, however, "one of the tallest schoolmasters" appeared and started to scold them, but when he caught sight of "the two young girls in white dresses" he turned right around and went down. They followed him and saw that the churchyard was full of people: they had been ringing the fire bell and "Everyone had thought there was a fire!" (196).

If there is no reference to this funny episode in Michaels' poem, the white colour of Paula's and Clara's dresses is probably there as a visual image recalling the transcendental energy they were looking for in their artistic research. In fact, as Marin summarizes in a highly poetical definition in his essay "Ruptures, Interruptions, Syncopes," "We might call white a transcendental color, since it characterizes the condition of possibility of all representation, light" (375). Yet in the poem the colour white also seems to symbolizes the strong link between Paula and Clara before the respective marriages. Of course it is also the colour of virginity, as both of them were still young unmarried women at that time. The whole image of the poem gives the idea that they felt extremely free to pursue their art with an intense simplicity, in a perfect accordance with their surroundings. Yet it is inevitable that the white of their dresses in the poem recalls two pictures by Becker, the portrait of *Clara Westhoff-Rilke* and the *Self-Portrait with a Red Rose*,<sup>20</sup> both of which however date from the year 1905. As seen in the first chapter, Becker painted them in a moment of reconciliation with Westhoff, when some misunderstandings with her and Rilke seemed to have been cleared up. The year 1905, however, for both friends was also a moment of deep crisis with the respective marriages: Becker was disappointed by hers, which was still unconsummated, and Westhoff was living separately from her husband and having financial troubles in supporting herself and Ruth. This is probably why in the two pictures Becker and Westhoff seem to be still two young girls, even though they were both married. In the poem the white of their dresses could therefore refer to the enduring nature

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<sup>20</sup> See first chapter, pp. 67-68.

of their friendship, despite all the difficulties between them which are not mentioned in the poem, where only Rilke's distance from Clara and Ruth is evoked.

As soon as Rilke appears in this part of the poem – as happened in real life – he immediately takes up all the space. Paula's relationship with him is quite contradictory. Very coherently with the letters, journals and biographies, Michaels does not clearly state whether they were lovers or not but just hints at the possibility in a very delicate undertone (“At the window, our legs // long against each other, grass in a current. // But his kind of love deepens / only with loss”). What is clear from Rilke's very first entrance in the poem is that Paula is very ironical towards him (“I named the scene: / Struggle, With A Table; / later learned the truth of it”), an attitude which often emerges from Becker's letters, even though not right from the beginning of their relationship. Yet her detachment and her criticism of the exaggerated seriousness with which Rilke saw his task as a poet and frequently played this part to impress his audience (“That night he said things like “let me stay in the storm!” / and “give me autumn!”) are alternated with moments when Paula is totally under Rilke's spell (“Nights together, midnight tea / in my studio, where, he said, / ‘everything becomes mysterious.’”). This kind of dual relationship between them is exactly what Torgersen highlights in his dual biography. And it is very interesting that Paula's paintings are not mentioned yet – and in fact, as seen in the first chapter, Rilke at first did not pay enough attention to his painter friend's work – but once again Paula very convincingly translates her feelings for him into images (“From Rilke you can learn about love / just watching him hold a cup or peel an orange”).

The reference to Tolstoy (“He talked about Tolstoy, and how we must earn / death”) as well as the previous statement attributed to Rilke that “everything” in Paula's studio “becomes mysterious,” confirm that it is still the year 1900 that Michaels is talking about in this part of the poem. In fact earlier that year, in spring, Rilke had made a second trip to Russia with Lou Salomé, which, however, had turned out to be very disappointing for the poet, as the two of them had tired themselves out. Yet during that second trip they had visited Tolstoy for the second time, and of course Rilke had not refrained from reporting that experience as one of the most meaningful of his life. Michaels certainly derives the references to these events in her poem from Rilke's journal, where, on September 16<sup>th</sup> 1900 – that is to say a couple of weeks after his arrival at Worpswede and just a few days after Becker and Modersohn's secret engagement – he would note down his excitement at having visited Becker's studio (very poetically defined by him the ‘Lily atelier,’ because of its colour):

Then I was in the ‘Lily atelier.’ Tea was awaiting me. A good and pure communality in conversation and in silence. Evening came on wondrously; from it grew our words: about Tolstoy, about death, about Georges Rodenbach and Hauptmann’s *Friedensfest*, about life and about beauty in all experience, about being able to die and wanting to die, about eternity and why we feel related to one another in the eternal. And about so many things that reached out beyond the hour and over us. Everything became mysterious. The clock struck much too late an hour and rang very loud and long in the midst of our conversation. Her hair was of Florentine gold. Her voice had folds like silk. I never saw her so slender and gentle in her white maidenhood. (*Letters and Journals* 149)

This passage is really unsettling, especially if one has read Rilke’s *Requiem for a Friend*, where Paula really inhabits eternity and the hereafter and still haunts the poet because of the special relationship she had with him. Moreover, the mysterious atmosphere uniting Paula and Rilke in a kind of suspended time should also remind the reader of the other novel behind the poem, *Niels Lyhne* by Jacobsen, in those intense moments that Niels shared with Fennimore before betraying his friend Erik. The “Florentine gold” of Paula’s hair recalls Rilke’s Eurydice, “that blonde woman,” who appears in his poem “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes,” which was analyzed together with the *Requiem* in the first chapter. Finally, Rilke in his journal is enchanted by Paula’s “white maidenhood,” a detail that further explains Michaels’ reference to Paula’s and Clara’s white dresses.

Yet, as Langbaum reminds the reader of the dramatic monologue, the speaker is the only completely concrete character in the poem, while “The other characters, instead, derive their life from the speaker. They exist as he sees and describes them, so that their existence partakes of the problematical quality of a visual and intellectual construction” (*Poetry of Experience* 202). Therefore, even though Rilke seems to exist in the poem, the reader should not forget that he is becoming alive only *through* Paula’s vision (and judgement) of him. It is also worth noticing that Rilke is the only character within the poem who speaks. Both his poetical statements and his part in the dialogue with Paula that she recalls (“Rilke, don’t be a ‘writer,’ stay / a man who writes! / ‘What do you know about it, Paula?’”) are reported as a direct speech. Even though Paula is being ironical about his ‘playing the poet’ all the time, she thinks that what he says has to be noted down, while her husband Otto’s speech, for example, is never reported in the poem. Michaels seems therefore to be attracted not only by the mysterious relationship between Rilke and Paula, but also by the link between word and image that they represent, as will become clearer later in the poem. As far as this part is concerned, it is only clear that – coherently with Becker’s biography – Paula is refusing to cooperate with Rilke’s rhetoric of verbal seduction,

and yet she does not refrain from letting herself be seduced by the mysterious power of his physical presence which in her eyes is the essence of poetry turned into an image. And even though the use of his last name, “Rilke,” and her first name, “Paula,” (“To him, I was Paula. / But he was always “Rilke.””) seems to show that their relationship never came to a real equality, the notation on Paula’s part is once again ironical. Yet from Becker’s letters one should also remember that, once she decided to leave her husband and go to Paris for the fourth time to pursue her art, it was precisely to Rilke that she confided that she did not know who she was anymore, and that she felt uncomfortable with signing her letters as either Paula Modersohn or Paula Becker. Rilke’s use of her first name could therefore also hint at the particular feeling of intimacy and deep knowledge of her that he had from the start, as in the poem Paula states that “What was missing in me, Rilke knew.”

The presence of direct speech within the poem is interesting also to understand better how Michaels uses the form of the dramatic monologue to give voice to Paula Modersohn-Becker. It is true that Paula reports fragments of dialogues, but she seems totally unaware of having an audience. She rather gives the impression of talking to herself, as it is clear that she is conscious of her divided nature. The form of the dramatic monologue therefore allows Michaels to explore all the different fragments of her character’s personality by respecting Paula’s intimacy and paradoxically leaving the audience out of the poem. This is why, according to Langbaum, the dramatic monologue, “in spite of its obvious resemblance to the soliloquy, corresponds in its style of address to the dialogue, where each speaker is absorbed in his own strategy” (*Poetry of Experience* 155). Yet the kind of dialogue which can be represented within the dramatic monologue is a peculiar one:

In the most typical dialogues, of course, each speaker is counteracted by the other, so that no single perspective prevails as in the dramatic monologue. Nevertheless, the style of address is the same in that the speakers in dialogue and in the dramatic monologue communicate with the audience indirectly. They neither speak *to* the audience, nor are they concerned to describe themselves *truly*, that is for the benefit of the audience; they are concerned only to exert force on the scene around them. (155)

This is particularly relevant as far as the creation of the character Paula is concerned, as Michaels in her dramatic monologue lets her speak *despite* her taciturnity, as if she did not need to be disturbed by the presence of an audience. Paula is portrayed while she is absorbed not so much by her painting, but by the emotional process which allows her to transform experience into painting. Not because each image she evokes must become a picture of hers but because her



memory and sensitivity very convincingly work in that way. And this is why a purely ekphrastic poem could not say as much of her as a dramatic monologue containing instances of ekphrasis: Michaels does not want to explore the results of Becker's art but rather her human adventure as a painter. Michaels too, being the writer who gives voice to her, seems to be part of the silent and imperceptible audience which, thanks to the poem, is able to enter Paula's 'innermost studio' (that is to say the room where she concretely paints, as well as that immaterial space where her soul finds expression) anytime and be involved by the incredible intensity of her approach to art.

The dramatic monologue seems therefore to raise four glass walls around the speaker, who is totally unaware of them, so that the audience can be there without being felt by the speaker to be there: "The speakers communicate to the audience in spite of their absorption; their absorption is, in its intensity and direction, among the things they communicate" (Langbaum 155). The apparent absence of the audience is also what allows Michaels to create a character capable – as Marin in the above-mentioned quotation said concerning painting – of a "plural gaze," that is to say "a *nonsubject*, at once everywhere and nowhere," which results in a sort of "*thing-consciousness*," which was also Rilke's aim as far as the subject in his poems was concerned. The form of dramatic monologue that Michaels uses to give voice to Paula Modersohn-Becker seems therefore very coherent with the artistic *temperie* which was dominating in all arts at the beginning of the twentieth century.

*"Paula painted everything as if it were an animated still life, starting from the subject and then emphasizing the thing itself."*

*Otto Modersohn's letter to Gustav Pauli*<sup>21</sup>

In particular, Michaels through her character gradually gains a 'pictorial gaze,' which in some parts of "Modersohn-Becker" come to create that peculiar effect that Bayley would call "of arrest." It happens when Paula from action or contemplation starts 'freezing' some images into as many still lifes of the reality surrounding her. This can be seen for instance in the following passage:

Skating on the Christmas pond;  
lamps like owls in the trees.  
I crushed fans of spruce and buried my face in my hands

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<sup>21</sup> *Paula Modersohn-Becker 1876-1907 Retrospective.*

as if in a book. While Rilke read inside,  
his beautiful head bent from his body  
*like a stem "broken" by the line of water in a vase.*

He married Clara and soon she was moving horizontally,  
*a figurehead on a ship*, pregnant with their daughter.  
His invisible barrier between them;  
*birds hitting glass.* (my emphasis)

As one can infer just from these few examples, and find confirmation in the rest of the poem, it is frequently through the use either of *similes* or *metaphors* that Michaels attains this particular effect "of arrest." At the beginning Paula is the character in action and it is Rilke, the poet who is intent on reading, who is stilled into immobility and compared to a flower, which is often one of the objects portrayed in traditional still lifes. As seen in the first chapter, Becker liked to insert flowers not only in her still lifes but also in her portraits and self-portraits. It is therefore from Becker's painting that Michaels indirectly derives one of the images which is then used in her poem to freeze action. Nearly in the same way, Clara's pregnancy (and therefore her physical movement from maidenhood towards a more mature and accomplished womanhood) is stilled by Paula into "a figurehead on a ship," an image which is a direct reference to Rilke's *Requiem* in that passage where he disparages men's right of ownership of women ("Does the sea-captain still possess the figurehead /at his prow, when the mysterious lightness / of her god-like self lifts her high into the bright sea-wind?" vv. 233-35) – which could also be his sublimated explanation of his own inability to love Clara and share his life with her.

Yet it is especially the third example that clears up not only Michaels' poetical process of inserting still lifes within the poem, but also summarizes Rilke's approach to the complex relationship between art and life and his influence on Paula's personality. If the poet himself becomes an *object* ("a stem 'broken' by the line of water in a vase") within the picture, it is then as a transparent but solid material ("glass") that he would stand as an insurmountable obstacle between his wife and daughter, hindering the union of the three members into a family. Paula's love for Rilke in the poem seems to be the same kind of love that Becker, despite her reservations regarding the poet's self-absorbed character, saw and appreciated in him the transformative force which allowed him to turn everything external into an inner image.

It is no surprise that Michaels reproduces the same process through the use of the *simile* and the *metaphor*, as this last, in the passage quoted above, is for her "the mechanism that [...] joins

disparity; electric as a filament.” As used by Michaels, similes and metaphors are therefore the poetical devices allowing the subject’s transformation – which is a sort of silent and invisible metamorphosis – into the object of the work of art. The poem very faithfully also represents Paula’s detachment from Rilke’s absolutist statement seen in the first chapter, that “the highest task of the union of two people: that each one should keep watch over the solitude of the other.” The painter in fact sees Rilke’s attitude towards Clara and Ruth as a trouble in his personality, deriving from his inability to be as devoted to his family as he was to his art. In a similar way, later in the poem, Paula – like Becker in real life – will not see pregnancy as an obstacle to her own art.

The pictorial technique that Michaels uses in her poem recalls Brodsky’s words on “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes,” where he speaks about Rilke’s ability to isolate the subject and turn it into an object. And behind this tendency of his there is clearly Cézanne’s poetics of the object, which in his view should be evoked more than represented, “in the hope” – as Michaels says in the passage quoted above – “that we would smell his still life.” One should at this point remember that it was Becker who had introduced Rilke to Cézanne’s art. And it was Becker who had implored Westhoff to let her have the letters that Rilke was writing in 1907 about Cézanne’s painting, which later on would be collected in a book. Rilke’s own poetics was so influenced by the French’s Master’s approach to his art that the following year, when he felt compelled to write the *Requiem for a Friend*, he translated Becker’s pictorial gaze in a way that very closely recalls Cézanne’s painting: “Only your looking stayed outside, large, / and did not say: *This is me*; but *This is*” (83-84 my emphasis). This undoubtedly was Rilke’s translation into poetical terms of the attained “object-ness” of the subject which in his eyes was the highest task the artist should strive to realize.

Married, my aesthetic turned physical,  
a knowledge I couldn't paint:  
a heap of coltsfoot,  
its yellow points curling on the table;  
the white bedroom of birches, our faces cold,  
the warmth of us under clothes – sometimes  
chocolate, a blanket – until darkness  
rolled on top of the light, leaving only  
the small breathing spaces of stars.  
The accidental beauty  
of things brought in from outside,  
leaves and crushed mignonettes carried in on sweaters:  
the unplanned life that purred our days.  
Following his trail: chair still rocking, lit pipe,  
the apple changing colour on the plate.

Only love sees the familiar for the first time.

The light changing Otto's face, changing  
him.  
Winter turning the walls blue.  
Imagining him naked, even as he stood there,  
naked.

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Opened by hills;  
unnerving metal yellow of birch leaves  
between my teeth;  
forest's green chill on my shoulders.  
Ice filled my veins,  
the pond the colour of drowned ghosts, ragged as a shadow.  
Trees pushed up through my throat,  
leaves crowded my eyes and  
I looked. Grateful, bursting with shape and colour.  
I held my husband until I felt his face inside my own,  
until my skin was blind with attention –

and still I didn't know anything, still  
my hand was stupid.  
My eyes went black, I held the brush,  
choking on a thread of song.

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In this part of the poem there is a meaningful discrepancy between Paula's deep physical communion with Otto, and Becker's entries about her marriage. As seen in the first chapter, as early as the end of March 1902, that is to say less than a year after her marriage, Becker noted down her disappointment deriving from her disillusionment as to her "deep belief in the possibility of a kindred soul," which was followed by a sad acknowledgement that one's loneliness does not end with marriage. Moreover, as her marriage was unconsummated, Paula's physical happiness in Michaels' poem seems an impossible experience for Becker at that time. Yet Paula sounds absolutely *true* and any reader who did not know Becker's biography would have no doubt that her feelings as a married woman are faithfully represented in the poem.

As Heffernan observes, verbal representation cannot be perceived by the viewer without his or her consciousness of a difference permeating and complicating likeness: "The consciousness of difference – the sense of friction between the medium and the subject matter of a work of art – is precisely what makes the difference between a copy and an imitation, or between delusion and aesthetic illusion" (37). According to Michaels' poem, which gives voice to a painter, the same seems to be true for poetical representation. In fact, as already stated by S. T. Coleridge in "Poesy or Art," it is the artistic *imitation*, rather than the copy, which can possibly draw nearer to truth: "If there be likeness to nature without any check or difference, the result is disgusting, and the more complete the delusion, the more loathsome the effect [...]. You set out with a supposed reality and are disappointed and disgusted with the deception; whilst, in respect to a work of genuine imitation, you begin with an acknowledgement of total difference, and then every touch of nature gives you the pleasure of an approximation to truth" (qtd. in Heffernan n201).

The interesting point in "Modersohn-Becker" consists in investigating why Michaels changes Becker's unhappiness and divided nature as a woman artist, striving to look for the same fulfillment in art and love, into Paula's happiness deriving from her marriage and becoming one with her art. In other words, why turn Becker's *disharmony* into Paula's *harmony*?

The reader is here required to become a viewer of Michaels' poem as if it were a painting, and – as Marin, following Panofsky, suggested in the passage mentioned above – oscillate

between closeness and distance to it so as to perceive its totalizing power. That is why a close observation of some apparently unimportant details in “Modersohn-Becker” can lead to some more general considerations about the poem as a whole. First of all, the “heap of coltsfoot, / its yellow points curling on the table,” which Paula cannot paint but which are easy to imagine as painted in a still life. Was “coltsfoot” ever mentioned by Becker? The answer is affirmative, and it is worth noticing that she mentioned them precisely in the entry which precedes the one lamenting her loneliness despite her marriage and dream of finding a kindred soul thanks to it. Becker, in fact, in March 1902, “Easter Week,” after once again admitting that she was feeling lonely,<sup>22</sup> wrote the following passage in her journal: “I welcome the spring outside with passion. It must consecrate me and my art. It will strew flowers on me as I work. I found coltsfoot out by the brickyard. I carried some of them around with me and held them up to see how the yellow stood out deep and shining against the sky” (*Letters and Journals* 274). It is clear that ‘the coltsfoot experience’ did not involve Modersohn in any way, but was recorded by Becker as she was interested in the effect of the colour yellow of the flower shining against the sky. It was therefore just an ‘experience of yellow’ that she deemed worth noting down in her journal.

Moreover, there is another detail which can be explanatory of the process of transformation from Becker into Paula, that is to say the “white bedroom of birches,” which is never mentioned in Becker’s letters and journals and yet is plausible, as the birch is a very common tree in Worpswede and the surrounding area. Yet the birch itself is also a very dear tree in Michaels’ novel *Fugitive Pieces*, not only because the fascinating Canadian landscapes often includes birches but also because the protagonist Jakob Beer’s spiritual as well as erotic happiness is said to come about in a forest of birches with his beloved Michaela:

We sleep among the wet birches, nothing between us and the storm except the fragile nylon skin of the tent, a glowing dome in the blackness. Wind rolls in from the distance, catches in the high antennae of branches then rolls past us into the rain, full of electricity. I cover Michaela, inside the sleeping bag, conscious of the tent as if it were a wet shirt against my back. Lightning. But we are grounded.

She rises to me unhesitatingly. What does the body make us believe? That we’re never ourselves until we contain two souls. For years corporeality made me believe in death. Now, inside Michaela yet watching her, death for the first time makes me believe in the body.

As the wind gathers in the trees then moves on, rippling through the forest, I disappear in her. Glinting seeds scatter in her dark blood. Bright leaves into the night wind; stars on the

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<sup>22</sup> “In this first year of my marriage I have cried a great deal and my tears often come like the great tears of childhood. They come when I hear music and when I am moved by beauty. When all is said and done, I’m probably just as lonely as I was when I was a child” (*Letters and Journals* 274).

starless night. We are the ones foolish enough to be sleeping out in the April storm. In the shaking tent Michaela tells me stories, my ear on her heart until, with the rain against the frail nylon, we sleep.

When we wake, there is pool of water by our feet. It is not on Idhra or on Zakynthos but among Michaela's birches that I feel for the first time safe above the ground, earthed in a storm. (189)

The fact that Paula's happiness in the poem seems more to recall Jakob's and Michaela's happiness in *Fugitive Pieces* than Becker's real feelings, seems further confirmed by another episode narrated by Jakob. At the party where he met Michaela there was a painter, a Pole from Danzig, who, years before, could not bring himself to use yellow paint, "every shade of the brightest yellow." Jakob, the first time of his waking to Michaela, in "the serenity of a winter bedroom," affirms: "I knew that this was my first experience of the colour yellow" (184). In other words, Michaels – whose surname by the way bears a resemblance with Jakob's beloved first name (Michaela) – in "Modersohn-Becker" finds herself superimposing the intense love which found its way in her novel, and this is why such a strong feeling is convincing in the poem despite the fact that there is no trace of it in Becker's biography.

In "Modersohn-Becker" Michaels therefore seems to translate Becker's loneliness into Paula's unity with her husband, thanks to a use of true emotions coming from her novel *Fugitive Pieces*. At the same time, however, she also attempts another kind of translation: from Becker's letters and journals and pictures into Paula's gaze within the poem. And this pictorial gaze is what allows Michaels to conceive the poem both as a window and a mirror, clarifying her own vision of art and love, which sometimes come to coincide in Paula's view.

According to Langbaum, in all poetry of experience "the final perception is a fusion of subject and object, an instant when the speaker sees and understands the object because, seeing it through his own perspective, he sees and understands himself in it" (*Poetry of Experience* 209). In Michaels' poem, in fact, Paula's perception of the reality surrounding her seems to follow the same rules and directions for the composition of a still life: "Only love sees the familiar for the first time. // The light changing Otto's face, changing / him." It is the painter's perpetual wonder at the daily world surrounding her, as well as the effect of light on the objects, which arrest time into still lifes: "Following his trail: chair still rocking, lit pipe, / the apple changing colour on the plate."

The poem becomes successful when, as Langbaum says, the speaker's subjectivity can dissolve in the recording of his or her innermost being:

It is at the point where the life established by the particular perspective becomes so strong a surge as to lose its form, that the speaker reaches his apotheosis of perception and self-perception, becoming more himself than ever only to dissolve his own particularity and the particularity of what he sees in the general stream of being. (*Poetry of Experience* 209)

Referring to Becker's painting and Paula's power of vision within Michaels' poem, instead of "gaze" one should perhaps use more properly the term "glance," as, according to Norman Bryson in his book *Vision and Painting*, "against the Gaze, the Glance proposes desire, proposes the body, in the *durée* of its practical activity: in the freezing of syntagmatic motion, desire, and the body, the desire of the body, are exactly the terms which the tradition seeks to suppress" (qtd. in Heffernan 144).

If the images in the passages quoted above from Michaels' poem – which vaguely recall Becker's painting – are examples of *notional ekphrasis*, which in Heffernan's definition is "the representation of an imaginary work of art," where language not only rivals but actually "displaces the work of art it ostensibly describes and salutes" (14), the same process seems to take place in Paula's daily life as far as love for Otto is concerned, as she has to "imagine him naked, even as he stood there, / naked." Absence is therefore the necessary condition both for artistic representation and love, as they are equally ruled by desire.

Moreover, the wonderful passage which follows in the poem is actually the description of the disappearance of Paula's subjectivity so as to let herself be invaded by the landscape and by her husband and find them embodied in her painting. The process of embodiment is overwhelming for Paula, as she can contain two souls only by temporarily renouncing her own individuality ("Grateful, bursting with shape and colour."). In Michaels' poem Paula really seems to paint as if she were literally giving birth to the images, in what Rilke deemed to be the truest process of creating, of giving life to shapes by externalizing them from one's own inner world. When creation is – as it is here – conceived as a *physical* creation, it reveals itself to be an act of love, which does not necessarily lead to knowledge. Quite the contrary, as Rilke said at the end of his *Requiem*, the "old enmity / between life and the great work" forbids "anyone who has lifted his blood high / into a long piece of work" to sustain it there, as "it falls / by its own gravity, and fails." (vv. 274-80).

The necessary outcome of Paula's creative process seems therefore to provoke what Marin would refer to as a "syncope,"<sup>23</sup> making opaque the representation when "the gaze stops short

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<sup>23</sup> "As for the term 'syncope,' it plays on and brings into play the semantic tension underlying the notion, since it evokes an interruption of bodily functions in an odd conjugation with self-consciousness, a sudden and momentary



and fixes on the signifiers alone, while their signifieds disappear. When signs are manifested as signifiers, the transparency of signification becomes opaque” (379).

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diminution of the action of the heart combined with interruption of breathing, sensation, and voluntary movement.”  
(*On Representation* 374)

I started again; where everything starts:  
at the body. Classes in life-drawing,  
training my hand to see.

In Paris alone,  
my family waiting for me to give up  
so I could go back to being “happy.”

Every day, failure boiled up into my throat  
and stayed there.

•

Obsession is the sacrifice of light  
to the richness of submergence.  
But love is separation,  
the membrane of the orange dividing itself,  
the surface of silver  
that turns glass into a mirror.

There's failure in every choice.

Art emerges from silence;  
silence, from one's place in the world.

•

Not that paint captures light,  
but that light breaks free from the paint.

I imagined autumn in Worpswede, the tangled red  
wire of empty bushes, a ceramic sky  
crazed with branches. I sank deep in myself,  
breathing in as if my bones were cedar.

Nowhere have I felt closer to love

than there, alone in that city.

Stars are flickering tips of snakes;  
starlight, their fragile skin cast behind.

My dreams longed for Otto, for forest, for home.  
I woke and the space was empty, except for paintings:  
my step-daughter playing recorder,  
hollow vowels slipping through the trees,  
streaming behind her;  
my sister's black hair pulled tight,  
sleek as mink, her braid a watery tail down her back.

Then I felt crazy – my two lives, simultaneous.

Two whites: snow on the birches.

•

Fulfilment is wordless,  
the silence when skin takes over.

But when you're not speaking with skin,  
you must love with language.  
Rilke would say that's even more intimate –  
the instant words become picture,  
leaping from his throat, to my inner eye.

•

The first spring day, with Otto in the garden.

My mother crossed the grass, her arms open,  
like a child waiting to be lifted.  
Since five in the morning she'd travelled towards me.

We pulled the table out to the verandah,

set the blue dishes.

My dress round as the billowing cloth.

In this part of the poem, Michaels seems to refer to the fourth time that Becker went to Paris, in 1906, after separating from Modersohn. As seen in the first chapter, in the spring of the following year she would get pregnant and later go back to Worpswede with her husband and give birth to her daughter Mathilde. Becker's last stay in Paris was a period of utmost loneliness, as only Rilke supported her in her choice. Happiness had always been one of Becker's dearest aims, and she had come to identify it with her becoming a painter, as her marriage had proved to be so disappointing. It is no surprise that Becker decided to flee to Paris in 1906, as she had fixed her thirtieth year as her own deadline to finally "accomplish something." Her closest relatives at first were divided between understanding her deepest needs and refusing to accept the pain she was causing everybody else, Modersohn in the first place. Becker was perfectly conscious of all this, as on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1906 she wrote to her mother: "I, too, find Otto touching. That, and the thought of all of you, were what made my decision especially difficult. [...] And no matter what I do, you must firmly believe that I do it with the desire to do the right thing" (*Letters and Journals* 397). Becker's choice to become a painter was clearly becoming absolute and could not be founded anymore on the acceptance of a compromise between her family duty and her art. As she wrote to her sister Milly, "The main thing is to think consistently and with one's whole being" (407). Becker, in other words, was trying to overcome her strong sense of guilt, by trying to convince her relatives – as well as herself – that she was not bad, that it was in her nature to find a sense of accomplishment in her art: "Guilty or not guilty. One is simply as good or as bad as one is. There is little point in trying to change oneself by fussing about. [...] I think that, by nature, I'm a good person; and even if I do something bad now and again, that's only natural, too" (407). It was a high price that Becker was paying for such a choice: very coherently, in "Modersohn-Becker," "the richness of submergence" costs Paula "the sacrifice of light."

In Michaels' poem too, Paula's sense of failure derives from the fact that great results are expected from those who strive to be successful in their art at the cost of other people's sufferings. Her sense of inner division derives precisely from the insoluble conflict between those two parts of herself. Love "is separation" because it restitutes one to oneself, to the limits of one's own being. Love, like art, cannot find expression without a deep experienced unity culminating into separation so as to become visible, tangible, real, representable. It is only then that love – or art – is not to be looked for anymore but is finally revealed in the silence of

contemplation. According to Michaels' poem it seems that it is not thanks to Paula's selfishness or selflessness that the nature of love (and art) is revealed to her but rather because she has finally found the way to come to terms with her simple being ("one's place in the world"), in a quiet acknowledgement of her deep loneliness and isolation. These are the necessary conditions to let pictures emerge from that frightening edge between consciousness and the unconscious where the artist no longer controls his or her creation.

It is therefore in Paris that Michaels' Paula discovers her own truth: that she does not belong to one place, and that she does not have just one life, but two lives, which are simultaneous. Worpswede *and* Paris, home *and* the foreign capital where she needs to go to look for her art. Such a split condition is also a dangerous edge bordering madness ("Then I felt crazy – my two lives, simultaneous"), yet it inevitably constitutes the most fruitful territory for Paula's art. As Langbaum affirms, "The geographical 'discrepancy' imitates in its effect the psychological phenomenon of illumination, in that it makes for the suddenness of the discovery and the sense of the discovery as a transformation of what was already known" (*Poetry of Experience* 196). This moment in Michaels' poem culminates in a wonderful pictorial metaphor: "Two whites: snow on the birches." The startling metaphor, deprived of a verb, can equally refer to an annihilation of the image, as the white of the birches gets confused with the white of the snow in a negation of visibility, or to utmost visibility, culminating in pure light, in a pure transcendence of form, as the birches and snow come to coincide.

Moreover, the recurrent affirmation in *Fugitive Pieces*, "Every moment is two moments," once again comes to the reader's mind, and in particular the moment when Jakob Beer, after marrying Alex, feels he is living in two temporal dimensions at once, on the one hand in his memories of his relatives and his childhood and on the other in his present with his wife:

Alex's hairbrush propped on the sink: Bella's brush. Alex's bobby pins: Bella's hairclips turning up in strange places, as bookmarks, or holding open music on the piano. Bella's gloves by the front door. Bella writing on my back: Alex's touch during the night. Alex whispering goodnight against my shoulder: Bella reminding me that even Beethoven never stayed up past ten o'clock. (140)

If writing poetry is for Beer the only way to create a bridge between his past and his present, for Michael's Paula it is painting that brings back images from Worpswede and her closest affections while she is in Paris, striving to find her own way into her art. Her love then seems to be best nourished by absence ("Nowhere have I felt closer to love / than there, alone in that city."). It is only in Paris that Paula has the feeling that her pictures are becoming alive, and that

she is giving life to living creatures and not simply to artistic objects. It is absolutely coherent with Becker's biography that Paula sleeps in her studio together with her pictures. In fact, at the time of her utmost creativity, in spring 1906, Becker had no money to rent a room and a studio, but the experience of sleeping among her paintings seemed revelatory for her art too. As she wrote on 21<sup>st</sup> May to Martha Vogeler, "I'm living here in a large, bright atelier. Even without much furniture it makes a very comfortable impression and has become a little home for me. I love to fall asleep among my paintings and wake up with them in the morning. With faith in God and myself, I'm painting life-size nudes and still lifes" (*Letters and Journals* 400-1).

In the same way, the dramatic monologue aspires to poetically represent a life-size character, which has lost nearly all its fictive reality and comes as close as possible to speaking and breathing in the poem like a human being. Yet the concreteness of painting is to be transferred to a possible concreteness of verbal language, which quite paradoxically comes to be realized precisely when used poetically, that is to say in its least referential and most evocative use. The frame, which borders and limits the painting, is to be substituted in the poem by another kind of framing. Michaels chooses to let her "Modersohn-Becker" develop around multiple time and place dimensions, with a combination of layers that would probably be impossible in a single real painting. The writer therefore transforms what appears to be a limit of verbal language (its inability to create concrete images) into a proliferation of multiple images inhabiting the character's mind. Only partially will they be transferred to Paula's art. The rest will remain as the tracks of the reader's journey within her life and experience.

Besides, the poem can reflect upon the relationship between reality and artistic representation, as Paula comes to be a character so alive on the page because she herself continuously journeys between her life and her painting, between her present time and her memories, between presence and absence. What is very interesting to observe is that the paintings Michaels mentions are difficult to identify with the real ones. The first one seems to refer to *Girl Playing Horn in Birch Woods*, which however is dated 1905 and does not portray Paula's step-daughter Elsbeth but another girl. And the musical instrument is not a recorder but a horn.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Girl Playing Horn in Birch Woods*, 1905

As for Paula's portrait of her sister, with her "black hair pulled tight, / sleek as a mink, her braid a watery tail down her back," the image does not seem to relate to any of Paula's paintings. In what appears to be yet another subconscious interference of *Fugitive Pieces*, it seems more to recall Beer's sister, Bella, killed by the Nazis when they were children, who is coming back to him as a ghost that he does not want to let go of.<sup>24</sup> More than the exact references to Paula's paintings, what matters in this poem is that Michaels strives to represent that peculiar inner space where past and present are confused, and figurative shape is given to memories. Michaels was possibly tempted to give voice to a painter – who was also an excellent writer – because of the need she frequently conveys in her poems and essays to let images speak when silent emotion is the announcement of some spiritual revelation ("Fulfilment is wordless, / the silence when skin takes over").

Maybe words and images are both needed to recreate the spiritual dimension that artists strenuously give their life to pursue. Michaels gives voice to this obscure necessity when, with a few delicate touches in her poem, she depicts the relationship between Paula and Rilke as a physical one, not necessarily suggesting that they were lovers. What is certain is that their love was artistically consummated ("But when you're not speaking with skin, / you must love with language. / Rilke would say that's even more intimate – / the instant words become picture, / leaping from his throat, to my inner eye").

If – as seen in the first chapter – in Rilke's *Requiem* Paula's ghost refused to cooperate with the poet's rhetoric of disembodiment, and, instead of coming back to him as a holy image saying not "This is me" but "This is," appeared in the "pregnant" form which most of all reminded the

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<sup>24</sup> "Bella was fifteen and even I admitted she was beautiful, with heavy brows and magnificent hair like black syrup, thick and luxurious, a muscle down her back" (*Fugitive Pieces* 6); "At night I choked against Bella's round face, a doll's face, immobile, inanimate, her hair floating behind her" (44); "That night, I dreamed of Bella's hair. Shiny as black lacquer under the lamplight, plaited tight as a lanyard" (106).

poet of her carnality, in Michaels' poem the struggle for mastery between word and image is solved in favour of a pseudo-erotic communion where words are identified with the male power of inseminating while the woman receives man's language and generates images. By depicting this very "intimate" process, of words turning into images in a continual creative flow, Michaels in "Modersohn-Becker" goes far beyond *ekphrasis*. In fact she attains a very peculiar representation, mainly based on metaphor, which is purely visual but *is* originated by language and could not exist without it. Words, therefore, are not used just to reproduce images but to create them, and combined in the poem they become the silent language able to convey the speaker's most unspeakable and hidden emotions. Moreover, by leaping from Rilke's throat to Paula's eye, language becomes not so much gestural but intensely physical, and as such completely reinterprets Rilke's opposition of "This is me" and "This is" by fusing subject and object in one totalizing act of love. This way not only is Michaels able to create one main character (Paula) and other secondary characters so alive on the page that they are bestowed with physical consistency, but she can attain her dream of a poetical language which is whole and can properly represent inner and outer experience not so much despite fragmentation but precisely thanks to it.

The poem which aims to give voice to a human character therefore cannot but be a sum of fragments, as the whole of the character is evoked following a poetical transformation which reminds the reader of the *synecdoche*, where the 'part' stands for the 'whole.' The sense of failure, so frequently expressed by Becker (and Paula in the poem) as well as by Michaels when she talks about the poet's attempt to capture reality, marks in fact the artist's success – whether he or she is a painter or a poet. Yet it is a deep transformation that must take place within the text or the frame: the artist must not try to capture reality but needs instead to be captured by it. Only once this fundamental shift has happened will he or she realize that representation is necessarily to be identified with a kind of circumlocution where words turn round the object so as to perceive its presence within its absence and silence.

There is a poem by Emily Dickinson, "Tell all the Truth but tell it slant" [1129], which in the first stanza best illustrates the need to circumvent truth:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –  
Success in Circuit lies  
Too bright for our infirm Delight  
The Truth's superb surprise



In the poem “What the Light Teaches,” included in *Miner’s Pond*, Michaels too is attracted by the silence enveloping truth, which can be rendered through the use of verbal images:

The truth is why words fail.  
We can only reveal by outline,  
by circling absence.  
But that’s why language  
can remember truth when it’s not spoken.  
Words in us that deafen  
that wait, even when their spell seems  
wasted;  
even while silence  
accumulates to fate. (116)

### *Silence Accumulating to Fate*

*“I’m not afraid of anything, all will be well – except death;  
that is the only ghost I am afraid of, that is the only true misfortune.”*

*Paula Modersohn-Becker, in her last letter to Fellner<sup>25</sup>*

While still in Paris, on 21<sup>st</sup> February 1907, Paula wrote to her sister Milly: “You say you are sad that I don’t write you about my work. Dear Milly, art is difficult, infinitely difficult. And sometimes one doesn’t want to talk about it at all. But that is no reason to make you sad” (*Letters and Journals* 416). In Becker’s letters and journals, around the 21<sup>st</sup> March 1907, there is no trace of a possible reference to Paula’s “first spring day, with Otto in the garden,” when the painter is described as pregnant (“My dress round as the billowing cloth”) with yet another pictorial simile. Once again, it seems that Michaels wanted to approach the conclusion of her poem with a beautiful picture of Paula’s life within her family. The moving image of her mother travelling towards her gives the idea of a final reconciliation between mother and daughter, but curiously in a reversal of roles: Paula’s mother is a child and Paula now has nearly attained the status of motherhood. It is a picture everyone in Becker’s family would have wished could become real one day. And according to Becker’s mother it did become real, as in her letter to Herma dated 10<sup>th</sup> May 1907 not only are her joy and relief at having found her daughter’s

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<sup>25</sup> *Letters and Journals* 428.

family so happy and serene conveyed, but one can find also a few details which Michaels seems to have reassembled in a different picture in her poem:

My dear Herma, I arose this morning at five o'clock and was driven home from Worspswede through the spring air and the fresh new green of the birch *allee*. Yesterday was Ascension day, an absolutely heavenly Ascension Day! A year ago I would never have believed that I would be in my little Paradise [in Worspswede] again. But that distressed God, and so He made immediate plans to have it turn out the way it has! I surprised them by going out there on Tuesday evening. When I arrived there was a little explosion of joy. Otto and Paula were working together in the garden and came running toward me with delighted faces and Elsbeth, who had just gone to bed, dashed down in her nightgown calling, "Grandmother is here, Grandmother is here!" And there was a happy supper out on the white veranda, and everyone's bag of stories was emptied out for the others. (*Letters and Journals* 419)

The only child here is Elsbeth, who is not there in this part of Michaels' poem, and Paula's mother's journey, which could also sound metaphorical in the poem, so as to indicate a reconciliation between mother and daughter, was in fact a real journey; yet she did not run towards her daughter; quite the opposite happened: it was Becker, together with her husband, who ran towards Frau Becker. Paula's mother's childishness in Michaels' poem could possibly be a reinterpretation of Frau Becker's naïve wish of finding every conflict solved in her daughter's family. "If you had been there to eat my whipped cream!" Frau Becker went on in her letter to Herma, "No, if only you'd been there for everything; above all I would have granted you the quiet harmony of our hearts which, even though no one mentioned it, filled our harmless chatter like music of the spheres" (419).

Once again, what difference does it make, to reassemble details derived from Becker's letters and journals in a new composition? In this case, from one harmony depicted by Frau Becker in her letter to Herma, the poem shifts to a different one, recreated by Michaels. Maybe here it is only a different stress on some emotional events, yet that stress is an important one. The first day of spring undoubtedly hints at a renewal of life, and therefore at Paula's wished-for pregnancy. In real life, Becker – as late as 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1907 – that is to say just a couple of weeks before Mathilde's birth, was still yearning to go to Paris, as she wrote to her mother on that date: "How I should love to go to Paris for a week. Fifty-six Cézannes are on exhibit there now!" (425). And Paris, by the way, at that time also meant Rilke, who was getting to know Cézanne's painting on Becker's advice.

If up to this point the reader's impression could be that Michaels solves Becker's persistent division between her art and family life in a final regained unity, it is the mysterious final part of the poem which rather suggests that it may not be so.

*When the Tree is Grown the Planter is Gone*

*“The grotesque remains of incomplete lives,  
the embodied complexity of desires eternally denied.”*

*Anne Michaels, Fugitive Pieces*<sup>26</sup>

3

Branches drip, dripping.  
Rain gets in everywhere, its animated shadow  
fills every surface.  
Dreams that usually evaporate in the light  
stay wet with darkness.

That I'm looking for something I can't find  
makes me strangely satisfied.  
It fills me with time.

All my life I've been saying grace  
for hunger: invisible, smelling of earth,  
heavy as cattle down a darkening field,  
their bodies pushing their heads close to the ground,  
their necklaces of bells.

•

Every painting is a way of saying goodbye.

In this concluding part of the poem Paula is alone, and it is not clear where she is. The family picture has ended, and there is no hint of Mathilde's birth. Michaels mentions maybe just one realistic detail which can be found in the letters and journals, but belonging to three years earlier, in 1904, when Becker – as she wrote to Marie Hill on 30<sup>th</sup> April – was in Worpswede and enjoying Modersohn's four days absence as, she said, “I played the role of Paula Becker and

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<sup>26</sup> p. 24.

slept under the thatched roof in my little white bed. I had such fun. At night I heard the cows rattling their chains in their stalls, just the way they used to” (*Letters and Journals* 332). More than the exact reference to the cows, it might be useful to observe that Paula in the poem could simply be going back over some memories of Worpswede, where cows were always grazing in the surrounding fields.

Yet what seems more worth noticing, is that Paula here does not seem to belong to diurnal life anymore (“Dreams that usually evaporate in the light / stay wet with darkness.”). As for the rain getting in everywhere, it gives the idea that she is not on this earth but in a sort of underworld, or simply in the realm of absence. This makes another connection with Michaels’ *Fugitive Pieces*, when Ben, the protagonist of the second part of the novel, who teaches a course in Toronto entitled “Forms of Biography” and goes to Idhra to look for Beer’s journals, reflects on the role of absence in his life:

Most discover absence for themselves; trees are ripped out and sorrow floods the clearing.  
Then we know what we loved.

But I was born into absence. History had left a space already fetid with undergrowth, worms chewing soil abandoned by roots. Rains had made the lowest parts swampy, the green melancholia of bog with its swaying carpet of pollen. (*Fugitive Pieces* 233)

The beautiful passage of “Modersohn-Becker,” where Paula says that all her life she has “been saying grace / for hunger,” recalls Michaels’ above-mentioned formula for Cleopatra’s love, “making hungry where most it satisfies.” The painter similarly enters absence with all her being and in that emptiness she becomes “strangely satisfied,” as only that way does she actually touch the presence of time within herself.

The reader here can hardly refrain from feeling that Paula *is* in fact speaking from those Elysian Fields that Becker herself mentioned in her letters when in 1906 she separated from Modersohn and wrote in her journal: “When I read Otto’s letters they are like a voice from the earth. And I seem to myself like someone who has died and now dwells in the Elysian Fields and hears this cry from the earth” (*Letters and Journals* 401). Becker’s premonition of her death, which more than once occurred in her letters and journals, in Michaels’ poem becomes the condition for her eternal creativity. Paula therefore in “Modersohn-Becker” finally embodies the Eurydice that Rilke described in his poem “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes” as living in a condition of perpetual satisfaction, precisely because she does not belong to the earth and the finite life anymore but dwells forever in the infinity of absence.

The closing sentence of the poem, “Every painting is a way of saying goodbye,” is Michaels’ wonderful rewriting of Becker’s already quoted entry in her journal dated 26th July 1900, where she said: “And if only now love would blossom for me, before I depart; and if I can paint three good pictures, then I shall go gladly, with flowers in my hair” (*Letters and Journals* 195). It is Rilke’s reflection on death which resurfaces here, both in Becker’s journal and Michaels’ poem: the artist must bear his or her own death within, and the work of art is a way of giving birth to one’s death as a creature.

Yet, mysteriously enough, the final line of the poem does not coincide with its end but rather with a temporary interruption of the vision contained in it, as Bayley has wonderfully clarified with regard to Keat’s poetry: “The moment of truth and of annihilation for Keats is when the intense reality of the interior vision ends, and ends in goodbye. Life goes on at the end of Keats’s greatest poems, but not the poem itself: it remains enchanted, rooted on the spot. In the Nightingale Ode it is the bird who leaves the poem –” (*Uses of Division* 148). In “Modersohn-Becker” the bird seems to be substituted by a flock of paintings taking flight from the unknown and leaving the painter too.

The attentive reader could wonder at this point: what are the limits of a dramatic monologue? How is it cut out – or rather *framed* – in time and space? It is probably Langbaum who gave the most enthralling answer:

the dramatic monologue has no *necessary* beginning and end but only arbitrary limits, limits which do not cut the action off from the events that precede and follow but shade into those events, suggesting as much as possible of the speaker’s whole life and experience. They are naturalistic limits, imposed not by logical necessity but by physical conditions such as location and perspective and ultimately by the physical limitations on life and experience. Since the speaker’s death is the only ultimate conclusion of a dramatic monologue, the dramatic monologue must be read not as a definitive unit, a complete action, but as a characteristic and characterizing episode in the speaker’s career. (*Poetry of Experience* 157)

As for “Modersohn-Becker,” one is tempted to further expand the already wide limits traced by Langbaum and observe that Michaels’ spontaneously spurs her dramatic monologue to overcome the boundaries of Becker’s biography so as to reach the turning point where the painter can finally be transmuted into Eurydice, and live in what – from the limits of our earthly vision – appears to be a paradoxical deep union of life and death, which is the condition of perpetual creation. This is probably why “Modersohn-Becker” does not end either with Mathilde’s birth or her mother’s death but with Paula’s birth as a painter.

Michaels, in other terms, takes Paula further, to that metamorphosis that Rilke had wished for Becker as an artist, and thought only partly accomplished at her death, as he stated in the *Requiem*. Of course in the poem there is no hint that either Becker's wish to have a child is the cause of her death, or that Otto is to blame for it. Michaels simply reunites Becker and Rilke's yearning for truth in Paula's voice when she appears to be already beyond life. The end of the poem seems in fact to spring from this letter which Becker – quite meaningfully – wrote his “Dear Friend” at Christmas 1900:

I feel as if the barricades are falling which one has built up wearily and small-mindedly against so many things and so many people; as if one were progressing, and as if the vase could contain more and more, so that with each year a new white rose could bloom in it and beckon to the others, shine into their midst and stroke their cheeks with its shimmer and fill the world with beauty and fragrance. And that is life, a life like a prayer, a pious prayer, a jubilant prayer, a lovely and smiling prayer which descends deeper and deeper into the meaning of life, whose eye grows greater and more serious because it has seen so much. And when it has seen everything, the final thing, when it may no longer look, for then death comes. Perhaps in this sense I can reconcile myself with death, because I, too, must suffer it someday. (*Letters and Journals* 216-17)

What is clear at this point is that the extensions, or deviations in “Modersohn-Becker” from Becker's biography are due not so much to Michaels' wish to change or reinterpret the painter's life but more to the effort on her part to give voice to the invisible part of her life. To properly conclude the journey in this wonderful poem there is no better comment than Beer's in *Fugitive Pieces* when he states: “Never trust biographies. Too many events in a man's life are invisible. Unknown to others as our dreams. And nothing releases the dreamer; not death in the dream, not waking” (141).

## *Skin as a Window*

“Paula Becker would you have dared to try garlic?”

Sujata Bhatt, from “The Garlic of Truth”<sup>27</sup>

Sujata Bhatt<sup>28</sup> did not write only one poem but a multi-voiced collection brought together under the title of *A Colour for Solitude* (2002). Whereas Michaels in “Modersohn-Becker” tries to combine fragments of Becker’s experience, Bhatt needs to approach it in separate poems. Giving voice to the painter is not enough, and hers is not the only voice that matters to Bhatt. In fact, in the “Author’s Note” she wrote: “My interest in Modersohn-Becker can be traced to Clara Rilke-Westhoff (whose friend she was) and ultimately to Rilke and to Rilke’s work” (*A Colour for Solitude* 10). Bhatt also clarifies that, even if one does not usually associate poetry with research, “I, however, find myself increasingly drawn to subjects that demand research: subjects that are either historical events or historical figures” (11).

After reading Rilke’s poems, letters and journals, Bhatt was first struck by Westhoff’s silence with respect to “Rilke’s verbal expansiveness” (10). In 1979 she therefore wrote the first poem in her voice, which bears the title of “No Road Leads to This.” This poem, says the author, “grew out of my desire to give life to Rilke’s abstract notion of love as ‘two solitudes greeting and saluting each other’” (10). The poem is set in the house where the Rilkes chose to base their family, in Westerwede, as is indicated in the subtitle together with the year, 1901, that is to say shortly after their marriage. No road leads to this house because the two artists living in it – and especially Rilke, who significantly lives upstairs “with ink and paper” while his wife lives downstairs “with my clay and stone” – transform it into a kind of temple open to metaphysical forces. Bhatt clearly refers to Rilke’s letter dated November 12<sup>th</sup> 1901, where he describes that house to an acquaintance of his, “A house like this in the middle of the moor, without neighbours (except for a few unknown farmsteads) lying on no street and discovered by no one, is a good refuge [...]” (Torgersen 111). Rilke expected refuge and protection from his marriage,

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<sup>27</sup> *Brunizem* 78.

<sup>28</sup> Sujata Bhatt was born in Ahmedabad, India, in 1956. She is a graduate of the Writer’s Workshop at the University of Iowa and now lives in Germany with her husband, the writer Michael Augustin, and daughter. Carcanet have published six collections of her poetry and a substantial selected poems, *Point No Point* (1997). She has translated Gujaraty poetry into English for the *Penguin Anthology of Contemporary Indian Women Poets*. Her work has been anthologized, broadcast on radio and television, and has been translated into more than twenty languages. *A Colour of Solitude* is her fifth collection of poetry.



the ideal conditions to ensure him the peace and equilibrium that were necessary for writing. The Rilkes' life in Westerwede, however, did not last long, as in 1902, just two weeks after Ruth's birth, Rilke's letters already mention the possibility of breaking up the household.

Westhoff's voice – in the poem as in her life – is totally subdued to Rilke's, and in "No Road Leads to This" her unbalanced relationship with her husband is represented by Westhoff's constant attempt to climb to Rilke's room while he never comes down to hers, to see her works:

[...] Tonight again  
on the staircase, I  
grope my way to your room.  
Each night I climb  
up these steps  
back to you, with your open windows  
so close to the winds and stars.  
I listen to your poems as I wash  
the dust off my skin and hair. [...]  
Tomorrow  
come see the ground,  
the gawky yellow weeds  
at eye level from my window down below. (*Colour for Solitude* 28)

Bhatt wrote the first poem about Becker's works in 1985, after her very first visit to Germany, where she visited the *Kunsthalle Bremen* and therefore encountered her paintings. At that time she was still a student in Iowa but, many years later, after she had graduated, she married the German writer Michael Augustin, who had first invited her to Bremen, and went to live in Germany, just a few miles away from Worpswede. The above-mentioned poem, included in her first collection *Brunizem* with the title of "For Paula Modersohn-Becker," which she later called "Was it the Blue Irises?," is not in Becker's voice but in what seems to be the poet's voice. As Bhatt says, it was written "in response to one of her self-portraits." This is probably why in *A Colour for Solitude* it is placed nearly at the end of the collection.

What is very interesting to notice is that, precisely in *Brunizem*, which was published in 1988, there is one whole section entitled "Eurydice speaks," which not only includes a poem with the same title where Eurydice is given voice, but other dramatic monologues embodying other characters. Curiously enough, there is one poem, "Marie Curie Speaks to Her Husband," where Marie Curie speaks to Pierre after his death, and Michaels too wrote a dramatic

monologue in Marie Curie's voice, called "The Second Search" and included in her collection *Skin Divers* (1999), where, in a very similar way, she has chosen the moment in which a grieving Marie Curie continues living in her husband's absence.

Can one infer that in post-colonial poetry there is still the need to absorb European literature, art and science, in a sort of cannibalism so as to make them one's own? The answer seems to be affirmative, yet the transformative process cannot be defined as one of total absorption but is more directed to combining the two experiences so as to come to represent an unavoidable inner separation, as the recurrent sentence in *Fugitive Pieces*, more than once quoted in this research, best summarizes: "Every moment is two moments." Post-colonial and European literature are currently trying ways of co-existing peacefully and, what is more, in the most meaningful examples – as Michaels' and Bhatt's works show – cannot but acknowledge a fruitful interdependence, which is no longer unilateral but a two-way circulation of ideas and experiences. This is probably why the dramatic monologue seems to be particularly relevant especially for women's post-colonial poetry of the twentieth century, as it allows the absorption of another personality, but in fact results in a merging of two personalities, two places, two times and two cultures. Therefore Armstrong's definition of the "double poem" seems to be valid not only for the nineteenth century but can also be extended to the twentieth century (and probably further):

No less than Christina Rossetti, however, women experimenting with mask or with myth call upon the resources of the double poem – the expressive 'I' speaking in parallel with another poem emerging out of the same words which contradicts and questions the limits of that subjectivity. Perhaps because women in the nineteenth century were confronted with contradictory experience they use the double poem persistently. (Armstrong 368)

Furthermore, translation too, as will be discussed in Epilogue, can contribute towards overcoming what is certainly to be considered an 'anxiety of influence' – to say it with Harold Bloom – also as regards the traditional European form of the nineteenth-century dramatic monologue.

### *Going Through Eurydice*

Having said that, the 'Eurydice experience' is probably necessary if one wants to get into the skin of another. Undergoing the experience of speaking in another voice requires a paradox on the part of the poet, as his or her own personality must be so strong as to be able to renounce

part of itself to leave space for another. Therefore it is not by sheer coincidence that Paula's voice resurfaces precisely in Bhatt's "Eurydice speaks" section in *Brunizem*. Apart from the poem "For Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907)," which will be later included in *A Colour for Solitude* with the title "Was it the Blue Irises?," Paula's voice emerges in the following poem, "The Garlic of Truth," ironically and seriously revolving around a search for Truth,<sup>29</sup> and coming to the striking direct question: "Paula Becker, would you have dared to try garlic?" (78). Paula seems to be an indispensable interlocutor for the speaker, who needs to know Becker's opinion before stating her own. But it is particularly in the following poem, "Wanting Agni," that the 'Eurydice experience' starts, as the speaker, who – unseen – is watching the celebration of an Indian funeral, cannot refrain from imagining her own death, and she wishes for herself to be given the same kind of commemoration the Indian woman's corpse is undergoing instead of a Western funeral:

If they want to bury me  
my scalp will be afraid,  
if they do an autopsy  
my soul will be stuck in the fluorescent lights  
watching  
watching with hydrochloric acid-shame and embarrassment.  
But if I'm taken away on bamboo and roses and neem  
and placed on more wood  
than Agni, the good god of fire will come rushing towards me,  
laughing  
as if tickled by all the saffron. (80)

One is here reminded of the fear of being buried alive that Brodsky mentioned in his essay dedicated to "Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes," as seen in the first chapter. Yet Bhatt's Eurydice is certainly not willing to stay in the underworld but chooses the earth instead and is ready to substitute Orpheus (to whom the poem is addressed) with another man, less divine but more listening:

Orpheus, I tell you I'm not in hell,  
this place is called Maine.

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<sup>29</sup> "Once upon a time, truth stood with a capital 'T' / like this: Truth. / When people laughed the 'T' slumped and wished / it were part of an undiscovered tiger instead. / Not that anyone knew / what it meant: Truth or truth, big deal." (*Brunizem* 77)

All winter the cold wind burns my face,  
and I sweat, wading through all this snow.  
But it's spring now:  
sounds of snow melting,  
water dripping off eaves, flooding crocuses  
and jack-in-the-pulpits.  
Pussy willows, cattails, forsythia suddenly  
awaken junipers tipped with pale new shoots.  
The wind flings pine cones my way.  
Now walking along the coast  
I follow seagulls  
with my camera, seagulls  
skimming waves and I focus  
on their bills in the foaming  
water, they dip their bills,  
I focus, they rise with limp silver  
flashing in the sun as others come swooping  
down, I turn circling with my camera  
while waves rise and crash upon rocks  
flinging salty seaweed and mollusks;  
chipping seashells upon cliffs  
waves crash and leave small pools of fish stranded...  
Orpheus, I want to stay here  
with the smooth pebbles,  
I want to stay here, at the ocean's edge  
I have found someone new –  
no god, but a quiet man who listens. (*Brunizem* 82)

Bhatt's Eurydice would not have encountered Rilke's appreciation, as she is not at all content with her death, but she rather seems to have escaped it because she loves life more than death. It is also hinted in the poem that Eurydice, by choosing to change place (she is in Maine now, and Orpheus evidently does not know this) and lover, has started a new life which is still partly unknown to her and it seems definitely preferable to her, as the repetition of "I want to stay here" confirms. The fact is that Bhatt's Eurydice has found the way out of the myth, and has resurfaced to earthly and mortal life.

Curiously enough, in Bhatt's third collection, *The Stinking Rose*, Orpheus speaks to Eurydice in the poem "Orpheus Confesses to Eurydice," and it is yet another variation on the myth that asserts itself. In the first section of the poem Orpheus appears to be a weak man, who does not believe in the power of his own song to bring Eurydice back from the underworld:

1

It was a lack of faith.  
I admit it. I didn't believe enough  
in you or even in the power  
of my song. I needed constant reassurance. (86)

Yet the most interesting part of the poem comes in the second section, where Orpheus tells Eurydice about something very strange that he happened to see:

2

Once when I stood singing by the cliffs  
a sharp stone fell – and then a lizard  
darted to the east and her sliced-off tail  
rushed away to the west – and I watched  
the tail shudder and jerk –  
a yellow-green thing in such a hurry.

Now I've become a torn-off  
lizard's tail. Only my tongue lives  
in my bodiless head – my tongue still sings  
against the noise of the river.

Maybe this is what I really wanted:  
To be just a tongue –  
a lizard's tail without the lizard.

To be a pure voice  
without my tired, awkward body –

Now I'm almost weightless and about to be swallowed

by the ocean – I will become  
a stronger voice. (86-87)

The power of incantation of Orpheus' song requires his mutilation, or, worse, that he becomes bodiless if he wants to be a great poet. As opposed to Eurydice, Bhatt's Orpheus remains confined within the myth, as he must renounce his physical – and therefore mortal – life if he wants to become "a pure voice." The "lizard's tail without the lizard" of course can also be seen as a phallic symbol, and the power of song similarly come to be identified with the male sexual power, but what is more striking here is that if the poet wishes to have a "stronger voice," he must renounce his self completely and merge into the elements. Bhatt's Orpheus is therefore strangely similar to Rilke's ideal of the poet, whose greatest aim is to disappear in the purity of his song.

What is interesting to notice is that Bhatt never denies the body in her own poems but, on the contrary, quite often takes it as a source of inspiration.<sup>30</sup> In Bhatt's most anthologized poem, "Search For My Tongue," the poet's tongue is a lizard's tail slipping away which cannot be found:

Days my tongue slips away.  
I can't hold on to my tongue.  
It's slippery like the lizard's tail  
I try to grasp  
but the lizard darts away. (*Brunizem* 65)

Even more interesting is that what seems to be a missing tongue in fact reveals itself to be a self-regenerating tongue, which lives together with English in an inwardly conflicting double whole:

## II

You ask me what I mean  
by saying I have lost my tongue.  
I ask you, what would you do  
if you had two tongues in your mouth,  
and lost the first one, the mother tongue,

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<sup>30</sup> For instance in "White Asparagus": "Who speaks of the strong currents / streaming through the legs, the breasts / of a pregnant woman / in her fourth month?" (*Monkey Shadows* 98).

and could not really know the other,  
the foreign tongue.  
You could not use them both together  
even if you thought that way.  
And if you lived in a place you had to  
speak a foreign tongue,  
your mother tongue would rot,  
rot and die in your mouth  
until you had to spit it out.  
I thought I spit it out  
but overnight while I dream,  
[...]  
it grows back, a stump of a shoot  
grows longer, grows moist, grows strong veins,  
it ties the other tongue in knots,  
the bud opens, the bud opens in my mouth,  
it pushes the other tongue aside.  
Everytime I think I've forgotten,  
I think I've lost the mother tongue,  
it blossoms out of my mouth. (66)

Very differently from her Orpheus, Bhatt in this phase of her poetry does not have to disappear to find her “pure voice” but has to acknowledge her double tongue to feel whole. Moreover, only her mother tongue can name things and make them exist, as it is the only one that has the power to eternally renovate itself. In Bhatt’s poetry it seems that the purest voice is the silent and missing Gujarati language which is the language of the body and sometimes fights against the English language – that is to say the language of the conqueror – but at other times it simply flows within the banks of English as an undercurrent of secret unspeakable meanings and different flavours and shades of colours. Here Eurydice *is* the lost dead language and the poet *is* Orpheus trying to resurrect her/it as, due to his use of the English language, he is in danger of forgetting her/it. Even though in Bhatt’s first collections it did not appear to be so, she *is* exactly like Rilke, as she envies Orpheus for his capacity of disappearing in his song and being transformed into his poem. It becomes clear in the poem “Ars Poetica” in *Augatora*, where the speaker (presumably the poet speaking in the first person) is asked which writer or poet she envies most, and she replies:





and which shines when the song allows.

I envy Fredrika Brillembourg  
                                when she is Orpheus  
    when she is singing all vowels  
full of loss and hope  
    at the part where Orpheus is still  
searching for Eurydice  
when the black shoes stomp on and on  
                                tireless –

Envy? Oh yes.

Oh yes,

I would like to disappear  
                                into those vowels – (106-7)

More than the speaker's wish to become Orpheus, and therefore to be transformed into the male poet, what is striking here is her deep desire to vanish into song, to *become the poem* and enter its space for transformation, and potentially be able to embody everything and everyone. Orpheus' search for Eurydice therefore becomes one with the speaker's wish to find a totalizing language able to grasp all reality.

*From Eurydice to Paula*

*“Is it a voice  
or is it a woman?”*

*Or shall I say: there is a voice  
that is a woman?*

*[...]*

*She is so silent  
for someone who is a voice.”*

*Sujata Bhatt, from “Is it a Voice?” for Edvard Munch ”<sup>31</sup>*

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<sup>31</sup> *Augatora* 87.

The creative process which led Bhatt to the composition of *A Colour for Solitude* is very curious and similar to a *mise en abîme*, as one gets the impression that she could speak in Becker's voice only after embodying Eurydice, whose voice allowed Bhatt to explore Westhoff's voice and her own voice as a viewer of Becker's works. In "Was it the Blue Irises?" the speaking I of the poet cannot but return "again and again to your self-portrait with blue irises" (104). Embodying Becker's friend and being a viewer of her paintings were therefore the necessary preambles to finally embodying the painter's voice:

I was on the top floor with other paintings, other painters,  
but unable to concentrate on them because  
already I could hear the tone of voice your brown eyes would require.

So I rushed back down to be with you.

The look that passed between us was full  
of understanding so I could imagine living with you  
and arguing with you about whether to put garlic in the soup.

I stared at the blue irises but in my throat  
there was the pungent fresh bitterness of watercress. (104)

Whereas Michaels embodies Becker's voice by erasing herself from the poem, Bhatt is present in her collection, as a visible and living vehicle to give body to the painter's presence. After gradually encircling Becker's voice, Bhatt gets into her shoes. The process of embodiment, which is accompanied by the presence of the speaker, can recall one of the eight episodes of the movie *Dreams, I Saw a Dream Like This, or Such Dreams I Have Dreamed* (1990) by Japanese director Akira Kurosawa. In the fifth episode called "Crows," an art student (representing Kurosawa himself) visits an exhibition of Van Gogh's paintings and enters one of them until he finds himself inside the vibrant and chaotic world of the painter's artwork. He also meets him and converses with him. The student loses track of the artist (who is missing an ear and will kill himself shortly after) and travels through other works trying to find him. He finally sees him while he is getting lost in his "Wheat Field with Crows;" a shot resounds in the air and the crows suddenly fly away.

The viewer of the paintings in Bhatt's poems equally enters Becker's pictures, in most of them (especially in the self-portraits) finds the painter speaking in the first person, and finally gets out of Becker's artwork with poems written in the poet's voice as a viewer of Paula's art and life. As Paul Sharrad observes, "language and body both operate as 'skins' between the poet and her world/s" ("The Memory of the Tongue: Sujata Bhatt's Diasporic Verse" 6). According to him, skin, in Bhatt's poems,

is a place of constant alteration, of things surfacing and things being absorbed. Many poems enact a voyage into memory, dream, another person's world, followed by some return to the surface of the recording persona or the writing of the poem itself, usually with some hint of transformation of that surface. (7)

Like the windows in Bhatt's poem "Augatora," skins are both protective and permeable membranes:

*Windoge, vindauga*, wind eye –  
the hole, the opening, the opening out  
into the wind, the hole.  
The wind blowing into the house.

The wind eye, *windoge*, and then  
*augatora, augadauro*, the eye-gate,  
the eye's gate, the hole for the eye to measure  
the wind, the sun – corona, cornea, hazy –  
Hazy light today. Rings of light follow you.  
*Augatora*  
the gate opening towards the sun –  
eyes watching for the wind. (*Augatora* 16)

In the collection *A Colour for Solitude* not only language(s), but Becker's paintings too are to be considered as skins: they are both windows and mirrors, allowing the poet to contemplate the outside world and herself. Sometimes they burst open because of a detail, or an emotion inducing a juxtaposition of different times and places, while sometimes they suddenly shut and everything they contain and evoke remains secluded in an unattainable 'elsewhere.'

*Poems to Enter the Frame*

If Michaels does not seem to have seen Becker's painting closely except maybe in pictures and books, Bhatt, who lives in Germany, and precisely in Becker's native city, Bremen, not only is in close touch with the actual painter's work and surroundings, but she came to 'use' Becker's art to come to terms with her feeling of being an outsider in Germany:

My own life in Bremen and my frequent visits to Worpswede have no doubt entered the poems, even where it is not apparent. And my experience of the weather, the landscape, the language and the music of Northern Germany has surely affected my perception of the colours in Modersohn-Becker's paintings. At the same time, being the ultimate foreigner, I retain the perspective of an outsider. And perhaps to some extent, responding to Modersohn-Becker's work has been a way for my mind to enter and try to understand a totally alien culture and country. In the end, of course, there are the poems, just the poems, for there is a great deal that cannot be explained or analysed in rational, numerical terms, or even in prose. ("Author's Note" 13)

I was tempted to enter her poems with the sole help of Becker's paintings, which I saw at the Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum in Böttcherstraße, Bremen, but I felt very curious to discover more about this sort of 'possession' that had induced Bhatt to 'travel' within Paula's personality for nearly thirty years. Not only was I lucky enough to be able to meet her in August 2011 in Bremen, but I was also able to add to our long conversations about Becker's painting and life a visit to her places together with Bhatt, therefore partly sharing with her the process which has led her to follow Becker's tracks for such a long time. In fact, as Bhatt herself told me when I met her, four more poems had appeared in her latest collection, *Pure Lizard*, which she published in 2008. They are very intense, and in all of them Paula speaks in the first person: two poems are addressed to Rilke and two to Clara, as if to try once again to restore the balance between speech and silence, which was the initial urge which had prompted Bhatt to write a collection dedicated to Becker: "So far, to a large extent, Rilke has had the last word regarding both Clara and Paula. I wanted to change that, to restore the balance, so to speak" ("Author's Note" 12). Therefore, very coherently with what she says in *A Colour for Solitude*, neither in these four poems does Rilke speak in the first person. As Bhatt told me, she felt that he had written so much himself, that there were no silences to be filled, and writing in his voice would have meant mimicking his style, which made no sense to her; Clara and Paula, on the other hand, did not speak of so many things that there was a great deal to imagine about them. While

reading Bhatt's poems, in fact, I had the feeling that they were meant as letters written in poetry, perhaps just mentally addressed. She confirmed this to me, and added that she allowed herself the freedom to imagine Paula's and Clara's most intimate thoughts, which are not recorded in any letter or journal.

For her *A Colour for Solitude* is therefore a "biography in poems," attempting to convey what more traditional biographies cannot say:

although Paula's letters and journals have largely survived, there is a great deal she did not comment on. And when she was most deeply immersed in her painting, she left no written records of her thoughts. [...]. As a poet, I have been more interested in exploring and imagining what has been left unsaid and what has been left aside for speculation by biographers and art historians. Therefore, Clara's (and Paula's) relative silence has been more an inspiration to me than a hindrance. ("Author's Note" 12)

Moreover, Bhatt's collection (together with Michaels' poem) certainly contribute to make Becker's work known outside Germany, as – still in 2001 when Bhatt wrote her "Author's Note," – "It has been only in the last twenty-five years or so that Paula Modersohn-Becker's work has gained, however slowly, the respect it has been deprived of. And yet, she is still largely unknown to the general public outside Germany" (10). Entering the Museum Paula Modersohn-Becker, both concretely and metaphorically – as I also entered Bhatt's personal museum of images derived from Becker's work – was very useful as well as extremely interesting. While reading Bhatt's collection – and not knowing all of Becker's pictures, as I would later realize in Bremen – I had suspected that she had 'invented' a few pictures. But actually she had not done so. Bhatt told me that she thinks it is licit for a poet to 'invent' a picture but she simply did not happen to do so, as she is interested in listening to the story each painting has to tell her. It is a starting point for a narration of something which is there and is not there at the same time: "Ironically, I find that the facts often free the imagination to probe deeper, to imagine things that otherwise could not have been imagined" ("Author's Note" 11).

Ekphrasis therefore for Bhatt is part of the creative process which basically consists in the effort to find a story for each painting which catches her imagination. Sometimes a picture can haunt her for a long time, continuing to tell its story until she writes it. She also travelled to other cities and places to see other paintings or exhibitions dedicated to Paula Modersohn-Becker. It seems to be a neverending obsession, as Bhatt had not planned to write four more poems in Paula's voice after having completed and published *A Colour for Solitude*. Once she did, her editor at first did not want to include them in her new collection *Pure Lizard*. But once

he read them he liked them so much that he agreed to include them. In the same collection there are many poems inspired by paintings and sketches by other painters. Bhatt admitted that at first she was very skeptical about letting herself get involved in other painters' work. It happened, however, and she could not but welcome this new source of inspiration; as a consequence, many of her most recent poems are inspired by Portuguese painter Paula Rego. Bhatt also greatly admires the work of Frida Kahlo, to whom she addressed rather than dedicated a few poems in *The Stinking Rose* (1995) but – as in Rilke's case – she felt that Kahlo had already said and written a good deal about herself and her art, therefore there was no point in writing poems to fill the blanks. Finally, *The Stinking Rose* includes two poems for American painter Georgia O'Keeffe, whose affirmation on painting is quoted at the beginning of the second section of the book, meaningfully entitled "New World Dialogues": "*The color used for the paintings had little to do with what I had seen – the color grew as I painted.* – Georgia O'Keeffe." The same reinvention of reality according to one's inner perception seems in tune with what Becker wanted to convey with her art.

*"I used to think there was  
only one voice.  
I used to wait  
patiently for that one voice to return  
to begin its dictation.*

*I was wrong.*

*I can never finish counting them now.  
I can never finish  
writing all they have to say.  
[...]*

*And each voice says: follow me  
follow me and I will take you –"*

*Sujata Bhatt, from "The Voices"<sup>32</sup>*

Yet it must be said that it is only in the case of Becker that Bhatt's interest progressively grew until one whole book was necessary to collect all the poems in her voice or other characters' voices. As the poet confesses in her "Author's Note," the idea of writing an entire collection came to her after having written a second poem in Paula's voice and having read the letters and journals. It is also worth noticing that living in Germany, and especially hearing her daughter learning Rilke's poems by heart in German, were part of the process of embodiment:

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<sup>32</sup> *The Stinking Rose* 103-4.

In 1994, after I wrote my second poem connected with another Modersohn-Becker self-portrait, now entitled ‘Self-Portrait on My Fifth Wedding Anniversary, 25-5-06’ (first published in *The Stinking Rose*),<sup>33</sup> I thought of eventually writing a sequence of poems entirely devoted to and drawing their inspiration from Paula Modersohn-Becker’s paintings, especially the self-portraits of which there are more than fifty and which appear at every stage of Modersohn-Becker’s artistic development. By that time (1994), I was long familiar with Paula’s biography and with her letters and journals. The German language itself had a new resonance for me as I watched my small daughter grow up. (More recently, listening to her learn and recite Rilke’s poems for school has added another dimension to my relationship with Rilke’s work.) My poems grew out of this atmosphere. (*Colour for Solitude* 11)

One is here reminded of what Henry James said of Balzac’s characters, that “It was by loving them that he knew them, not by knowing them that he loved,” as was mentioned at the end of the first chapter in this research. In the same way, Bhatt was induced to read Becker’s letters and journals after having found herself so involved in her painting that she was spontaneously led to write poems devoted to her. It is also interesting to notice that, with the process of writing and composing *A Colour for Solitude*, Bhatt’s linguistic doubleness between her mother tongue (Gujarati) and English (the conqueror’s tongue), gave way to a creative tension between two European languages, English and German:

Practically all of my research was conducted in German. However, since English is my language, the poems are in English. Paula and Clara, of course, had spoken in German to each other. And so, in a sense, there was always a certain amount of linguistic tension that I experienced in the making of this book. At the same time, there were days when I was not aware of the language I was working in. There were days when I was only aware of the sounds, rhythms, colours and emotions involved with my ‘characters’ or ‘speakers.’ (*Colour for Solitude* 12-13)

As one can infer from this passage, Bhatt’s creative language has become English, and it is in English that she can ‘translate’ her characters and speakers to make them alive on the page. Yet this new doubleness of tongue is equally productive of a crossing of cultures which requires poetry as the literary genre which can best allow the creation of a ‘third tongue,’ admitting and ideally welcoming all the others in one potentially infinite mother tongue, not exclusively

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<sup>33</sup> When first published in *The Stinking Rose*, the poem was entitled “Paula Modersohn-Becker Speaks to Herself” (91-92).

intended as the one inherited from the poet's own mother, but also from foreign writers whose work is so fundamental for the poet's original creation. No longer identified just with her mother's language, her mother tongue rather becomes a *function* for Bhatt. Far from being a negative development as Sharrad sees it,<sup>34</sup> it rather seems to make for a more inclusive universalization. Moreover, it is very interesting to notice that this 'third language' is not necessarily inherited from the female line of the 'literary' family which has come to be important for the writer but can equally be derived from the male line.

As far as Michaels is concerned, German is more problematic for her, as – as she says in *Fugitive Pieces* – it is the language in which the Holocaust was scientifically planned by exploiting euphemism as a device to falsify truth. Yet, in "What the Light Teaches" Michaels too seems to be invoking a new pacifying language able to heal the wounds of History:

Language remembers.

Out of obscurity, a word takes place  
in history. Even a word so simple  
it's translatable: number. Oven.

Because all change is permanent,  
we need words to raise ourselves  
to new meaning: tea and dacha and river. (*Miner's Pond* 113)

As for her 'quest' for the real pictures, Bhatt's approach to Becker's experience is very different from Michaels' also thanks to her husband's job as a cultural editor for radio Bremen. Bhatt in fact had the opportunity of meeting Hille Darjes, Becker's granddaughter, who is an actress. And she introduced her to Mathilde Modersohn, Becker's daughter, who unfortunately at that time was already quite old and not lucid. What struck Bhatt was the incredible similarity that Mathilde still showed with her mother. Meeting her for Bhatt meant to see Paula as she *could have been* if only she had reached her daughter's age. Bhatt's poems therefore spring from real life too, and this is probably why the time-span covered in *A Colour for Solitude* is so much wider than in "Modersohn-Becker."

Bhatt's collection in fact not only re-opens one moment of Paula's inner life where past and present merge – as happens in Michaels' poem – but, besides poems where Clara speaks after

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<sup>34</sup> "If the diasporic person becomes separated from her mother tongue, she may also be disconnected from memory and from continuity of identity." (4)





*“Where else but in Venice  
should this memory  
be written down.”*

*Sujata Bhatt, from “Lines Written in Venice”<sup>35</sup>*

In *A Colour for Solitude* Bhatt reconstructed a subsequent chronological order which does not coincide with the order of composition, so that the reader gets the impression of entering Paula’s life from her earlier creative years (1897) and following her until her death, after which the memory of her is still felt in the present time of the speaker. Yet what is interesting to explore is the thematic progression in the collection. From this point of view the above-mentioned last poem of *A Colour for Solitude* should be considered the first from an ‘emotional’ point of view, as it conveys the sense of mourning felt by the poet who speaks in the poem, which has prompted her to re-open Becker’s life and here and there in the collection to give her personal interpretation of the mysteries encircling her life.

What is very different from Michaels’ “Modersohn-Becker” is that the subjects within the collection change not only from the first, the second and the third person, but also according to what can be properly defined as a spectrum of points of view. Thanks to this multi-faceted subjectivity, Bhatt not only comes and goes from her character Paula, but also from the dramatic monologue and from Becker’s and Westhoff’s works of art. A few examples are necessary to illustrate this process which certainly expands beyond the wide range of possibilities allowed by the dramatic monologue as a poetical genre.

To restrict discussion to the first person – which is one of the conditions deemed necessary to define a poem as a dramatic monologue –, the personal pronoun ‘I’ in *A Colour for Solitude* can indicate three different kinds of subject:

- (a) the ‘I’ of the poet who is the speaker and viewer of Becker’s artwork within the collection
- (b) the character of Paula speaking to herself or to Clara or Clara speaking to herself or to Paula, and finally
- (c) one figure within a painting which is given voice by the poet interpreting Becker’s feelings and intentions concerning it.

(a) At the beginning of the collection the ‘I’ of the poet/speaker is mainly implicit, and it addresses the ‘you’ of the painter as if she were other than herself and yet her art and unsaid things in her life were incredibly attractive for the poet/speaker. Interestingly enough, the ‘I’ of

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<sup>35</sup> *A Colour for Solitude* 106.



The 'I' of the poet/speaker becomes explicit towards the end of the collection, particularly in the poem discussed above, "Was it the Blue Irises?," which was originally written by Bhatt in 1985, and then also in "Lines Written in Venice," "*about a visit to Mathilde (Tille) Modersohn. Bremen, 1995*," where the poet/speaker recalls her visit to Becker's daughter and imagines how the painter would have looked if she had survived her early death:

[...]  
Looking at your face  
I imagined if Paula had lived  
to be old – then this is how  
she would have looked,  
    like you –  
your hair faded but still long  
worn pulled back  
    and coiled exactly  
the way Paula used to  
    style her hair.  
[...] (106)

(b) It is worth noticing that the poems where Paula speaks in the first person are not usually the ones where she wants to affirm her identity but where she rather tries to give voice to her inner doubts about who she is, as in "Self-Portrait as My Sister, 1897":

Whose face is this?  
  
An accident?  
  
It is my sister, Herma  
on a windy day –  
  
The wind tears all shapes  
into a blur of colour –  
  
Even the lines of this face  
    are scattered

as if the wind has flung  
Herma's face onto mine –  
as if our faces were flowers  
in the wind's path – (20)

In "Self-Portrait with Blossoming Trees," Paula confesses her search for happiness in her marriage as well in painting:

And if I paint myself serene  
will I become  
serene – at one with these  
blossoming trees?

And if I sign my name  
as 'Paula Modersohn'  
in large capital letters,  
will I feel more  
like Otto's wife? (36)

As far as Clara is concerned, it is quite meaningful that she speaks in the first person mostly after Paula's and Rilke's death, as if they were taking all the space in the scene of the collection and *their* relationship was the most important one, while Clara has gradually become conscious of being only a character of minor importance in the artistic and sentimental triangle that the three of them constitute. Clara can somehow be considered a 'posthumous' character within the collection, as she seems to find her own identity only after her husband's and friend's death. So many years after their disappearance, she can admit the truth without being angry or frustrated but as if she were simply coming to terms with it, as in Bhatt's poem "16 April 1945. *Clara Westhoff to Paula Becker*," set shortly after Bremen has been bombed:

[...]  
Bremen is no more.  
Oelze told me –

But tonight I will sit with you,  
with my memories –

All those letters  
about Cézanne,  
Rainer sent me  
were really written for you.  
I always knew.  
And in the end he meant  
the sonnets to be for you –  
And the elegies, he wanted to place  
in a niche to your memory, he said –

Always you.

He loved Lou  
and he loved you, Paula –  
He needed you.

It was your death he kept  
within his heart – your death  
he could never accept. (102-03)

The ‘I’ of Clara is here weakened by the assonance of “you/Lou,” which seems to exclude her from Rilke’s intimacy. This is confirmed in another poem, again in Clara’s voice, called “The Room Itself is Dying. *Clara Westhoff to Rainer Maria Rilke, circa 1921,*” where Clara acknowledges that Rilke will not go to see her and Ruth anymore, and that her daughter has already forgotten his face. Had Paula still been there, maybe things would be different:

[...]  
There are days  
when I think if Paula were still  
alive and if she lived here  
in this village, or nearby  
in Worpswede – if Paula  
were still alive –  
then, surely you would  
arrive at the station  
loaded down with your books  
and papers – Then, no doubt

you would come to see Paula –  
And perhaps that way, I imagine,  
    in her presence  
you would allow me  
to speak with you –

But she is dead –  
she who had brought us together  
    so many times  
without even knowing that she did – (100)

Another interesting poem in Clara's voice, besides "No Road Leads to This," is "Icicles Hang from the Reeds of Our Roof. *Clara Westhoff to Paula Becker, February 1902,*" where Bhatt feels the need to let Clara say her opinion about an argument she and Rilke had had with Becker when, as seen in the first part, they had forgotten her birthday and Becker, wounded by their lack of attention, had replied to Clara's letter of apologies by reproaching her for acting as the mouthpiece of Rilke. This letter got an answer only directly from Rilke as – as usual – he was the one who spoke in his wife's voice too. In Bhatt's poem, Clara's answer – which actually was never given – is of course in no way rhetorical as Rilke's real answer was:

[...]  
You are angry  
at me, bitter – You say  
I sound too much like Rainer.

But what is love?

Should love not be open –  
    open to change,  
open to the other?

Or do you love me more  
because you don't  
want me to change? (32)

As the year indicated by Bhatt is 1902, this poem is not intended to represent Clara's inability to understand the present, which would be bridged later on, but is Bhatt's way of filling the blanks in the communication between Paula and Clara, as if she were sure that – despite there being no real answer from Clara – she must have wished to reply mentally to her friend. In order to get to Paula's truth, Bhatt needs therefore to assess the truth of the whole complex system of relationships in which she was involved. This is why one long dramatic monologue with one single point of view is not enough for her, but she needs to orchestrate an entire spectrum of different points of view.

(c) The poems where Bhatt make figures in Becker's paintings speak are the most ekphrastic ones, if one agrees with Heffernan, who – in the passage quoted above – said that writing ekphrasis means envoicing a silent object, and it is not limited to speaking "about works of art" but includes speaking "to and for them." There are only a few purely ekphrastic poems in *A Colour of Solitude*, and it is worth noticing that the title of six of them starts with "Two Girls,"<sup>36</sup> but only one of them is in the first person: "Two Girls: The Blind Sister, 1903" (37). The poem refers to Becker's painting *Blind Little Sister*, which shows two little sisters, one with dark hair and the other with blonde hair.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Blind Little Sister*, 1903

Bhatt's poem gives voice to the former, who becomes the blonde sister's guide:

My blind sister  
stands in the sun.

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<sup>36</sup> "Two Girls in a Landscape, 1901" (30), "Two Girls: The Blind Sister, 1903" (37), "Two Girls in Profile in a Landscape, charcoal, 1903/4" (40), "Two Girls: One Sitting in a White Shirt. The Other; a Standing Nude, 1906" (73), "Two Girls: Nude, One Standing, the Other Kneeling in Front of Red Poppies, 1906" (74) and "Two Girls with their Arms Across their Shoulders, 1906" (75).



I stand behind her.

I hold her, guide her –

Look at her pale yellow eyelashes,  
the blonde hairs of her eyebrows –

Today, the sun will not

let her hide –

[...] (37)

There is one more poem whose title starts with “Two Girls,” which, however, is not an ekphrastic one and yet seems to explain why Bhatt wrote so many similarly entitled poems. It is called “Two Girls, Two Sisters. *Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff*, 1900,” and – as seen in the first chapter – explicitly refers to Rilke’s favourite names for Paula and Clara taken together. In fact he called them “The Girls,” or “The Sisters” as soon as he arrived at the Barkenhoff, and Paula was “the blonde sister” (Torgersen 63). The poem is a very short one:

Two girls, two sisters –

that’s what Rilke calls us,

celebrating us – and he would join

our sisterhood – If only we could

remain like this, Clara –

open in our love

without having to choose – (23)

In real life it went quite differently, as friendship within ‘the Family’ was followed by marriages and the birth of children which brought not only distance among the single members but also – as between Becker and Westhoff – misunderstandings and arguments. This poem seems therefore to be a wish on Bhatt’s part, that the link within this group of artists could actually be a “thousandfold” love as Becker had defined it in her angry letter to Westhoff.

Therefore, so many poems dedicated to “Two Girls” – besides being as many ekphrases based on real paintings – are also visual representations within Bhatt’s collection of the deep link between the two friends, who often helped each other in moments of great difficulty. The fact that Bhatt in “Two Girls: The Blind Sister, 1903” uses the first person could imply that the painting is particularly relevant for her also as regards the relationship between Becker and Westhoff. If Becker for Rilke was “the blonde one,” in the painting she could be the blind sister,

and it is quite plausible that she is the weaker one who needs to be guided, as 1903 was a year of great loneliness and troubles both for her married life and for her painting.

*A Finished Unfinishedness*

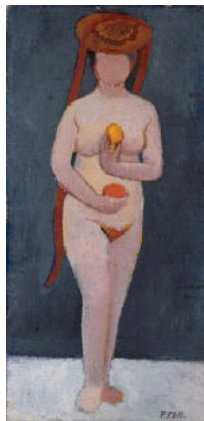
Not only a multitude of characters but also of points of view are necessary to Bhatt, as with the collection *A Colour for Solitude* she enters the realm of possibilities of Becker's life with the poetical device of the "as if," allowing the poet to re-open time and explore chances that the painter's short life could not include. As a poet, and traveller in Becker's adventure into art, Bhatt – like any artist – is of course interested in the conditions which make creativity possible, and are all reunited within that "thousandfold love" mentioned by Becker. It is in the poem giving the title to the collection, "A Colour for Solitude. *Paula Becker to Rainer Maria Rilke, 1906*," where Paula speaks about her relationship with Rilke starting from the representation of him that she gave in her portrait, that Bhatt's idea of the artist – derived not only from Becker's painting but also from Rilke's reflections and theorizing about it – can come out:

Truth does not belong  
to you alone – Truth does not  
belong to anyone.

Maybe this portrait  
that I'm making of you  
is more intimate than sex –

All these hours we spend together  
in my room – while all of Paris  
stays locked outside.  
No one has dared  
to see you the way I have.  
All these hours I am the artist:  
For once, it is me who is  
*not female, not male – but both*  
*and also neither – I am the artist*  
*who understands the light on your skin. (55-56 my emphasis)*

The vision of the artist which Bhatt summarizes from Becker's and Rilke's art, at first glance seems an androgynous one, but then it appears more to refer to someone who has completely renounced her ego and has therefore become selfless. Maybe the two coincide, as Paula in Bhatt's poem mentions something "more intimate than sex" which perhaps has also a reflection on identity: does the artist have an identity which transcends the mere sexual difference of male and female? Maybe the question is even wider, as it also seems to involve the difference between object and subject, past and present, memory and reality. What comes out of Bhatt's interpretation of Becker *and* Rilke's art, is that the artist must tend to formlessness if he or she wants to *give shape* to things and people. This emerges from another poem included in Bhatt's collection, "Self-Portrait as a Standing Nude with a Hat, 1906," which refers to the painting bearing the same title, which Becker did in the year 1906, the most creative, fulfilling and unsettling of her short life.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait as a Standing Nude with a Hat*, 1906

It is a poem in the first person, where Paula seems to reach the most extreme border of her research, and her identity is totally entrusted to the unknown developments unveiled or opened by her painting:

A brush stroke  
and my face disappears –  
and so do my nipples.

What is this desire  
to become featureless –  
to become a menhir?

Why this yearning

to return to rock, to stone –?

A brush stroke  
and I can decide my fate.

I am painting myself into a menhir,  
into the truest stance –  
[...]

My face is gone  
but my pubic hair  
remains.

A brush stroke  
and I can decide my fate – (69-70)

Even though featureless, and close to being transformed into a lifeless and ancient object of the Stone Age like a menhir, Paula's femininity is kept in this poem as far as the visible trace of her procreative attributes are concerned. She maintains her pubic hair but she erases her face and nipples. The woman artist in Becker's version interpreted by Bhatt, is therefore similar to a goddess of the earth, offering fruits and her body deprived of its mere esthetical features but not of traces of civilization and vanity (the hat), as if to show that she is a woman who is still alive and not dead as she appears to be:

From the light in the colours  
you can see  
that I am still flesh – not stone  
not even rose marble – and I am so far away  
from pink granite –

My face is gone  
but I wear a hat with long ribbons  
to show you  
that I'm still alive.  
The long ribbons streaming  
down my back show you  
that this body is not flat.

It will take time to become stone. (69)

More than androgynous,<sup>37</sup> the woman artist envisaged here is one who stands at the border between life and death and is willing to undergo any kind of transformation, into organic or inorganic substances and objects. This is why she corresponds and also does not correspond to Rilke's vision of Paula in his *Requiem*. In the above-mentioned poem, "A Colour for Solitude," Bhatt gives voice to Paula's rebellion to the idealistic version of her contained in Rilke's poem:

[...]  
I could never be  
the rose in your poems –  
the sleeping girl –  
I could never be so innocent  
and so motionless.  
And you could never fit in  
with the trees in my landscapes  
the colours in my skies – (57)

Biographers report that Becker deliberately left the portrait of Rilke unfinished, and in the poem the unfinishedness of the painting comes to represent the necessary condition for the artist's freedom to create:

I must tell you,  
this portrait shall remain  
the way it is – It is finished  
in its unfinishedness.  
And I cannot  
paint your eyes blue  
until you can show me  
how to live for art – for the greatness  
of art – without guilt.  
Show me  
how you live out desire, live out

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<sup>37</sup> Andrea Sirotti, in his essay "La voce transnazionale di Sujata Bhatt," preceding the translation of three poems taken from *A Colour for Solitude*, speaks of a "visione sovrasesuale (o intersessuale) dell'artista," (Sirotti 39) which paradoxically is present in the most erotic poems written by Bhatt.

every urgent desire –  
and yet, always remain true  
to yourself.

Give me  
a better colour  
for solitude. (57-58)

This poem certainly goes to the heart of the most troublesome dilemma for the artist: if art springs from a perpetual openness to all possibilities, as Emily Dickinson had already said in her wonderful poem [657] quoted in the introduction, how can one find a balance between the requirements of art and the exclusive choices that life poses to the artist as to any other human being? Of course there is no answer, just a perpetual conflict which is at the base of the human need for art. This is probably why the references to myths are so numerous in Bhatt's – and of course in Rilke's – poems: only in gods and divinities can contradictions find appeasement, as human beings will always be looking for a way to overcome the limits of their mortal condition.

### *Self-Portrait as Another*

*“The nineteenth century believed in a responsible, respectable moral agency called ‘character’; in place of this, people in modern times possess only a flighty, interchangeable succession of selves, facets which never quite – as in a cubist portrait – add up to a face.”*

*Peter Conrad, Modern Times, Modern Places*<sup>38</sup>

If it is true that in Becker's painting one can detect a progression from landscape painting, to human figures within landscapes, still lifes, portraits of people Becker knew intimately and self-portraits where single objects of a still life which become highly symbolic are often maintained, Bhatt is evidently attracted by the painter's continual search for her identity. Her self-portraits allow the poet to explore the multitude of selves which in real life usually cannot find full expression. Bhatt told me that they are so inspiring for her, as they are all different from one another. Even visiting the Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum in Bremen, where in the first room there is a succession of self-portraits, one gets the impression that Becker was so many women, belonging to different times, and that her *true* identity is certainly not to be found in one single

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<sup>38</sup> 64.

image. Bhatt likes Becker's still-lives very much but she simply did not feel that she could make stories from them. While we were visiting the museum together, she asked me: "How can you turn an apple into a poem?" A poet certainly can, if only he or she finds his or her inner necessity to do it.

Bhatt instead was probably deeply inspired by Becker's search for her (multiple)self as, being a poet who lives at the crossroads of different cultures and traditions, she too had to come to terms with her own multiple identity. Her identification with Becker is therefore induced by the painter's avant-garde attitude of seeing herself as an object of her own art, open to all possibilities.<sup>39</sup> This is probably why Bhatt in her collection is so interested in Becker's self-portraits, as by observing them and writing poems telling the stories she perceives in them, she can identify with the painter's continual unfinishedness. However, the distance intervening at the end of the collection between the speaker and the character stops the identification which was becoming a metamorphosis *into* the character, which instead, in Michaels' "Modersohn-Becker," has already taken place when the poem starts and lasts until the end. At the end of Bhatt's collection, on the other hand, the poet seems to take leave from Paula, mourning for her with what appears to be a fragmented *Requiem* written one century after her death. Yet, exactly as happened to Rilke, Paula once again did not remain closed in her death but came back again, speaking in four more poems in *Pure Lizard*. Therefore, Becker's incompleteness and deep artistic commitment apparently continue to haunt Bhatt as, being a poet, she cannot but be attracted – as Michaels writes in *Fugitive Pieces* – by the invisible part of Becker's biography, by what remains unknown and probably unknowable of her life.

In fact, if one just glances at the titles of the 59 poems that make up the collection, it is evident that the self-portraits take up a lot of room, as they are 26 out of 59. There is for instance "Self-Portrait in Front of Window Offering a View of Parisian Houses," where Bhatt seems to imagine how Becker is looking for her new identity in Paris.

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<sup>39</sup> As Sharrad puts it, "Art and the self appear not as a stable core or a fixed end product but as an affective 'intensity' with which data are grasped," (8) as shown in the epigraph to *A Colour for Solitude*, where Bhatt quotes Becker's famous affirmation recorded in her journals: "The intensity with which a subject is grasped (still lifes, portraits, or creations of the imagination) – that is what makes for beauty in art" (*Letters and Journals* 356).



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait in Front of Window Offering a View of Parisian Houses*, 1900

The imagined process of painting the self-portrait here recalls Rilke's obsession with the mirror, and his vision of poetry as a way of seeing inner reality. As Omar Calabrese observes in his book *L'arte dell'autoritratto*, the frontal self-portrait derives from the myth of Narcissus, who contemplates himself in the mirror of water, and it indicates that the painter is portraying himself or herself as a remarkable individual, whether he or she is proud or even bizarre in his or her attitude addressing directly the viewer.<sup>40</sup>

My face is distorted:  
so broad at the cheekbones,  
a butterfly shape  
filled with the darkness  
of indoors –  
as if I were looking into  
one of those mirrors  
                  those circus mirrors –

But I'll still look up as high as I can,  
into the mirror – ignoring the windows  
of the houses behind me –  
[...] (22)

Yet it is in another poem, "Self-Portrait as Anonymous," that Bhatt comes to understand the essence of self-portrayal. Instead of defining the painter's personality, a self-portrait in fact represents the impossibility of that definition. More than that, it allows the freedom of

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<sup>40</sup> See in particular the chapter "*Ipse me finxit. L'autoritratto come simbolo di autonomia intellettuale*," pp. 125-59.



unlimitedness, which – if honestly and open-heartedly pursued – does not fail to be transmitted to the viewers:

[...]

We know who you are, we know  
where you are –  
and yet, we do not. (64)

*“Or, a self-portrait in words.  
How shall I do it?  
The look on my face  
is not a mask –”*

*Sujata Bhatt, from “Self-Portrait with Garlic”<sup>41</sup>*

What comes out of Bhatt’s collection *A Colour for Solitude* is that the impossibility of defining one’s identity is not only an inheritance of post-colonial writers, but is the necessary condition for any artist who, far from seeing it as a limit, can find a thousand ways to represent it in what is to be considered a continual creative yet hazardous game. Bhatt needed to wear the mask of Paula in her poems just because Becker too – like only Van Gogh before her – had painted a series of versions of herself to convey the multiplicity of her inner truth.

“Every moment” then, to say it with Michaels, is not just “two moments” but a thousand ones. It is therefore hardly surprising that in the poem “Self-Portrait with a Lemon, 1906/07” – which is not a dramatic monologue but starts as a description of the story preceding the image as it is represented in the painting – Indian references get superimposed onto the image.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait with Lemon*, 1906-7

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<sup>41</sup> *The Stinking Rose* 58.

Bhatt's poem starts to describe a sari which is not there, to end with a verbal representation of the image which now appears to be closely connected to Indian culture:

[...]

The blue border  
on the end of her *sari*  
    covering her head  
cast a blue shadow –  
a soft, cotton blue shadow  
    across her face –  
And there, where the blue darkness  
    of her sari  
met the darkness of her hair –  
was another shadow,  
another border – it was  
a fast brush stroke – thick cobalt  
blue disappearing into a maroon, ochre black –  
    an orange, olive black –  
a hungry blue  
    plunging into black –

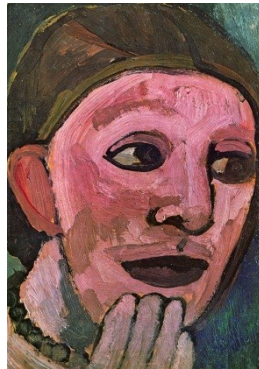
A brush stroke so fast  
    and so strong  
there was only one chance  
of getting it right –

When she bit into the lemon in her hand  
and lifted her head like that,  
the sari-end slipped off  
    of her hair  
and she left it  
hanging down for a moment –  
then pulled it taut  
over her shoulders instead –

The green light from the leaves  
flickering across her throat –

The cobalt blue living within the *kohl*  
streaked around her eyes –  
[...] (85 my emphasis)

It is therefore inevitable that Bhatt should dedicate one poem to Becker's self-portrait called "Self-Portrait with Hand on Chin," where the painter represents her face as a mask.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait with Hand on Chin*, 1906

It is interesting to notice that Becker painted it in 1906, the year which was to be the most decisive for her life, as she fled to Paris and finally felt close to becoming someone but then later decided to go back to her marriage. In this picture she represented herself as doubtful, and her facial traits are so stylized in what is probably the most expressionist technique that Becker experimented, that they become mask-like. The mask, together with the self-portraits in the nude and the motherhoods, were the painter's privileged themes in 1906. Becker did different versions of her "Self-Portrait with Hand on Chin," including some on paper. In her poem "Self-Portrait as a Mask, 1906," Bhatt seems to refer to one of those.



Once again, the poem – which is in the first person – starts with an erasure of the face:

Eyeless – and so it is a mask.

As if I have lifted off my face –  
the lines and shadows and shape  
on my face – and placed it  
                  on a newspaper  
for you to look at it. (78)

As Calabrese observes,<sup>42</sup> Benveniste's theory that any direct references to the receiver of a verbal text are to be considered marks of the 'enunciation of discourse' – that is to say the communicative function which links the production of the work of art to the reception of it – can be applied to visual arts too. Bhatt's poem therefore is a verbal representation of a pictorial enunciation of discourse: in the self-portrait in fact Becker gazes directly at the viewer of her painting, seeming to address him or her the same unheard questions she is posing to herself. The poem, however, does not stimulate the reader's participation when it becomes somewhat didactic:

This is my shell –  
my own mask, my daily mask  
that I create over and over again – (78)

On the contrary, it gets very involving when, instead of explaining, the poem too starts questioning the reader:

Here is a forehead that dreams  
                  only of eternity –

But how can human eyes  
                  live with such a lack  
                          of emotion –?  
Perhaps my eyes have died.  
Or have they  
                  simply disappeared? (78)

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<sup>42</sup> See *L'arte dell'autoritratto* 74.

*Progressing Towards the Disappearing 'I'*

*“Quale ritratto vuoi che ti mandi,  
quello dell’uomo terreno o quello dell’uomo celeste?  
... Arrossisco di farmi dipingere casi come sono,  
non oso farmi dipingere come non sono.”*

*Paolino da Nola, Vth century<sup>43</sup>*

It is very interesting to notice that neither in Bhatt’s poems dedicated to Becker’s self-portraits does Paula always speak in the first person. Yet, reading the progression of the poems as the writer ordered them in a chronological order, the first person seems to prevail in the self-portraits Becker did in 1906, when all possibilities seemed to be open to her in what was her attempt to reach an autonomy in her art in Paris. The following selection of poems is meant to trace Bhatt’s path in her identification with Becker’s need to search for her true self as an artist possibly deprived of any sense of guilt, which led the German painter to adhere to a sacred and nearly primitivist vision of art, where the artist is asked to offer herself as if in a ritualistic sacrifice allowing her to give visual shape to the art that she carries within herself as a creature.

In a similar way, Bhatt needed to ‘incorporate’ Becker’s experience to undergo the same process in her poetry: it is no longer a question of finding a balance between her own original Indian culture and English culture, but poetry can become the space where to absorb other artists’ lines of research so as to reach a personal truth which is also a universal and transcultural one. What seems to be Bhatt’s personal journey into Becker’s personality therefore marks a step beyond what is still quite constrictively called ‘post-colonial literature,’ as her displacement into the painter’s identity invites one to an opening of all kinds of borders: different times, places, languages and arts merge in one multiform creative experience.

The selection here presented is a choice of nine poems based on as many self-portraits, not only because the self-portrait is the pictorial genre which seemed to be so relevant for Becker at the creative peak of her short career as a painter, but also because Bhatt is very impressed by them. They certainly represent a challenging vision of female identity and the possibility of giving a visual representation of a woman’s inner self through a very original and avant-garde depiction of her body. It is also very interesting to notice that Bhatt’s use of subjects varies according to the different periods of Becker’s life the self-portraits belong to, and also depending on the different relationship the poet spontaneously establishes with each image.

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<sup>43</sup> Qtd. in Calabrese 129.

In “Self-Portrait with Coppery Red Hair, 1897/98,” “Self-Portrait with Scratches, 1903” and “Self-Portrait with Your Jaw Set, 1905,” Bhatt addresses the painter as ‘you.’ This way a certain distance from Paula is maintained, as if the poet did not feel completely sympathetic with the image represented in the self-portraits. “In Her Green Dress, She is, 1905” is a curious poem, as it is inspired by one of Bhatt’s favourite self-portraits by Becker – *Self-portrait with Green Background and Blue Irises*, 1905 – which Bhatt also chose as the front cover of her collection *A Colour for Solitude*. Yet, the poet treats the painter with the third person, ‘she’, which is rarely used within the collection. Curiously enough, it also the self-portrait which the poet, this time speaking in the first person in the poem “Was it the Blue Irises? *Kunsthalle Bremen, 1985*,” uses to take leave from her character. One can only infer that the identification here is so strong – and so irrational, as is clarified in the latter poem – that Bhatt needs to contemplate the self-portrait from afar, as inside she feels too close to it and to what it represents.

The other four poems (“Self-Portrait on My Fifth Wedding Anniversary, 25-5-06,” “Self-Portrait with a Hat and Veil, 1906,” “Self-Portrait, Frontal, with a Flower in the Right Hand, 1906/07” and “Self-Portrait with Two Flowers in the Left Hand, *Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff*, 1907”) are dramatic monologues in the first person, where the identification between the poet and her character is strong and yet does not induce Bhatt to use any distancing device. If during her ten-year career, Becker, according to Gustav Pauli, painted herself twenty-four times, in 1906 alone she painted herself some sixteen times.<sup>44</sup> Becker’s intense effort to affirm herself as a painter in that period is deeply felt by Bhatt, who gives voice to her in the first person where Paula is closer to her fulfillment as an artist.

It is quite surprising that Calabrese, in tracing the history of the art of the self-portrait from its origins to the present day, has not included Paula Modersohn-Becker among the most remarkable and innovative woman painters of the twentieth century in the chapter “Questioni di genere. Le donne e l’autoritratto.” He just mentions Tamara de Lempicka and Frida Kahlo, who, however, started doing their very provoking self-portraits at least one decade later than Becker’s shocking *Self-Portrait on Her Sixth Wedding Anniversary* (1906). Yet many of the observations Calabrese makes with regard to women painters’ self-portraits, can usefully be applied to Becker’s self-portraits. First of all, it is quite meaningful that, while men painters usually came to do their self-portraits once their talent was recognized by the public, women, who still at Becker’s time found it very difficult to get appreciated, were more likely to use self-portrayal as a way of self-affirming their qualities as artists. This explains why Becker did so many self-portraits in the year when she was determined to “become someone.” Moreover, as one can

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<sup>44</sup> See Radycki 12.

observe from the paintings evoked by Bhatt in the following selection of poems, Becker never portrayed herself as a painter, but always strove to represent herself in the most essential way, as a woman and not necessarily as an artist.

As women painters very often do, she sometimes changed her age in her self-portraits, and Bhatt does not fail to notice that in her poems. Despite the influences which can be detected in her painting, Becker – being a modernist artist – did everything she could to find an autonomous style as a painter. Besides representing identity as secretly indefinable, multi-faced and multiform, she tried to affirm her femininity in a way which is exempt of any decorative elements intended to seduce the male viewer. If one compares Becker’s wide-ranging gallery of self-portraits with photographs, it is quite clear that she went against verisimilitude from the start. This seems to be confirmed by what the collector and art historian Karl Ernst Osthaus (1874-1921), who had met Becker, wrote to her mother in 1913 about the late *Self-Portrait with Camellia Branch*, that he had bought: “I find a great similarity in it with the way she appeared. And remarkably enough it has exactly the impression of her which has always remained in my memory. *I would never have recognized her from the other self-portraits*” (qtd. in King 140 my emphasis).



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait with Camellia Branch*, 1907

Becker represented herself as a woman who was in search of a true way to be and to feel, and sometimes, even when the self-portraits belong to moments of great doubts and uncertainties in her life, she painted them frontally. As Calabrese explains, usually the frontal self-portrait meant that the painter was addressing directly the viewer in a very self-confident way, so as to offer him or her an idealized or sacred or symbolic image of himself or herself.<sup>45</sup> On the contrary, Becker wanted to represent herself not so much as a talented woman but rather as a woman who has the power to *create*. It is true that she came to depict herself as a goddess but such

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<sup>45</sup> See Calabrese 130.

representation was not meant as a self-celebration but rather as a necessary return to a primeval view of the woman artist, who is in touch with the deepest and most mysterious forces of nature and finds herself at the crossroads between past and present and between life and death.

The poems quoted in their entirety in this section, in close connection with the paintings they refer to, will be translated into Italian in the Epilogue as a final stage of the process of embodiment that this research has meant to investigate.





a bird of prey –                    you are  
not at all apologetic  
for your anger, your need – (21)

This is one of Becker's first self-portraits, and it is in profile. She addresses the viewer with a sideways look which however seems quite proud if not challenging. This is the self-portrait where Becker ascribes to herself a touch of insanity, and if one compares it with her photographs of the same period, the self-portrait is absolutely not a good likeness. The painting therefore is not very referential but seems to portray a third person, who does not totally coincide with Becker.

This is probably why Bhatt not only addresses Paula as a 'you' but recognizes an "older woman" within the image that Becker, aged twenty-two at that time, offered of herself, and she addresses her as a 'she.' Why should a young painter portray herself as an older woman? The answer that Becker at that time had not mastered her technique yet, is probably not enough. Bhatt interprets Becker's expression as a physical sign of the young painter's exhaustion. She is needy and hungry because she is intensely striving to become a painter but she is not one yet. She recalls a "bird of prey" because her search for her art is absolute, fiery and must be achieved at all costs.

Becker did not meet with other people's appreciation at that time, and she was not sure she possessed the necessary talent to become a painter. Bhatt is fascinated and somehow also distanced by the painter's willingness to pour all her energy into her art.



the bones unbroken  
    the feathers unmarred –  
not loose, not separate  
but held together as a wing – intact –  
Still, there is  
clawed out light – The blue  
scratched out of the jay – The wing  
snapped off so cleanly – Was it a hawk  
or a cat? Blueness of intense loss,  
violence seeped into the feathers –  
colours of startled eyes –  
The scars are there  
even if you cannot see them –  
those marks made into the earth.

This is the face of a fourteen-year-old girl.  
Why have you taken it as yours?  
For you are twenty-seven-  
Why? Why is it so dark?  
Even your necklace is muddy,  
    struggling to be seen  
above the high collar  
    of your white shirt.  
Why is this you  
looking like a fourteen-year-old girl  
after two years of marriage?  
Why the scratches, the clawed out light?

What is the movement  
    behind these marks?

If only he had known  
    how to touch you –  
If only Otto had –  
If only Rilke had –  
If only you could have whispered:  
‘Rainer!’

If only you could have shown him –  
If only you could have shown  
Otto –

There was a man  
                  who could catch fish  
with his bare hands  
                  if he wanted to.  
He could catch birds, songbirds –  
Songbirds crushed in his fists  
                  if he wanted to –  
That was a story in Paris.  
He was a sailor from Goa.  
That was the movement  
behind the scratches, the clawed out light –  
That was *your* movement – the way you entered  
the canvas with a knife –  
                  scarring yourself  
into a fourteen-year-old face – (33-35)

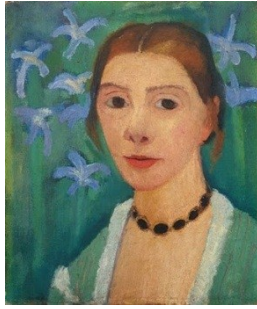
This is the only self-portrait that Becker did with this technique, where, as Bhatt says, she “carve[d] out the light.” If one looks closely at this painting, the image gives the idea of being very definite and very confused, as if it were dark and luminous at the same time. Such a technique therefore seems very coherent with the period that Becker, as seen in the first chapter, was living: she needed to go to Paris but she missed Worpswede; she felt that she was getting closer to her idea of ‘simplicity’ in painting but she was still dissatisfied with the results she was attaining; she was closely linked to Modersohn but she was disappointed by her marriage. There was no light in her life: it had to be “clawed out,” “pulled out,” as Bhatt says, not only with passion but with rage too. To reach purity she needed violence.

Yet, in Bhatt’s poem, Paula is not a “bird of prey” anymore, but seems to be frightened, wounded, frozen. Even though the self-portrait is frontal, her gaze is lost in the distance, as if she were addressing something or someone beyond the viewer. Her single brush strokes recall the wing of a blue jay which was “snapped off so cleanly.” To become one with her art, Paula has to renounce parts of herself; this is why the joy of painting involves a great pain. The process described by Bhatt here is very similar to the way in which Rodin finally reached the

shape of a body in sculpture, by taking away all the superfluous matter. It is a painful birth in art. This is probably why Becker, as Bhatt observes in the poem, portrayed herself as a young girl. It was certainly not for vanity but because her age in painting was not the same as her 'biological' age: in 1903, aged twenty-seven, she was just starting to reach maturity in painting.

What is remarkable in this poem is that, while Bhatt describes the way Becker enters the canvas, and therefore painting, physically, by wounding herself ("the way you entered / the canvas with a knife – / scarring yourself / into a fourteen-year-old face –"), she too enters her poem and merges with Paula: the repetition of "If only" is the "knife" with which Bhatt cuts the skin of her poem as Becker had cut the canvas of her painting.

The "movement" Bhatt refers to, which pertains equally to poetry and painting, is when the skin dividing the artist from his or her object gets broken, and the embodiment can start to take place.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-portrait with Green Background and Blue Irises*, 1905

“In Her Green Dress, She is, 1905”

In her green dress, she is  
the background and the foreground –

A green dress the colour  
of iris stems,  
the ones in the background –

A green dress  
the colour of iris stems against grass –

Green on green on green –

She is the foreground  
and the background –

Her face intent because  
she’s listening to a bird in the distance –  
a single bird – persistent –  
calling again and again –  
Its song slit, cleft –

rising and falling  
and rising again through the stillness.

Its song clinging to the leaves –  
A melody  
that must have moved Bach –

Her face intent because irises





the painter is just listening to it. She does not need to catch it, as the sailor did with the songbirds in the previous poem, but here the bird's song heard in the distance is like a piece of music by Bach which frees the painter's emotion.

Bhatt's use of the third person to refer to Paula in this poem may remind one of Rilke's ideal of the artist, who is asked to see, and not to possess, what he represents – until sometimes, as happens in his ekphrastic poem “Archaic Torso of Apollo,” which was discussed at the beginning of this chapter, it is the work of art which starts to see the viewer. This is what happens in this poem too, where “Even the black stones, the oval shaped / black stones of her necklace / can see you –.”



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait with Amber Necklace*, 1905

“Self-Portrait with Your Jaw Set, 1905”

If truth is impossible  
then are you good  
at telling lies?

Woman of Pompeii, of ancient Pompeii,  
you have made yourself  
so regal, almost matronly  
with three children at home.

But yours is the face in the mosaic –  
Yours is the face in the fresco.

Liquid gold  
thick around your throat –

And the gold is everywhere:  
flickering in your eyes  
washed across your hair –

Your jaw set  
against Vesuvius –

Pompeii glancing out of your eyes  
as if you were about to say,  
‘I dare you –’ (43)

This is one of the self-portraits where Becker is least recognizable. One would never say that it belongs to the same year as the *Self-portrait with Green Background and Blue Irises*: she appears to be a much older and – as Bhatt observes – matronly woman, as Becker certainly was not at that time. The fact that Becker is not true to herself in this self-portrait induces Bhatt to ask ‘her Paula’ in the poem whether she is good at telling lies. Yet there seems to be a deep truth hidden in this self-portrait and it is Bhatt who reveals it indirectly in her poem, as she detects a superimposition: Becker painted herself like a woman of Pompeii. The similarity with the mosaic of a young woman which dates from the first century in fact is very striking.



Portrait of a Young Woman, Pompeii, 1<sup>st</sup> Century

The chronological distance is not the only element that matters here. The portrayed woman is aristocratic, very sober and self-contained in her attitude, elegantly adorned with precious jewels which show that she belongs to a high rank.<sup>46</sup> The overall image is one of a conservative woman who would never transgress the rules traditionally provided for women.

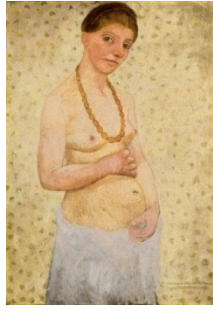
Yet Becker, as Bhatt says in her poem, turned this woman’s gaze into a defiant one addressed to Vesuvius more than to the viewer. Becker’s self-portrait, in other words, is not only premonitory of a future condition that the painter – who wanted to become a mother – wished for herself, but it is also challenging, as her “jaw set / against Vesuvius” shows. The reference to Pompeii and Vesuvius implies the danger of getting killed by the eruption of the volcano, as happened to the people who were frozen in death by the solidification of the lava and are there preserved forever like sculptures.

Bhatt has heard the questions that Paula is asking in her self-portrait: is it possible to be a painter *and* a married woman? An artist *and* a mother? How will my future be? Will I be brave enough not to conform to the dominant model of matronly women?

Poetry is usually very good at finding the right questions, not at answering them.

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<sup>46</sup> In fact only aristocratic people were portrayed at that time.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait on Her Sixth Wedding Anniversary*, 1906

“Self-Portrait on My Fifth Wedding Anniversary, 25-5-06”

I will become amber.

Daphne wanted  
to become a tree.

I think  
it was she who chose sweet laurel,  
she who chose leaves that are always green.

But I need to go  
deeper, into amber.

Already this light,  
this sunny May morning  
                    in Paris  
has turned my hair amber  
                    the dark russet kind –  
more red than gold.

My eyes: brownish amber  
sparkle brighter than the necklace  
I wear today – large oval  
beads of amber – so heavy.

It’s too warm, too early,  
but never mind. I’m half-naked. It’s easier  
to paint what I mean to paint  
                    this naked way.



at last with my *self*.  
My *self* that now only speaks  
to me in Paris.

I need to live  
                  more fully through  
the body to find my soul.  
Yes, the body, this woman's body  
  that is mine –

I need to go deeper  
into amber.

Should I have a baby?  
And if I did?  
Then, would my body be able  
to teach my soul something new? (59-61)

According to Rainer Stamm, former director of the Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum in Bremen, this painting is sensational in art history as it is “the first naked self-portrait by a woman” (“Paula Modersohn-Becker and the Body in Art” 22). One can feel that this self-portrait is symbolically linked to the *Self-Portrait with Amber Necklace* as Becker, says Stamm, “[h]aving to decide between art and family, Paris and Worpswede, at the border of the nineteenth century and the modern avant-garde, [...] paints herself confident, the embodiment of the new woman: the female artist” (23). She was a woman who had come to many cross-roads.

Yet, quite surprisingly, Bhatt, in this dramatic monologue where she lets the painter speak in the first person, represents her wishing to undergo a transformation which is also a solidification, as Paula says in the very first line: “I will become amber.” The freedom she has attained is the opposite of an abstraction, but coincides with the possibility to create. Her (potentially) pregnant body is not a metaphor of her art, but is a double image which refers both to painting *and* making babies:

Her use of oil paint helped us feel the presence of one body within another, the miracle of one life growing within another, acquiring its mass and weight by forcing maternal form outward, distending a surface of skin so that it signifies a child within. Modersohn-Becker represented physical reproduction intellectually. She used the sign-making essence of

painting to stand for the natural making of babies. She made her paintings, as it were, pregnant with meaning. (Higonnet 19)

Art and pregnancy are both forms of embodiment, and what Becker showed for the first time in this self-portrait is that they are both generated within the body. Far from being detached from it, the soul is contained there too, as Bhatt's Paula says in the poem: "I need to live / more fully through / the body to find my soul." Becker's art was the opposite of a search for abstraction and – very coherently – Bhatt gives voice to Paula's acknowledgement of being close to a metamorphosis into amber.

Becker also painted an allegory based on this self-portrait, *Composition with Three Female Figures*, but the painting was destroyed in World War II.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Composition with Three Female Figures* (middle figure, a self-portrait), 1906/07

Pauli ascribed it to the year 1907, when Becker was pregnant. In any case the self-portrait is expanded in the representation of a ritual of fertility and offering of fruit. Even though the two fruits Paula is holding in the bowl have been interpreted as the two symbols of talent and progeny,<sup>47</sup> it is true that it is the number three which dominates in this image. Paula in fact is holding a third fruit in her left hand. This image could also hint at the fact that the artist is the intermediary at the cross-roads of divine (rational) and subterranean (irrational) forces.

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<sup>47</sup> See Radycki 13.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait with Hat and Veil*, ca. 1906

“Self-Portrait with a Hat and Veil, 1906”

In this hat and veil,  
                  in this sheer yellow veil,  
I am Eurydice  
  in hell –

Eurydice in a room  
in a hell where the curtains are as red  
as poppies in the sun –  
as red as the ripe seeds  
Persephone once bit into.

And she has taken charge now –  
She has smuggled in  
the scent of orange blossoms,  
brought in bolts of sea-green light –  
and the sea air  
                  with turquoise shadows –

Sometimes I feel as if  
I am underwater.

I chose to come here.

But I am doomed.  
Doomed to hold on  
to these oddly coloured roses  
in my hand – pinkish lavender –



Pinkish lavender jarring against  
the red curtains, the red panels  
of the hat around my ears –

Pinkish lavender: the last two roses  
Orpheus left behind  
for me – If only he had  
given me flowers that were white  
or even yellow –  
then I wouldn't  
feel so conspicuous,  
so out of place – (79)

Eurydice eternally returns. It is true that Becker seems to be alive *and* dead in this self-portrait. The year 1906 was one of great satisfaction for her accomplishments in her art and great suffering too, because she had left Otto to go to Paris and had all her family against her. Yet the sad woman in the portrait is also charming because of her elegant veil and hat. The red curtains give a touch of eroticism to the painter, which Bhatt, instead, reads as a sign of Eurydice's confinement in hell.

By now it is clear that Eurydice is the mythical figure which resurfaces in modernity too with the symbolic function of 'accompanying' any woman who is undergoing a deep and partly mysterious transformation. This was certainly true for Becker in 1906, when – as seen in the first chapter – she recorded in her journal that she felt like someone who had died and now dwelt in the Elysian Fields.

In Bhatt's poem the contradiction between the two lines "I chose to come here" and "But I am doomed," is interesting because it seems that the artist's condition can be summed up by the paradox that he or she must 'choose to have no choice.' And that was certainly Becker's case. It is also worth noticing that – unlike what happens in Bhatt's poem "Eurydice Speaks" – Eurydice here is still confined in the underworld, and even worse, as she feels as if she were "underwater," where it is impossible to breathe and survive. And she has neither forgotten nor substituted her Orpheus with another man, but still thinks of him, as the two flowers she is holding show. What is more, they are the *wrong* colour, probably unsuited to take her out from the kingdom of the dead.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait with a Flower*, 1906/7

“Self-Portrait, Frontal, with a Flower in the Right Hand, 1906/07”

This is my face that greets me  
in a dream – out of focus – it is  
a face seen through the fog, mist –  
a face seen through rain, through  
a rain streaked windowpane – How smudged  
it is and blurred as if by accident,  
as if I could not find the lines  
of my own face.

This is the face that Otto must see  
nowadays – out of focus – fading away –  
for I have left him for good.  
I stand before plum coloured flowers:  
Huge bushes – these rhododendrons –  
And in my right hand I hold  
a tiny white flower for Otto.  
‘Let me go.’ I wrote to him –  
‘Let me be free.’ And he will take  
the white flower with its whitish stem –  
almost ashen the way I painted it.  
He will call it his little white rose  
not knowing that it is a weed  
mimicking jasmine –  
He will call it his small snowdrop of petals  
not knowing the petals are wild –  
And the whiteness will remind him of moonlight.

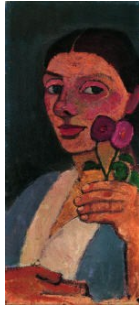
And even now as I  
    return to him, uncertain –  
I make a necessary compromise –  
    And even now  
he will look at me and say  
‘At last –  
    at last you have come back.’

But he will never notice  
that my face has changed,  
    that my face has become  
    unreachable –  
forever out of focus  
    for him – (80-81)

This dramatic monologue comes immediately after the poem “Self-Portrait with a Hat and Veil, 1906” in *A Colour for Solitude*. It is in this self-portrait that Becker seems to be “underwater,” as Bhatt said in the previous poem.

This is a case where Bhatt translates some biographical details from Becker’s life into the dramatic monologue. Unlike Michaels, Bhatt sees Becker’s return to Otto as “a necessary compromise,” mainly due to her inability to support herself as a painter. Yet in this poem it seems that only Paula’s simulacrum can go back to her marriage, as she is now faceless, as if she “could not find the lines” of her own face. Even though she has returned to Otto, in the poem – where Bhatt explicitly refers to Becker’s letters – she is now forever alone (“forever out of focus / for him –”). The flower the painter holds in the self-portrait is interpreted by Bhatt as a wild flower – representing Paula’s *real* identity – which Otto mistakes for a rose, therefore misunderstanding his wife’s gesture of offer too, which is probably not addressed to him in the painting.

Yet it is also interesting to notice that – as Calabrese observes – the self-portrait in the twentieth century starts to be less referential and instead begins to explore the subject’s potentialities more than its real appearance. Therefore, if one looks at this self-portrait from an aesthetic point of view, it appears to be extremely avant-garde. It is quite surprising that by the time Becker did it, she had already decided to resume her more conventional life in Worpswede.



Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Self-Portrait with Two Flowers in her Raised Hands*, 1907

“Self-Portrait with Two Flowers in the Left Hand, *Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff*, 1907”

Now that I am truly ripe  
with child – I don’t have the strength  
to paint myself naked before a mirror.

If I could, I would go  
to Paris right now –

Clara, you write to me from Berlin,  
from Oberneuland –  
but you speak of Rilke’s letters,  
Rilke’s words  
full of Cézanne’s light –

Cézanne’s big exhibition in Paris –  
where I should be with *you* –  
will soon be over.  
And I won’t make it this time.

From my eyes, my swollen eyelids,  
you can tell how heavy I must be,  
how lethargic –

So now I wait for you  
to bring me Rilke’s letters,  
the ones you promised –  
I need Rilke’s words  
to bring Cézanne into my room

in Worpswede –

As for me,  
I give you colours of crockery.

I wear a sleepy blue:  
blue of a ceramic milk jug –

Even the sky looks milky today.

Two flowers because  
of the second heart  
beating within me.

My left hand because it has to be.

I want this child.

These flowers are for you, Clara –  
for you, Cézanne – (89-90)

In 1907 Becker was *actually* pregnant. Her physical conditions consequently changed, and Bhatt in this poem refers to her being “heavy,” “lethargic,” and having “swollen eyelids.” However, a deeper and unspeakable change has occurred, which is not only due to Becker’s pregnancy but to her decision to leave Paris: “Before joining the modernist fray in 1906, Modersohn-Becker did not paint herself in the nude; and once she left Paris in Spring 1907, her portraits are clothed (including those she painted while she was pregnant)” (Radycki 11).

Interestingly enough, Paula in Bhatt’s poem writes an imaginary letter to Clara and describes herself “ripe / with child” as if she were a fruit containing another fruit. She is holding two flowers “because / of the second heart” beating within her, and yet – in Bhatt’s interpretation – the flowers are addressed neither to the viewer, nor to her husband but to Clara and Cézanne, that is to say to her dearest friend and to the painter she esteemed more than any other. She needs Rilke’s letters to bring Cézanne’s light into her life, as she seems to miss the exceptionality of art, as her daily life can only be represented now as a still life in plain colours: “I give you colours of crockery. // I wear a sleepy blue: / blue of a ceramic milk jug – // Even the

sky looks milky today.” Yet the reference to milk, which is quite common in still lifes and is so impressive in the famous painting *The Milkmaid* (1658) by Johannes Vermeer, also has maternal associations; in the painter’s waiting to give birth to her child here, milk spills so as to cover the whole sky.

In Bhatt’s poem, Paula is very happy to be pregnant (“I want this child.”), but she needs her art too to be complete. Art and motherhood are two different forms of her desire that she is trying to fulfill. Her art must be temporarily put at rest (“I won’t make it this time”) but is still alive and yearned for when she is close to give birth to her child. Bhatt’s Paula seems to have escaped Eurydice’s hell and be ready to live fully as a painter *and* a mother.

“Was it the Blue Irises? *Kunsthalle Bremen*, 1985”

The way I returned again and again to your self-portrait with blue irises  
made the guards uneasy.

The way I turned away from your self-portrait with blue irises  
made the guards uneasy.

Was it the blue irises floating around your face, was it  
your brown eyes illuminated by something in the blue irises?

How could you know, how could you feel all this  
that I know and feel about blue iris?

I was on the top floor with other paintings, other painters,  
but unable to concentrate on them because  
already I could hear the tone of voice your brown eyes would require.

So I rushed back down to be with you.

The look that passed between us must have lasted  
a long time because I could smell the light  
from the irises falling across your face.

The look that passed between us was full  
of understanding so I could imagine living with you  
and arguing with you about whether to put garlic in the soup.

I stared at the blue irises but in my throat  
there was the pungent fresh bitterness of watercress.

When I finally left you I noticed three guards following me.

By the time I got home I was furious at them  
for witnessing all this. (104)

In this poem – which was one of the first ones Bhatt wrote – the poet enters the Museum Paula Modersohn-Becker in Bremen and gets out of her character – at least on the page. The poet *is* the viewer of the *Self-Portrait with Green Background and Blue Irises* and she seems to feel the need to write the poem in order to try to understand the mystery which is conveyed not only by the painting, but by the painter too. The secret communication here is between Bhatt and Paula as if she were still alive, and in fact she *is* alive in her painting. The artwork then becomes the vehicle for a deep, unspeakable emotion which can cross time and space.

The museum as a place where paintings are collected so as to be moved from secular time (and forgetfulness) to eternity (and perennial memory), started entering ekphrastic poetry in the modern age, when it was seen as a shrine where sacred object of art could be preserved. W. H. Auden was the first to introduce a museum in his famous poem “Musée des Beaux Arts,” which, however, is mainly a descriptive ekphrastic poem included in his collection *Another Time* (1940).

In this poem Bhatt too enters the Paula Modersohn-Becker Museum as a shrine, not only because Becker’s paintings can be contemplated there but because it is the place which can be the starting and/or concluding point of her embodiment of the painter, by using the self-portraits in particular. They are as many windows allowing the poet to enter the painter’s life and secret thoughts, through her colours, her shapes, all the unanswered questions her paintings seem to address to the viewer. This is why the guards’ presence is disturbing for the poet: she feels that a very private and confidential communication is taking place between her and Paula. Therefore no one should eavesdrop on it.

What matters here is that such communication remains silent, as images speak instead of words. And the mystery of such a deep understanding luckily remains unsolved, so that, as in John Ashbery’s “Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror,” “the strict /Otherness of the painter” remains confined “in his / Other room” (Ashbery 74).



## *When the Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*

“But poems are like dreams: in them  
you put what you don’t know you know.”

Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision”<sup>48</sup>

Adrienne Rich<sup>49</sup> included her poem “Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff,” dated 1975-1976, in her collection *The Dream of a Common Language, Poems 1974-1977* (1978). The poem was also published after Rilke’s *Requiem* – translated by Lilly Engler and Adrienne Rich – in the “Epilogue” of the first volume of Becker’s letters and journals translated into English by J. Diane Radycki, *The Letters and Journals of Paula Modersohn-Becker*, which appeared in 1980. Engler’s and Rich’s translation of Rilke’s *Requiem* is dated 1980 too, that is to say four or five years after Rich’s poem. Yet Rilke’s *Requiem* is mentioned in “Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff,” with precise references that not only show that Rich knew it very well when she wrote the poem, but also that the *Requiem* constitutes an underlying text with which Rich’s poem continually and sometimes implicitly interacts.

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<sup>48</sup> *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* 40.

<sup>49</sup> Adrienne Rich was born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1929. She attended Radcliffe College, graduating in 1951, and was selected by W.H. Auden for the Yale Series of Younger Poets prize for *A Change of World* that same year. In 1953, she married Harvard University economist Alfred H. Conrad. Two years later, she published her second volume of poetry, *The Diamond Cutters*. After having three sons before the age of thirty, Rich gradually changed both her life and her poetry. Throughout the 1960s she wrote several collections, including *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963) and *Leaflets* (1969). The content of her work became increasingly confrontational – exploring such themes as women’s role in society, racism, and the Vietnam war. The style of these poems also revealed a shift from careful metric patterns to free verse. In 1970, Rich left her husband, who committed suicide later that year.

In 1973, in the midst of the feminist and civil rights movements, the Vietnam War, and her own personal distress, Rich wrote *Diving into the Wreck*, which garnered her the National Book Award in 1974. Rich accepted the award on behalf of all women and shared it with her fellow nominees, Alice Walker and Audre Lorde.

Since then, Rich has published numerous collections, including *Tonight No Poetry Will Serve: Poems 2007-2010* (2010), *Telephone Ringing in the Labyrinth: Poems 2004–2006* (2006); *The School Among the Ruins: Poems 2000-2004* (2004), which won the Book Critics Circle Award; *Collected Early Poems: 1950-1970* (1993); *An Atlas of the Difficult World: Poems 1988-1991* (1991), a finalist for the National Book Award; *Time’s Power: Poems 1985-1988* (1989); *The Fact of a Doorframe: Poems Selected and New 1950-1984* (1984) and *The Dream of a Common Language* (1978).

Rich is also the author of several books of nonfiction prose, including *Arts of the Possible: Essays and Conversations*, *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics* (1993) and *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1986).

She lives in Northern California.

If, following a chronological order, Rich's poem should have been placed as first in this dissertation, as it was written before Michael's and Bhatt's poems, it comes last because it is the most ideologized one, where "the woman in the poem and the woman writing the poem [tend to] become the same person," as Rich, in her essay "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,"<sup>50</sup> says of her own poem "Orion," written in the Seventies. In an essay that belongs to the same year as "Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff," "Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson" (1975), Rich relates the creation of fictional characters in other women's poetry with repression:

Poetry is too much rooted in the unconscious; it presses too close against the barrier of repression; and the nineteenth century woman had much to repress. It is interesting that Elizabeth Barrett tried to fuse poetry and fiction in writing *Aurora Leigh* – perhaps apprehending the need for fictional characters to carry the charge of her experience as a woman artist. (*On Lies, Secrets and Silence* 175)

The same thing seems to happen in her "Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff," as the character of Paula that Rich creates has more connections with her than with Becker. Why then choose to wear the mask of Paula to state what the poet at that time believed was her own truth? Probably because, as a close reading of other essays she wrote in the same period shows, Rich in the Seventies, when she was in the midst of the feminist movement, believed that her own vision of women's need to fight to affirm a truer image of themselves was universal. She therefore did not refrain from carrying out a re-vision of Becker's life according to her own political and social creeds, despite the fact that – as seen in the introduction – the painter was openly resistant to the women's emancipation movement of her time. Moreover, it is striking that in "When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision," Rich's need to reunite "the woman in the poem and the woman writing the poem" comes after a discussion of "love" and "egotism," two themes which in fact were often mentioned by Becker in her letters and journals. Rich sees them differentiated by gender:

The choice still seemed between "love" – womanly, maternal love, altruistic love – a love defined and ruled by the weight of an entire culture; and egotism – a force directed by men into creation, achievement, ambition, often at the expense of others, but justifiably so. For weren't they men, and wasn't that their destiny as womanly, selfless love was ours? We

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<sup>50</sup> *On Lies, Secrets and Silence. Selected Prose 1966-1978* 47.

know now that the alternatives are false ones – that the word “love” is itself in need of revision. (*On Lies, Secrets and Silence* 46-47)

It is also interesting to discuss now “Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff,” as somehow Rilke’s *Requiem* and Rich’s poem are the two extremes of a creation of Paula as a character which is then mediated, even though in different ways, by Michaels and Bhatt. If in Rilke’s view Paula *should have been* the woman who was no man’s possession but was devoted to her art only, and was called to create just paintings and not children, Rich’s Paula is the tardy feminist who does not love her husband, ridicules Rilke and is ardently linked only to Clara. In other words, Rilke and Rich tend to simplify the conflict between Becker’s devotion to art and her family commitments by eluding or at least minimizing one side of the conflict. If one can say that Rich’s “Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff” is prompted by Rilke’s *Requiem*, Michaels’ and Bhatt’s poems certainly derive from a need to readjust the image of Paula that emerges from Rich’s poem too.

Bhatt personally told me that she knows Rich’s poem very well and that she thinks it mainly represents Rich’s personal biography and that she manipulated Becker’s to mirror her own in it. Bhatt prefers not to push her interpretation so far, yet she too has her own version of the story. In fact she believes that Rilke and Becker loved each other, even though maybe it was not a physical love, as she wrote in her poems in Paula’s voice contained in her latest collection *Pure Lizard*. She thinks that both of them had married the wrong person, and that Becker did not love Modersohn but had come back to him because of a necessary compromise mainly due to financial reasons. Moreover, as Bhatt said in the above-mentioned poem “Self-Portrait with Two Flowers in the Left Hand, *Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff*, 1907” – which, after reading Rich’s poem, seems a response to it –, she feels sure that Paula wanted to become a mother, as not only did she say it openly in her letters but all her paintings are there to confirm it. Becker in fact was also a pioneer in depicting motherhoods where the mother is in the nude, exposed to the gazer’s view, and completely at her ease with her child, like two animals resting. Michaels who, for her part, turns Becker’s unconsummated marriage into Paula’s happiness for her physical unity with her husband, seems to evoke Rich’s poem as regards the painter’s perceptions of her surroundings and alternations of light and darkness in pictorial terms.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that Rich’s poem was written in the mid-Seventies, when the author, as will be later clarified by reading her poem in parallel with her essays written in the same period, was so engaged in many feminist, pacifist and political issues, that they inevitably – and maybe even unconsciously – intervened to modify her vision of Becker’s too short

adventure into art and life. When she wrote “Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff,” Rich was probably attempting to solve her own inner conflict which did not seem to be so different from Emily Dickinson’s, as Rich, more than one century later, explained it in “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson”: “It is an extremely painful and dangerous way to live – split between a publicly acceptable persona, and a part of yourself that you perceive as the essential, the creative and powerful self, yet also as possibly unacceptable, perhaps even monstrous” (*On Lies, Secrets and Silence* 175).

## “Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff”

Paula Becker 1876-1907  
Clara Westhoff 1878-1954

became friends at Worpswede, an artists' colony near Bremen, Germany, summer 1899. In January 1900, spent a half-year together in Paris, where Paula painted and Clara studied sculpture with Rodin. In August they returned to Worpswede, and spent the next winter together in Berlin. In 1901, Clara married the poet Rainer Maria Rilke; soon after, Paula married the painter Otto Modersohn. She died in a hemorrhage after childbirth, murmuring, *What a pity!*

The autumn feels slowed down,  
summer still holds on here, even the light  
seems to last longer than it should  
or maybe I'm using it to the thin edge.  
The moon rolls in the air. I didn't want this child.  
You're the only one I've told.  
I want a child maybe, someday, but not now.  
Otto has a calm, complacent way  
of following me with his eyes, as if to say  
Soon you'll have your hands full!  
And yes, I will; this child will be mine  
not his, the failures, if I fail  
will all be mine. We're not good, Clara,  
at learning to prevent these things,  
and once we have a child it *is* ours.  
But lately I feel beyond Otto or anyone.  
I know now the kind of work I have to do.  
It takes such energy! I have the feeling I'm  
moving somewhere, patiently, impatiently,  
in my loneliness. I'm looking everywhere in nature  
for new forms, old forms in new places,  
the planes of an antique mouth, let's say, among the leaves.  
I know and do not know  
what I am searching for.  
Remember those months in the studio together,  
you up to your strong forearms in wet clay,  
I trying to make something of the strange impressions  
assailing me – the Japanese

flowers and birds on silk, the drunks  
sheltering in the Louvre, that river-light,  
those faces... Did we know exactly  
why we were there? Paris unnerved you,  
you found it too much, yet you went on  
with your work... and later we met there again,  
both married then, and I thought you and Rilke  
both seemed unnerved. I felt a kind of joylessness  
between you. Of course he and I  
have had our difficulties. Maybe I was jealous  
of him, to begin with, taking you from me,  
maybe I married Otto to fill up  
my loneliness for you.

Rainer, of course, *knows* more than Otto knows,  
he believes in women. But he feeds on us,  
like all of them. His whole life, his art  
is protected by women. Which of us could say that?  
Which of us, Clara, hasn't had to take that leap  
out beyond our being women  
to save our work? or is it to save ourselves?  
Marriage is lonelier than solitude.

Do you know: I was dreaming I had died  
giving birth to the child.  
I couldn't paint or speak or even move.  
My child – I think – survived me. But what was funny  
in the dream was, Rainer had written my requiem –  
a long, beautiful poem, and calling me his friend.  
I was *your* friend  
but in the dream you didn't say a word.  
In the dream his poem was like a letter  
to someone who has no right  
to be there but must be treated gently, like a guest  
who comes on the wrong day. Clara, why don't I dream of you?  
That photo of the two of us – I have it still,  
you and I looking hard into each other  
and my painting behind us. How we used to work  
side by side! And how I've worked since then

trying to create according to our plan  
that we'd bring, against all odds, our full power  
to every subject. Hold back nothing  
because we were women. Clara, our strength still lies  
in the things we used to talk about:  
how life and death take one another's hands,  
the struggle for truth, our old pledge against guilt.  
And now I feel dawn and the coming day.  
I love waking in my studio, seeing my pictures  
come alive in the light. Sometimes I feel  
it is myself that kicks inside me,  
myself I must give suck to, love...  
I wish we could have done this for each other  
all our lives, but we can't...  
They say a pregnant woman  
dreams of her own death. But life and death  
take one another's hands. Clara, I feel so full  
of work, the life I see ahead, and love  
for you, who of all people  
however badly I say this  
will hear all I say and cannot say.

1975-1976

*(The Dream of a Common Language 42-44)*

*"If in this sleep I speak  
it's with a voice no longer personal  
(I want to say with voices)"*

*Adrienne Rich, from "Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev"<sup>51</sup>*

"Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff": the poem has no title, or rather, the title has only the aim to clarify that it is a letter sent or, rather, just mentally addressed to Paula's friend Clara. It is very important to notice that – quite differently from Michaels' poem – Rich only mentions Paula's and Clara's maiden names Becker and Westhoff, despite the fact that in the poem they are both

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<sup>51</sup> *Dream of a Common Language 4.*

married. Therefore, what matters to Rich is their unmarried status, that is to say their condition preceding marriage. Interestingly enough, if in Michaels' opening of her poem darkness prevails ("These are days when day doesn't arrive; / at night the same darkness falls into place.") here exactly the opposite happens: "summer still holds on here, even the light / seems to last longer than it should."

The first 'issue' that Rich immediately mentions in the poem is pregnancy, a detail which is also very important to state the approximate time – the year 1907 – in which the poem takes place. "I didn't want this child," says Paula in the fifth line of Rich's poem, while Michaels never mentions pregnancy but just hints at Paula's dress "round as a billowing cloth" nearly at the end of her poem, and Bhatt just refers to Paula's potential pregnancy on page 59 of her collection and then again on page 89 when the painter is "ripe with child." It is clear that pregnancy is a very important issue that Rich wants to discuss from the start and which she considers very important for Paula's (and her own) life. In the poem, Paula does not want a child now because the relationship with her husband seems confrontational in a very different way from Becker's with Modersohn. In Rich's poem Paula seems to lament the fact that having got pregnant is a kind of defeat for her, as Otto will surely abdicate the responsibility for the child, which will be entirely its mother's charge. Moreover, artistic creation seems to take all Paula's energy, as it involves a continual search for what is still unknown to her, and is therefore in conflict with the "selfless love" that – according to Rich – women were requested to dispense when *she* was young – and nearly Paula's age in the poem:

writing is re-naming. Now, to be maternally with small children all day in the old way, to be with a man in the old way of marriage, requires a holding-back, a putting-aside of that imaginative activity, and demands instead a kind of conservatism. I want to make it clear that I am *not* saying that in order to write well, or think well, it is necessary to become unavailable to others, or to become a devouring ego. This has been the myth of the masculine artist and thinker; and I do not accept it. But to be a female human being trying to fulfill traditional female functions in a traditional way *is* in direct conflict with the subversive function of the imagination. The word traditional is important here. There must be ways, and we will be finding out more and more about them, in which the energy of creation and the energy of relation can be united. But in those years I always felt the conflict as a failure of love in myself. I had thought I was choosing a full life: the life available to most men, in which sexuality, work, and parenthood could coexist. But I felt, at twenty-nine, guilt toward the people closest to me, and guilty toward my own being. (*On Lies, Secrets and Silence* 43-44)



As in Michaels' poem, in Rich's "Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff," loneliness is indispensable to the painter's art as she knows and does not know what she is searching for, a necessary ignorance which makes Michaels' Paula "strangely satisfied." Yet what is very interesting to notice is that, despite the fact that Rich, in another essay contained in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, "Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying," affirms that the fecundity of poetry comes from the struggle for truth,<sup>52</sup> in "Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff," perhaps unintentionally, she modifies Becker's biographical truth. In fact, when Paula starts remembering the time she and Clara spent together in Paris before they were both married, she refers to real facts ("the Japanese / flowers and birds on silk, the drunks / sheltering in the Louvre, that river-light, those faces...") which, however, if one reads the letters preceding the poem and Rilke's *Requiem* in *The Letters and Journals of Paula Modersohn-Becker*, actually date from the year 1903,<sup>53</sup> when Becker and Westhoff were both already married and the latter had also mothered a child, Ruth.

Why should Rich – who by the way gives some biographical information about Becker in a short note before the poem, as the painter was not so well-known at that time – have changed or mistaken the years she refers to? Maybe because she was so concentrated on showing that Paula's and Clara's most prolific years were when they were still young unmarried women that she got the dates wrong. Moreover, Rich's Paula makes an affirmation concerning the triangle of her/Clara/Rilke which sounds true in the poem but with regard to Becker's biography is false. After recalling their time in Paris, Paula says of Rilke: "Maybe I was jealous / of him, to begin with, taking you from me, / maybe I married Otto to fill up / my loneliness for you." Such an interpretation, on Rich's part, is completely unfounded, as Becker – as seen in the first chapter – got secretly engaged to Modersohn when Rilke seemed to have a crush on her and only after learning of Becker's engagement did Rilke decide to get engaged to Clara. Nevertheless, it is true that Becker at that point was jealous of her, or rather of her *and* Rilke, as her relationship with him was never clear.

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<sup>52</sup> "The unconscious wants truth, as the body does. The complexity and fecundity of dreams come from the complexity and fecundity of the unconscious struggling to fulfill that desire. The complexity and fecundity of poetry come from the same struggle" (188).

<sup>53</sup> "TO OTTO MODERSOHN. *Paris 17 February 1903*. [...] Sunday I went with the Rilkes to a famous private collection of old Japanese art that is to be auctioned off. The pictures were not paintings in our sense, but paper or silk scrolls. They have a remarkable command of form, color, and spirit. They expressed an enormous range of moods: the nocturnal, the sinister and sensitive, even the modish-coquettish. And the beautiful leaves with blossoms and birds. One senses how closely these people connect with nature" (228-29). "*Paris 18 February 1903*. [...] The parquet in the Louvre is going to pieces. And today in the gallery of antique pictures, which is very quiet and secluded, there were ten drunkards of the worst sort and I alone" (230).

Once again, however, Rich is more interested in ‘using’ Rilke’s self-centredness to defend women’s creative work (“His whole life, his art / is protected by women. Which of us could say that? / Which of us, Clara, hasn’t had to take that leap / out beyond our being women / to save our work? or is it to save ourselves?”) than to explore Paula’s mysterious and contradictory connection with him. What instead is undoubtedly true and seems to be a direct reference to Becker’s letters and journals is the affirmation that “Marriage is lonelier than solitude.” Yet Paula in the poem has a feminist consciousness that is in no way Becker’s. When she refers to the “leap” beyond being women that she and Clara had to take in order to save their work, once again it is Rich who speaks in her voice, as in 1978 she wrote an essay entitled “Motherhood: The Contemporary Emergency and the Quantum Leap” where she refers precisely to the “quantum leap” as “a leap of the imagination” (*On Lies, Secrets and Silence* 271). And a few lines below in the poem, Paula’s patience and impatience *is* Rich’s patience and impatience with regard to the “great evolution of woman” envisaged by the radical feminism she was involved in at the end of the Sixties: “I feel daily, hourly impatience, and am pledged to the active and tenacious patience that a lifetime commitment requires: there can be no resignation in the face of backlash, setback, or temporary defeat; there can be no limits on what we allow ourselves to imagine” (271).

According to Isobel Armstrong, women’s poems of the nineteenth century were too often read as ‘symptoms’ of patriarchal oppression:

It is sometimes tempting to extrapolate such material [content of a direct polemic about women’s condition] from the poems (because they supply it in such abundance), personalising, psychologising or literalising by translating this material back into what is known or constructed as socioeconomic patriarchal history in a univocal way, so that all poems become poems about women’s oppression. In this way the nature of the particular language and form of individual poems becomes obliterated by the concentration on a single theme. (*Victorian Poetry. Poetry, Poetics and Politics* 319)

One is similarly tempted to read “Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff” as a poetical narration of a twentieth-century woman painter’s oppression. Such a re-visioning of Becker’s life, which reflects Rich’s sense of oppression in the Seventies, certainly had its own necessity, and yet there are other important elements in the poem which may escape the reader’s notice if he or she concentrates just on that single theme. For instance, the use of time and of the poet’s authority over her text which intervene when Rich ascribes to her character the prescient power with

regard to her own death and the *Requiem* that Rilke would write afterwards. If it is true that – as discussed in the first chapter – Becker had somehow envisaged her early death, it is of course impossible that she could imagine exactly what would happen once she was no longer there. When Paula starts to make precise references to Rilke’s “long, beautiful poem,” it is of course Rich’s and not her character’s consciousness at work; and the point in which the painter states that she was *not* Rilke’s friend, but Clara’s, is one of the most directly revelatory of the author’s presence behind her character, especially because Paula does not refrain from making observations about the tone of Rilke’s *Requiem* that only a poet could make (“his poem was like a letter / to someone who has no right / to be there but must be treated gently, like a guest / who comes on the wrong day.”).

Yet it is precisely because Rich renders Paula’s ‘end’ manifest in the poem that the importance of the painter’s death is clarified, perhaps also as regards Michaels’ and Bhatt’s need to write poems in her voice. This is certainly a relevant theme, which is closely connected to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice – a continuous thread running through this dissertation and accompanying the reader into the most obscure depths of these poems. As already observed in Rilke’s “Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes,” – but it can be said of all great poetry – death is not the end. On the contrary, when it is experienced by someone who is alive, it marks the beginning of an absolute consciousness, as happens to Dante in his *Divine Comedy*. All the knowledge which eludes the living is preserved in death’s kingdom. It is because of “our deep need for intelligible Ends,” says Frank Kermode in his book *The Sense of an Ending*, that we “project ourselves – a small, humble elect, perhaps – past the End, so as to see the structure whole, a thing we cannot do from our spot of time in the middle” (8).

In “Vesuvius at Home: The Power of Emily Dickinson,” Rich observes that Dickinson is the American poet who most keenly explored states of psychic extremity. Her poems are often anticipations of death, as if the poet could go through it and write a record of the experience which is usually a final, definitive and unrecountable one. Deep knowledge of Dickinson’s work prompts Rich to affirm that in her poems “consciousness – not simply the capacity to suffer, but the capacity to experience intensely at every instant – creates of death not a blotting-out but a final illumination” (*On Lies, Secrets and Silence* 180). For those who can survive it, or who, once dead, can be given voice by poets, Death therefore becomes an equivalent for Revelation. In “Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff” such a revelation seems contained in the only affirmation that Paula repeats – not as if she were discussing an issue, but as if she were reiterating a kind of mantra – “how life and death take one another’s hands,” a highly musical line which in fact is perfect iambic pentameter.

The co-presence of life and death – which in the light of Becker’s letters and journals she seemed to have discussed more with Rilke than with Westhoff – is a perfect theme for a wonderful ekphrastic poem that Rich wrote a decade earlier than “Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff.” The poem is entitled “Mourning Picture,” like the picture that Edwin Romanzo Elmer (1850-1923) painted as a memorial of his daughter Effie, who had died shortly before he did the painting.



Edwin Romanzo Elmer, *Mourning Picture*, 1890

The picture is so striking because the idea of death in it is conveyed with a great, not to say obsessive, attention to detail, which quite interestingly seems to transform every object into a symbol. Everything is so vivid precisely because of Effie’s death, which seems to have stilled time for her parents. Their reality now is forever turned into a too sunny hereafter where they appear to be separate and yet undivided from their (dead) daughter’s world.

In her poem “Mourning Picture,” Rich gives voice to Effie, who describes her father’s painting with the same detailed precision:

They have carried the mahogany chair and the cane rocker  
out under the lilac bush,  
and my father and mother darkly sit there, in black clothes.  
Our clapboard house stands fast on its hill,  
my doll lies in her wicker pram  
gazing at western Massachusetts.  
This was our world.  
(*The Fact of a Doorframe* 72)

Yet it is she – and not her father – who seems to have painted the scene:

I could remake each shaft of grass  
feeling its rasp on my fingers,  
draw out the map of every lilac leaf  
or the net of veins on my father's  
grief-tranced hand.

Out of my head, half-bursting,  
still filling, the dream condenses –  
shadows, crystals, ceilings, meadows, globes of dew.  
Under the dull green of the lilacs, out in the light  
carving each spoke of the pram, the turned porch-pillars,  
under high early-summer clouds,  
*I am Effie, visible and invisible,*  
*remembering and remembered.* (72 my emphasis)

Only Effie, and not her father – and precisely because she *is* dead – can possess the absolute consciousness which allows her to condense reality in a totalizing *and* detailed image. She is “visible and invisible, remembering and remembered,” because she has become subject *and* object, and can therefore be a figure in the painting as well as the ghostly presence who continually recomposes outer reality to an unsubstantial image; until at the end of the poem she is the only real thing and all the rest – her parents and her world and her toys – are given dreamy consistency.

They will move from the house,  
give the toys and pets away.  
Mute and rigid with loss my mother  
will ride the train to Baptist Corner,  
the silk-spool will run bare.  
I tell you, the thread that bound us lies  
faint as a web in the dew.  
Should I make you, world, again,  
could I give back the leaf its skeleton, the air  
its early-summer cloud, the house  
its noonday presence, shadowless,  
and leave *this* out? I am Effie, you were my dream.

1965 (72-73)

Effie here is like a dead painter who not only depicts reality but also has a prescient view of the future, and can therefore see the world move on while she remains framed in her father's picture. Effie's stunning point of view in this poem has something in common with Paula's point of view in "Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff." She is internal *and* external to the poem, painter *and* poet; she is confined in the eternal present of poetry but can also project herself into the future. She is Becker *and* Rich, who is writing the poem to find herself – or a meaning to her life – in it. This is why she ascribes to herself the right to partially change Becker's biography according to her own needs. As Kermode puts it, such an attitude can be explained with the modern tendency in literary plotting to think in terms of crisis rather than temporal ends: "we concern ourselves with the conflict between the deterministic pattern any plot suggests, and the freedom of persons within that plot to choose and so to alter the structure, the relations of beginning, middle and end" (*The Sense of an Ending* 30).

Going back to "Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff," it is interesting to notice that Paula, who was dreaming of her own death, does not dream of Clara, as if Rich's character were resisting the poet's manipulative interpretation. What follows in the poem is a descriptive reference to a real photograph where in fact Paula and Clara look "hard into each other."



Paula Becker and Clara Westhoff in Becker's atelier in 1899

This photograph was taken when the two of them were still young unmarried women, and neither of them had met Rilke yet. Then Paula starts to discuss yet another series of Rich's feminist issues ("our plan / that we'd bring, against all odds, our full power / to every subject. [...] the struggle for truth, our old pledge against guilt"), including Paula's wish to be pregnant of herself, and perhaps give birth to herself as a woman artist alone ("Sometimes I feel / it is myself that kicks inside me, / myself I must give suck to, love..."), whose love can nourish and be nourished by other women's love.

Like Michaels, Rich too mentions the fact that Paula sleeps with her paintings. As seen in the first chapter, Becker used to do it when she was in Paris during her last stay, in 1906. Yet in the poem it is not clear where she is, as she is probably a just a figure in a painting, being described in a poem by a poet who is dreaming her own death – and rebirth – through Paula's death.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Cracks in the Mask: the Dramatic Monologue as a Looking Glass*

*“I wear my mask for warmth: who ever shows  
His nose to Russian snows  
To be pecked at by every wind that blows?”*

*Christina Rossetti, from “Winter: My Secret”*

Alan Sinfield – whose monograph entitled *Dramatic Monologue* is to be considered the first full reassessment of the genre since Langbaum’s *The Poetry of Experience* – in 1977, when his book appeared, felt that after Ezra Pound’s “Hugh Selwyn Mauberley” (1919-20) and T. S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (1917), the dramatic monologue had embarked on a road of no return:

Dramatic monologue and allied forms may be employed by the poet, perhaps not altogether intentionally, as provisional languages through which he may gradually develop a first-person voice which does not suffer the disadvantages the Victorians sought to avoid. If the poet can cultivate a poetic ‘I’ which is sufficiently elusive and impersonal to suggest the mysterious and incalculable nature of the human psyche; which heads off the Romantic assumption that the poet’s self may be encapsulated, and truth with it, in a single language act; which possesses an ironical self-awareness but does not inhibit commitment; then he will no longer need dramatic monologue. He will have found his way back to the flexibility of first-person voice enjoyed before the Romantics – though not with the innocence of earlier poets. Dramatic monologue by affording scope for experiment contains within itself the means of its own redundancy. (Sinfield 71)

Yet, despite the fact that in the conclusive page of his study Sinfield observes what seems to be the progressive disappearance of the dramatic monologue, which in his view has returned “to occasional use, available when it seems to offer the appropriate form for a particular poem” (76), the final paragraph appears to be rather auspicious for this poetic genre: “Fiction and self-expression are equally fundamental to art. By working on the border between them and



conceding the entire territory to neither, dramatic monologue invites continuous reconsideration of their claims and capacities. We would be unwise to try to manage without it” (76).

Luckily enough, it seems that we have not done without it, as, according to Glennis Byron in her more recent book, curiously bearing the same title as Sinfield’s, *Dramatic Monologue*, published in 2003,

[i]t may well be [...] that the dramatic monologue survived Modernism and its aftermath in a more vigorous state than is generally believed, and that it survived primarily as an instrument of social critique. And if we look again at some of the poets more usually cited as examples of twentieth-century practitioners of the monologue by such critics as Alan Sinfield and Elizabeth Howe, it is interesting to see how frequently the works mentioned are in fact polemical. (Byron 120)

It is also very interesting that, at this stage of her study, Byron just mentions Robert Lowell’s, Edgar Lee Masters’, Richard Howard’s and Edwin Morgan’s dramatic monologues as instances of poets exploring the new opportunities presented by the dramatic monologue which can be more fully exploited at this time. While Howard “remains, formally, relatively conservative and traditional,” Morgan is “highly experimental” (121), and not only do they not have anything in common with each other but they both diverge from Pound and Eliot’s “flexibility of first-person voice.” Carol Ann Duffy’s dramatic monologues collected in *The World’s Wife* (1999) are later briefly analysed by Byron in the section dedicated to “Revisionist Dramatic Monologues,” where many other women poets’ works are taken into consideration. Yet, from the examples cited by Byron – which do not include any poems by Michaels, Bhatt or Rich –, it seems that an ironical, or polemical attitude is prompting contemporary poets to use the form of the dramatic monologue in what appears to be an attempt to ‘adapt’ the genre to more recent communicative developments, like the tendency to “repeatedly and directly draw upon and respond to media events” (Byron 138). The most direct consequence is that the poets’ presence is more and more evident in their dramatic monologues and the speaking voices seem more and more artificial and openly constructed by authors who use too knowingly the technical devices at their disposal.

The dramatic monologue, however, best survives when it finds ways to respond to deep and often irrational needs which always lead poets to explore the most mysterious and still unknown side of human nature. From this point of view, Michaels’, Bhatt’s and Rich’s monologues which give voice to Paula could not be more different from Duffy’s tendency to debunk mythological or human characters in her poems. Such a process in fact implies a detachment and a dominating

stance of the poet's 'I' with respect to her characters, that is in no way similar to the three women poets' attempt to revive Paula Modersohn-Becker. In fact Michaels', Bhatt's and Rich's use of the dramatic monologue as a form of embodiment recalls Browning's declaration of poetics through the poet-speaker's affirmation in Book One of *The Ring and the Book* (1868-9), that he "Creates, no, but resuscitates, perhaps" (l. 719), so that "something dead may get to live again" (l. 729):

I can detach from me, commission forth  
Half of my soul; which in its pilgrimage  
O'er old unwandered waste ways of the world,  
May chance upon some fragment of a whole,  
Rag of flesh, scrap of bone in dim disuse,  
Smoking flax that fed fire once: prompt therein  
I enter, spark-like, put old powers to play. (l. 749-55)

Even if, as seen in the second chapter, the more or less conscious variations with respect to Becker's real biography, which intervene in the three poets' dramatic monologues, testify to their presence within their poems, Michaels', Bhatt's and Rich's intention is to give Becker, so prematurely dead, a further chance to speak and say something to illuminate her inner world and the conflicts brought about in her life by her artistic vocation. It is the vague border between knowledge of Becker's biographical details and inference of her silent thoughts and wishes that here and there prompts the three poets to identify too closely with their character and make their own personality perceptible within the poems.

The sheer coincidence – which perhaps is not at all a coincidence – of having three poets writing in the voice of the same character, allows one to reconsider a poetical genre like the dramatic monologue, which is apparently undergoing further developments which had not been foreseen by Sinfield, and which Byron failed to notice in her more recent study.

### *Definition(s) of Dramatic Monologue*

Sinfield undoubtedly gave the most general and inclusive definition of dramatic monologue, one that is easy to adopt when one has to decide whether a poem is to be considered a dramatic monologue or not. In fact he soon dismisses the definition based on Browning's "Fra Lippo

Lippi” and “My Last Duchess,” which he comes to outline at the beginning of his book,<sup>1</sup> and takes the opposite approach, to start his discussion “from the broadest definition of dramatic monologue as simply a poem in the first person spoken by, or almost entirely by, someone who is indicated not to be the poet” (8). According to this definition, Michaels’ and Rich’s poems, as well as Bhatt’s poems in the first person where Paula – and not the poet – speaks, can certainly be defined as dramatic monologues. Yet Sinfield’s ‘technical’ definition leaves out a more palpable but decisive reflexive movement, involving the triad poet-character-reader, which Langbaum, as early as 1957, defined and rightly considered very relevant for this poetical genre:

It can be said of the dramatic monologue generally that there is at work in it a consciousness, whether intellectual or historical, beyond what the speaker can lay claim to. This consciousness is the mark of the poet’s projection into the poem; and it is also the pole which attracts our projection, since we find in it the counterpart of our own consciousness. (*Poetry of Experience* 94)

Once the reader of Michaels’, Bhatt’s and Rich’s poems has come to define them as dramatic monologues, what is interesting to observe is what kind of projection takes place in them. Even though Sinfield ascribes the ‘crisis’ of the genre to the experiments carried out by Eliot and Pound, it seems on the contrary that they contributed to bring stylistic changes to the modernist dramatic monologue that the three women poets cannot ignore:

Modernist dramatic monologue deliberately undermines the naturalistic conception of character. The speaker and his situation hang in an unsubstantial void. Attention is concentrated upon moments of intense apprehension which transcend circumstances and perhaps personality; all else is sheared away. Concreteness resides not in a social and physical setting but in brief and evocative images (Pound’s monologue “The Jewel Stairs’ Grievance” is only four lines long, though it does have six lines of annotation). (Sinfield 65)

Yet, if Sinfield sees the world which Eliot creates in *The Waste Land* (which in his view is “a sequence of dramatic monologues” 40) as made of “scarcely embodied voices competing for attention and speaking only of frustration and squalor” (41), Bhatt, Rich and particularly Michaels, make an extensive use of highly evocative images for the opposite purpose of

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<sup>1</sup> “A definition of dramatic monologue constructed from these two poems, then, should include a first-person speaker who is not the poet and whose character is unwittingly revealed, an auditor whose influence is felt in the poem, a specific time and place, colloquial language, some sympathetic involvement with the speaker, and an ironic discrepancy between the speaker’s view of himself and a larger judgment which the poet implies and the reader must develop” (Sinfield 7).

*embodying* Paula Modersohn-Becker in their poems. What will be attempted here is to identify the changes brought to the dramatic monologue by the three poets and to discuss the possible reasons which may have led them to transform the genre.

It is worth saying that critics rarely focused on women poets' dramatic monologues to support their theories. In fact, as late as 2003, Byron lamented that

[t]he work of women poets has rarely been included in the general theoretical discourse on the dramatic monologue, and while it is hardly surprising to find that women writers are not considered by such early critics as Sessions and Langbaum, it *is* surprising to see how frequently they remain ignored by those more recent critics who have benefited from the historical recovery and scholarly reconstruction of women's poetry which has taken place over the past few decades. (Byron 27)

First of all, it is important to underline that Michaels, Bhatt and Rich chose as a speaker a very peculiar character, Paula Modersohn-Becker, a woman painter who lived at the turn of the twentieth century and whose art was neither known nor appreciated enough by her contemporaries. If the Victorian poets Browning and Tennyson sometimes poured into their dramatic monologues a certain taste for "deviance and abnormality,"<sup>2</sup> Michaels, Bhatt and Rich seem rather to be attracted by the intensity of a woman's artistic experience which did not win any public approval during her short life. To become herself, that is to say the subject of her own life, Becker in fact needed to be subjected to the irrational drives which are at the base of creation. One century later, not only does the dramatic monologue seem to be the proper poetical sphere where voice can be given to such a contradiction, but it is precisely the incompleteness of Becker's life that is still likely to arouse the reader's sympathy.

Here are therefore two more unfailing aspects of the dramatic monologue:

There is the same tension between sympathy and judgement; our experience of a longing to evade experience becomes itself the most intense of experiences to the extent that we realize how far from the norm we are departing. Sympathy adapts the dramatic monologue for making the "impossible" case and for dealing with the forbidden region of the emotions, because we must suspend moral judgement, we must sympathize, while remaining aware of the judgement suspended. (*Poetry of Experience* 92-93)

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<sup>2</sup> See Byron 44.

It has been observed that women poets generally sympathize more with their speakers than men poets,<sup>3</sup> and in fact, as seen in the second chapter, the three poets somehow have smoothed out Becker's contrasts with her family or – in the case of Rich – exacerbated her conflict with her husband so that the character of Paula cannot fail to arouse the reader's wholehearted sympathy. This is probably due to the particular forms of dramatic monologue that the three poets use: Michaels seems to recreate the intimate and reflexive tone of a series of journal entries; Bhatt lets Paula speak in front of her image mirrored by some of her many self-portraits or in letters perhaps just mentally addressed to Clara or Rilke; while Rich is the first to write a dramatic monologue in Paula's voice in the form of a letter addressed to Clara, where she discloses some of her more unrecountable secrets. As Sinfield observes, the epistle is one of the forms that originated the dramatic monologue.<sup>4</sup> Yet, despite the fact that the three poets show that they know Becker's letters and journals, the poems they wrote in the form of letters, as well as being partly documented and partly invented, rarely give the reader the impression that the writer really intends to send them to the person they are addressed to.

This particular strategy is certainly connected to another important element of the dramatic monologue: the presence or presumed existence of an auditor. The form of the 'unsent' letter in fact allows the poets to explore at the same time their character's inner space and outer context, so that they can they avoid turning the dramatic monologue into a soliloquy.<sup>5</sup> Even in Michaels' poem, which is not in the form of a letter, Paula cannot be said to speak to herself. She rather seems to be talking to a very special listener, who is not completely embodied either in one person, or in the group of fellow artists and family members who appear in various parts of the poem. They are possible addressees, as in fact they were present in Paula's life, but Michaels depicts a moment which is a turning point in the painter's life. "A soul admitted to itself,"<sup>6</sup> as Emily Dickinson would say, needs a particular sort of Other to be confronted with, whose nature remains partly potential. The painter, in other words, is rather trying to find a secret channel of communication with that dark side of herself where art can burst out after breaking free from rational control.

Once again, it is Langbaum who best defined the subjective and objective movement that the dramatic monologue can create at the same time, by

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<sup>3</sup> See Byron 57-58.

<sup>4</sup> See the fourth chapter of his *Dramatic Monologue*.

<sup>5</sup> As Langbaum observes, "The difference [between the soliloquy and the dramatic monologue] is that the soliloquist's subject is himself, while the speaker of the dramatic monologue directs his attention outward" (*Poetry of Experience* 146).

<sup>6</sup> "There is a solitude of space" [1695].

making the outward movement of the poem a device for returning inward, to make the dramatic situation the occasion for lyric expression; so that in effect the speaker directs his address outward in order to address himself, and makes an objective discovery in order to discover himself. No matter how dramatic the dramatic monologue is, no matter how far outward it moves, its development is lyrical in that the speaker does not develop outward toward an external ideal, he does not change moral direction as a result of the circumstances; he rather makes the circumstances a part of himself as he develops inward toward an intenser manifestation of his own nature. (*Poetry of Experience* 200)

In “Modersohn-Becker,” in fact, it is as if we as readers were admitted into a secret room of Paula’s soul where no one else can enter. Not because in the poem she openly intends to address anyone. On the contrary, we are eavesdroppers without her knowing and that is why the poem is so involving. This particular aspect was considered a prerequisite for poetry by philosopher and critic John Stuart Mill in 1833, when he affirmed that “Eloquence is *heard*, poetry is *overheard*.” He furthermore explained that “Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to us to lie in the poet’s utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude” (qtd. in Byron 37). T. S. Eliot resumed this concept in his important essay “The Three Voices of Poetry” (1953), which is closely analysed by Sinfield when he comes to discuss the relationship between poet and speaker in the dramatic monologue. Eliot’s view in fact is nearly coincident with Mill’s:

I think that in every poem, from the private meditation to the epic or the drama, there is more than one voice to be heard. If the author never spoke to himself, the result would not be poetry, though it might be magnificent rhetoric; and part of our enjoyment of great poetry is the enjoyment of overhearing words which are not addressed to us. (*On Poetry and Poets* 100)

In “Modersohn-Becker” not only are we the privileged witnesses of the painter’s reflections, yearnings and doubts, but in some ways we also feel that we have a role in her discoveries. Paula is in fact acknowledging the limits and potentialities of her art while writing about them. To do this, she needs to be physically distanced even from the people who appear in her monologue. They spring forth all mixed up in her memories, as if all of them were part of her self. And the fact that the poem is made of fragments not only accounts for the truthfulness of her research – which is not complete but under way – but also leaves part of the meaning to be reconstructed by the reader. We participate in Paula’s research, pains and utmost joy, precisely

because they are incomplete and difficult to convey. Giving them shape implies keeping them on the verge of disappearance. This is why one cannot say that there is a pattern either in Paula's reflections or in Michaels' poem. Langbaum observes this same aspect in Browning's "Childe Roland to the Dark Tower Came" and T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": "the pattern cannot be understood, [...], as a rational pattern leading to an extractable idea. The pattern is rather the shine that comes off the events, the peculiar vibration by which we recognize them as expressive and as therefore in that sense significant" (*Poetry of Experience* 198).

It is necessary that someone else is there – in any potential time or place – to collect the pieces in one possible unity. Or rather, simply to find in Paula's incompleteness a projection of one's own. And yet, coherently with the development of the dramatic monologue since Modernism, if one or more auditors still remain implied in the poem, very rarely are they either living or present. Byron observes that this strategy is particularly developed by women poets, who often make use of self-objectification "so that the self-image that is scrutinised becomes a substitute for the more conventional audience" (63).

In the case of Michaels' poem it is therefore as if the auditor were implied, as when one writes one's journal. What is interesting is that such auditor paradoxically includes him- or herself, as it becomes an internalized space where one's unspeakable secrets can be conveyed. Having said that, context is not lacking, either in Michaels' or Bhatt's and Rich's poems. Yet, with the exception of part of Rich's dramatic monologue, it is not a social or ideological context but rather the concrete and abstract space allowing – and sometimes contrasting – artistic creation.

As for the absence of a concrete auditor interacting with or possibly overhearing the speaker's words, and considering that Becker's talent was not at all acknowledged at her time, it might simply relate to a greater loneliness as regards women artists at the beginning of the twentieth century. Yet, if Michaels, Bhatt and Rich have felt the need to give voice to Becker, a similar sense of isolation has probably not been completely overcome either at the end of the twentieth century or at the beginning of the next one. The fact that Paula in the poems fails to feel the presence of an auditor who is able to appreciate her art, implies that the poets too perceive that their potential auditors are external to their dramatic monologues and perhaps only in a future time will they be able to share the experience that is offered in their poems.

*A "Pilgrimage O'er Old Unwandered Waste Ways of the World"*

*"Man, bounded, yearning to be free,  
May so project his surplusage of soul  
In search of body, so add self to self  
By owning what lay ownerless before, –  
So find, so fill full, so appropriate forms –  
That, although nothing which had never life  
Shall get life from him, be, not having been,  
Yet, something dead may get to live again,  
Something with too much life or not enough,  
Which, either way imperfect, ended once:  
An end whereat man's impulse intervenes,  
Makes new beginning, starts the dead alive,  
Completes the incomplete and saves the thing."*

*Robert Browning, The Ring and the Book I, 718-34*

The fact that Michaels, Bhatt and Rich chose a woman painter of nearly one century earlier and not a contemporary one could be due to many reasons. Not only does it suggest that in Becker's life and art there is something that stimulates the poets' identification (and therefore something that they perceive as missing in contemporary art) but also that Paula's point of view becomes doubly extraordinary: on the one hand because Becker's choices were absolutely unconventional for a young woman of her time; and on the other because Michaels, Bhatt and Rich belong to a different time and place, and therefore writing dramatic monologues in her voice implies for them trying to penetrate the prejudices and conventions of another age.

As Mill wrote in his essay "The Spirit of the Age" in 1831, "the idea of comparing one's own age with former ages, or with our notion of those which are to come, had occurred to philosophers" but, as he observed, "it never before was the dominant idea of any age" (qtd. in Byron 86). If one cannot say that today this is still true in absolute terms, it must be said, however, that especially Michaels and Bhatt show what is still to be defined as a "historical consciousness." It cannot only be ascribed to their belonging to post-colonial poetry, yet the deep need to incorporate and further elaborate a European woman artist's experience is undoubtedly stimulating for them. While Rich in her dramatic monologue seems to look for a confirmation of her political ideas by projecting them into another woman belonging to a different age, Michaels and Bhatt are more willing to undergo an exploration of an artistic experience like Becker's, which is temporarily alienating for them. In their perspective, in fact, which is poles apart from Rich's, Paula cannot be an autonomous subject, independent from her husband or fellow artists, family members and so on, simply because she equates art with love.



And for those who want to explore truthfully their interweaving – as Michaels’ and Bhatt’s poems in Paula’s voice seem to say – life will become a strange combination of loneliness and intimate union with others. Love, in other words – exactly in the same way as art – if taken to its extreme fulfillment, can inhabit only a (temporarily) selfless subject, regardless of its being a ‘she’ or ‘he.’

*The ‘Forbidden’ Delight of Artistic Creation*

“Thou art the mould  
Wherein I pour the fervent thoughts, th’ untold,  
The self-consuming!”

Felicia Hemans, “*Properzia Rossi*”<sup>7</sup>

A historical awareness, combined with a biographical interest for extraordinary female personalities, portrayed within the comforts and struggles of domesticity, is also what prompted Felicia Hemans (1793-1835) to write *Records of Woman*, published in 1828. The book was so successful at that time to allow the poet – who was separated from her husband – to support her five children and her mother for several years. Very popular at her time, and admired by Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, George Eliot and Matthew Arnold, according to Paula R. Feldman – who in 1999 edited a new edition of *Records of Woman* – only recently has she garnered increasing interest from respected scholars. This is probably due to a recent turn in critical literary studies which is well explained by Jerome McGann in his book *The Poetics of Sensibility*:

The internal conflicts of modernism [...] call us to return to the eighteenth century, and in particular to reconsider carefully the poetry of the ‘feeling heart,’ the *coeur sensible*[...] I assume that adequate reading begins (though it will not end) by entering into those conventions, by reading in the same spirit that the author writ. (qtd. in the “Introduction” by Feldman xiii)

In *Records of Woman*, Hemans apparently celebrated the ‘domestic affections’ and was a devoted defender of hearth and home. Yet, according to Feldman, a close reading of her poems reveals that “[c]ontrary to expectations, woman’s space, the domestic sphere in *Records*, is far

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<sup>7</sup> *Records of Woman* 29.

from being a safe, peaceful, and insulated place. At any moment, it threatens to succumb to violence and dissolution” (“Introduction” xxii).

Most of the poems collected in *Records of Woman* are based on actual historical events, but Hemans “sees history as the recording not so much of grand occurrences but of human emotion and its implications” (xxii). What is very interesting in comparison with the dramatic monologues written in the voice of Paula Modersohn-Becker, is the way Hemans represents not only the tension between the ennobling power of love and the almost unbearable pain of its loss, but also the relationship between love, artistic creation and fame. In “Properzia Rossi,” a dramatic monologue where – as the author informs the reader in her note at the beginning of the poem – “a celebrated female sculptor of Bologna” speaks, fame is no substitute for love. In what can be read as a quotation from a poem by Rossi, which Hemans places as an epigraph in italics before the four sections of her poem, talent too is dismissed by Properzia, as it does not bring any happiness. The emphasis, therefore, turns again to love:

*– Tell me no more, no more  
Of my soul’s lofty gifts! Are they not vain  
To quench its haunting thirst for happiness?  
Have I not lov’d, and striven, and fail’d to bind  
One true heart unto me, whereon my own  
Might find a resting-place, a home for all  
Its burden of affections? I depart,  
Unknown, tho’ Fame goes with me; I must leave  
The earth unknown. Yet it may be that death  
Shall give my name a power to win such tears  
As would have made life precious. (Records 10)*

However, after the first section of the poem, where Properzia, consumed by her unreciprocated love, seems close to departing, the second section clarifies the character’s inner division as regards fame, as its dismissal is now contrasted by the almost erotic delight she expresses in her creative powers:

It comes,– the power  
Within me born, flows back; my fruitless dower  
That could not win me love. Yet once again  
I greet it proudly, with its rushing train  
Of glorious images:–they throng–they press–

A sudden joy lights up my loneliness,–  
I shall not perish all! (*Records* 29, vv. 26-32)

Properzia (and Hemans with her) is yearning to create something which will earn her the necessary fame so as not to be forgotten, not only by her beloved but by the public too. As Feldman underlines, “[i]n increasingly conservative Victorian culture, [Hemans] well knew that this wish was unacceptable – something a woman must mask” (“Introduction” xxv). This is why Hemans too needs to enter a room of mirrors if she wants to give voice to her deepest needs: she creates Properzia creating the figure of Ariadne, whose function is to substitute her as a simulacrum to arouse her beloved’s affections once she is dead:

The bright work grows  
Beneath my hand, unfolding, as a rose,  
Leaf after leaf, to beauty; line by line,  
I fix my thought, heart, soul, to burn, to shine,  
Thro’ the pale marble’s veins. It grows—and now  
I give my own life’s history to thy brow,  
Forsaken Ariadne! thou shalt wear  
My form, my lineaments; but oh! more fair,  
Touched into lovelier being by the glow  
Which in me dwells, as by the summer-light  
All things are glorified. From thee my woe  
Shall yet look beautiful to meet his sight,  
When I am pass’d away. (*Records* 30, vv. 33-45)

It seems that a mask is necessary to Hemans to admit her yearning for fame and to convey her love, but, as Byron observes,

[t]here are cracks in the mask. While her female speakers yearn for love, for the home and family, at the same time they frequently reveal a stereotypical awareness of the satisfactions that result from self-fulfilment, rather than self-sacrifice. This leads to a sense of division or splitting in the subject that is characteristic of the dramatic monologue. (Byron 53)

Once again, it is a ‘double poem’ which takes shape before the eyes and ears of the attentive reader. Far from being depersonalized in their roles as lovers, wives and mothers, the characters speaking in the dramatic monologues written by women, in the eighteenth century as in the

present time, use indirect strategies to finally affirm their talent. In Byron's view, even "Properzia Rossi," which at first glance does not seem to question but to confirm conventional beliefs concerning female subjectivity, is in fact covertly provocative:

The poem offers not so much a straightforward dismissal of artistic talent as an awareness and exploration of the tensions and contradictions between the satisfactions afforded by artistic creation and the satisfactions supposed to be afforded by more normative feminine roles of wife and mother. (Byron 53)

Such tensions not only remain unsolved in Paula Modersohn-Becker's time, but evidently they prompt Michaels, Bhatt and Rich to write dramatic monologues in her voice.

Yet it must be said that the historical awareness that early women poets like Hemans already gestured towards, and which was to become central to the form of the dramatic monologue as it developed, finds in Browning the poet who "most closely identified with the project of bringing the past to life" (Byron 85): "Browning's mimetic particularity, his prosodic and colloquial language and his concern to construct a particular sense of time and place are all part of his wider interest in the specifics of the historical moment" (85). Needless to say, exploring the past does not necessarily imply – whether for Victorian or contemporary poets – being exclusively driven by a sense of nostalgia, but also by a wish to better understand the present and, as Langbaum observes, "a critical awareness of our own modernity" (*Poetry of Experience* 96). Therefore, when the speaker of a dramatic monologue is not only a historical character but *also* an artist, the poet is certainly trying to look at his or her own age and place through "more critical spectacles" – as Becker told her husband the first time she left Worpswede for Paris – and also by using the speaker's art as a mirror of his or her own poetry.

This is why another important woman writer of dramatic monologues worth considering is Augusta Webster (1837-94), who was frequently compared to Browning. In her poem "The Painter" (1870) – which, in a kind of *mise en abîme*, recalls "Andrea del Sarto" and "Pictor Ignotus" by Browning – she gives voice to a male painter. If Webster's anonymous painter, like Browning's "Andrea del Sarto," strives to reach perfection, he seems rather to be willing to stop one step before falling victim to his own obsession, even though that implies of course an acceptance of imperfection:

So, 'tis completed – not an added touch  
But would do mischief – and, though so far short  
Of what I aimed at, I can praise my work. (Webster 265, vv. 1-3)

The painter *could* be a genius, if only he had had money to study and now he did not have a family to support. Even though he is a man, the same conflict between family duties and art undermining Paula Modersohn-Becker's research here forbids Webster's painter to become *someone*. And yet, while Paula – in Michaels', Bhatt's and Rich's poems – more than solving her contradictions tries to explore them in her art and to look for strength within herself, in "The Painter" society is to be blamed for his failure and the painter yields to a kind of passive resignation, deprived of any possible revelation: "I have grown / Too used to disappointment now to set / a hope on any issue" (267, vv. 71-73). Therefore, if Paula's art gains in richness and depth from her suffering, the same thing does not happen to Webster's painter. On the one hand he tries to console himself with the closeness of his beloved wife Ruth, whose very presence and judgement he is very dependent upon ("I need your love so much. [...] prophesy, / You happy prophet who can fill your eyes / With sunshine and see brightness where you will" 269, vv. 136-41); and on the other, that same presence which saves him from utmost despair forbids him to become the artist he believes he is deep inside himself:

For I know there is in me  
 Another power than what men's eyes yet find  
 In these poor works of mine. But who can tell  
 If now I ever shall become myself?  
 [...] but what is a man's self  
 Excepting what he is, what he has learned  
 And what he does? (268, vv. 126-31)

As Byron observes after analyzing this poem, "The Victorian tendency to see the human personality in increasingly secular and material terms is nowhere seen quite as clearly as in the work of Webster" (Byron 104). In Webster's poem the artist's failure seems to be due to the lack of money ("Ah well I am a poor man and must earn; [...] A man with wife and children, and no more / To give them than his hackwork brings him in, / Must be a hack and let his masterpiece / Go to the devil" (266, vv. 40-60). In Michael's, Bhatt's and Rich's poems, instead, Becker's lack of money – which is very often mentioned in her journal and which was one of the reasons why she felt she had to get married at some point – strangely enough is not one of the elements which seems to be important to the authors.

The need to earn one's living and the effort to reach a high ideal of life which comes to coincide with art are undoubtedly present in the wonderful dramatic monologue "Andrea del

Sarto” by Browning, and yet the atmosphere in the poem is so peculiar if compared with the one in “The Painter.” Andrea, in fact, thinks he has sacrificed his art to satisfy his wife Lucrezia’s concrete needs. That is why he has left King Francis’ court to build a house where they could live peacefully as husband and wife; but that is also why he thinks that his art is deprived of soul: “If really there was such a chance, so lost, – / Is, whether you’re – not grateful – but more pleased. / Well, let me think so. And you smile indeed! / This hour has been an hour! Another smile?” (*Andrea del Sarto. Pictor Ignotus. Fra Lippo Lippi* 96-98, vv. 201-4). Yet Lucrezia is not at all sentimentally and sexually satisfied, and in her many lovers she looks for what Andrea cannot give her.

Here the painter, Andrea, is depicted as a feeble man, not only because he cannot do without his wife and is ready to sacrifice his art for her, but also because he can never put his soul into his paintings, which remain simple works of cold perfection when compared to the ones by more imperfect but passionate painters:

There burns a truer light of God in them,  
In their vexed beating stuffed and stopped-up brain,  
Heart, or whate’er else, than goes on to prompt  
This low-pulsed forthright craftsman’s hand of mine.  
Their works drop groundward, but themselves, I know,  
Reach many a time a heaven that’s shut to me,  
Enter and take their place there sure enough,  
Though they come back and cannot tell the world.  
My works are nearer heaven, but I sit here. (90, vv. 79-87)

The poem is so fascinating because of Andrea’s inner doubts about the truth of what he would like to believe: while he tries to convince himself that his art is lacking in spiritual value because Lucrezia is not willing to give him her soul, deep inside himself he suspects that in any case he would never be able to reach that profound level of expression:

Had you enjoined them on me, given me soul,  
We might have risen to Rafael, I and you!  
Nay, Love, you did give all I asked, I think –  
More than I merit, yes, by many times.  
But had you – oh, with the same perfect brow,  
And perfect eyes, and more than perfect mouth,  
And the low voice my soul hears, as a bird

The fowler's pipe, and follows to the snare –  
 Had you, with these the same, but brought a mind!  
 Some women do so. Had the mouth there urged  
 "God and the glory! never care for gain.  
 "The present by the future, what is that?  
 "Live for fame, side by side with Agnolo!  
 "Rafael is waiting: up to God, all three!"  
 I might have done it for you. So it seems:  
 Perhaps not. All is as God over-rules.  
 Beside, incentives come from the soul's self;  
 The rest avail not. (92-93, vv. 118-35)

As this passage clarifies, Browning does not seem to be concerned with the role played by society in Andrea's failure as an artist. On the contrary, the painter had found a way of earning a living with his paintings, which were appreciated by King Francis and therefore responded to the needs and tastes of the most powerful people of his time. Yet art must be one with passion; that is to say, it must be prompted by a feeling which transcends the individual, regardless of its being a purely sexual (as it is the case of Browning's "Lippo Lippi") or a more sublimated drive. Perfection comes so easily to Andrea, but precisely for that reason he is not able to reach the heaven of art: "Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, / Or what's a heaven for?" (92, vv. 97-98). A true artist should get lost in his works if he wants to enter the heaven of creation body and soul. Andrea instead exceeds in the twilight of sublimation and not in the full day of passion, so his paintings reach too high a soulless perfection: "My works are nearer heaven, but I sit here" (90, v. 87).

It is also very interesting to observe how the financial side of art is treated by Browning differently with respect to what happens in "The Painter" by Webster. If in this latter the artist cannot properly develop his art because of his need to support a family, in "Andrea del Sarto" the painter uses the income from his art to try to buy Lucrezia's love. The fundament of art – that is to say the most spontaneous and therefore free desire – seems to be utterly denied in this poem. It is instead a vicious circle which induces Lucrezia to ask her husband for the money that she, despite all her beauty, has to pay to her cousin and lover Claudio. While Andrea, in turn, sells his soulless perfection to buy himself the self-induced delusion of Lucrezia's love.

The faded crepuscular atmosphere of the poem seems to refer to the impossibility of entering the realm of creation:

Eh? the whole seems to fall into a shape  
As if I saw alike my work and self  
And all that I was born to be and do,  
A twilight piece. (88, vv. 46-49)

Any financial recognition here, far from being the means of exchange between the sublimation of art and the reality principle ruling society, rather appears to be the necessary price to pay to grant oneself at least the delusion of being loved.

Social and economic constraints on the one hand and artistic fulfillment (if not ambition) on the other, are combined differently in “Pictor Ignotus” by Browning. Set in the Renaissance age, this very short dramatic monologue gives voice to a Pictor Ignotus, where “Ignotus” refers either to the painter’s not being known or of humble origin. It does not matter so much if he is to be identified with Baccio della Porta, Raphael’s friend and assistant. What is more important is that if the Pictor Ignotus has never attained fame, it is not entirely because of his need to scrape a living. As the poem says at the very beginning, he certainly would be able to paint like other more famous painters who have won public approval (“I could have painted pictures like that youth’s / Ye praise so”),<sup>8</sup> but it is precisely the pettiness of such approval that forbids the Pictor to second the public’s tastes:

These buy and sell our pictures, take and give,  
Count them for garniture and household-stuff,  
And where they live needs must our pictures live  
And see their faces, listen to their prate,  
Partakers of their daily pettiness,  
Discussed of, – “This I love, or this I hate,  
This likes me more, and this affects me less!”  
Wherefore I chose my portion. (58, vv. 51-57)

The conflict here is between a spiritual and a more commercial notion of art. Surprisingly enough, however, Pictor’s absolute and secret ideal seems to be represented by secular painting; if he has decided to become a mere executor of sacred paintings, deprived of any passion or personal involvement (“With the same series, Virgin, Babe and Saint, / With the same cold calm

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<sup>8</sup> *Andrea del Sarto. Pictor Ignotus. Fra Lippo Lippi* 57, vv. 1-2.



beautiful regard, –”),<sup>9</sup> it is just because they are the ones that can be accepted without being criticized. Pictor’s religion is art and, to foster it, he withdraws into his own entirely secular shrine. He is therefore induced to reject any compromise and, in very absolutist terms, cannot but let his own creative paintings slowly fall into oblivion:

At least no merchant traffics in my heart;  
The sanctuary’s gloom at least shall ward  
Vain tongues from where my pictures stand apart:  
Only prayer breaks the silence of the shrine  
While, blackening in the daily candle-smoke,  
They moulder on the damp wall’s travertine,  
‘Mid echoes the light footstep never woke.  
So, die my pictures! surely, gently die! (58, vv. 63-69)

Public failure as well as oblivion here are the price which the Pictor has to pay to fulfill his own ideal of art, which must forcedly remain private and secret. Behind its holy façade, the society of his time pursues and praises only appearances. The inner split here is not between family duties and artistic vocation but between a personal and passionate ideal of art which does not meet the social requirements in any way. Furthermore, what emerges from this poem is also Browning’s anti-Catholic attitude on the one hand and, on the other, the heavy burden he felt of the choice he had made, not in favour of painting, of course, but of poetry, which – at the time when he wrote the poem, that is to say towards the end of 1844 – Browning felt was unlikely to lead him to any fame or recognition.

Yet, failing in one’s art can be considered somehow successful only if it implies the transformation of one’s consciousness that allows the acknowledgement of one’s limits without giving up one’s deepest yearnings. And the secret aim of the dramatic monologue – in Browning’s time as well as in Michaels’, Bhatt’s and Rich’s time – may be precisely to find a time, a place and a character so that such a transformation can take place and be revealing for the reader.

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<sup>9</sup> *Andrea del Sarto. Pictor Ignotus, Fra Lippo Lippi* 60, vv. 60-61.

## *The Character as Multiplier*

*“What we call insincerity  
is simply a method by which  
we can multiply our personalities”*

*Oscar Wilde, “The Critic as Artist”*

One of the fundamental questions worth discussing when analysing any kind of dramatic monologue, is whether the speaker is credible as a character independent, or almost independent, of the ‘I’ of the poet.

Sinfield borrows from Käte Hamburger the term ‘feint’ to indicate the fact that, according to him, the dramatic monologue always lies, as “it pretends to be something other than what it is: an invented speaker masquerades in the first person which customarily signifies the poet’s voice” (*Dramatic Monologue* 25). He then makes a distinction between two possible movements of the dramatic monologue which are useful to identify and yet at a second glance appear to be quite misleading:

The varying degrees of dramatic realization we have observed have the effect of moving the feint either towards the poet’s ‘I’ or towards fiction. If there is a heavy apparatus of circumstantial detail which establishes for the speaker a world which we know is not the poet’s, then the feint begins to approximate to fiction. If, alternatively, the speaker is relatively unlocated in time and place so that there is little beyond the title, say, to remind us that it is not supposed to be the poet speaking, then the feint is closer to the poet’s ‘I’. (25)

Sinfield’s distinction seems to imply that the only way for the poet to avoid the ‘feint’ would be to write first-person lyrics, where he or she is supposed to speak with his or her own voice. Yet, after reading Michaels’, Bhatt’s and Rich’s dramatic monologues in Paula’s voice, not only does Sinfield’s distinction appear to be too drastic, but it risks overshadowing a possible development in the vision of character in the dramatic monologue which does not fall into his theorization of the ‘feint.’

Sinfield is probably influenced by T. S. Eliot’s essay “The Three Voices of Poetry,” which he discusses at the end of his book. Eliot in fact distinguishes three possible voices that the poet can use:

The first voice is the voice of the poet talking to himself – or to nobody. The second is the voice of the poet addressing an audience, whether large or small. The third is the voice of the poet when he attempts to create a dramatic character speaking in verse; when he is saying, not what he would say in his own person, but only what he can say within the limits of one imaginary character addressing another imaginary character. (*On Poetry and Poets* 89)

As for the third voice, Eliot further distinguishes the voice of poetic drama – when the poet is called to write verse for the stage, and has to imagine how each character, or the whole chorus, can speak in poetry – and the voice of the poet “in non-dramatic poetry which has a dramatic element in it – and conspicuously in the dramatic monologue” (94). Eliot of course came to discuss the difference between these two voices after he had already written for the stage. The first problem he singled out when he wrote poetic dramas was that “[w]hen the poetry comes, the personage on the stage must not give the impression of being merely a mouthpiece for the author” (92-93). In order to do this, the poet should try to extract the poetry from the character, and not to impose his poetry upon it. This, according to Eliot, is necessary to differentiate the various characters that interact in the play. As in the dramatic monologue there is only one speaker, Eliot thinks that the poetry in it can only be imposed upon the character: “What we normally hear, in fact, in the dramatic monologue, is the voice of the poet, who has put on the costume and make-up either of some historical character, or of one out of fiction” (95). He mentions two poets speaking in the role of an historical personage: Browning – for example in “Lippo Lippi” – and “Mr. Ezra Pound, who adopted the term ‘persona’ to indicate the several historical characters through whom he spoke: and the term is just” (95). Shakespeare of course is the example of the poet dramatist who never speaks in his own voice. Eliot therefore comes to his negative vision of the dramatic monologue as regards the creation of a character: “I risk the generalization also, which may indeed be far too sweeping, that dramatic monologue cannot create a character. For character is created and made real only in action, a communication between imaginary people” (95).

This is why, for Eliot, the poet – who in the case of the dramatic monologue “is assuming a role” and “speaking through a mask” (96) – can only mimic the character and therefore is to be considered a sort of ventriloquist rather than a creator. From these observations, and Eliot’s use of terms like “role,” “mask,” “mimicry,” “ventriloquism” and so on, one would infer that the dramatic monologue can only lie precisely because of its lack of a real stage, where a real action can take place among real characters, who address a real audience. Yet Eliot himself, to underline the difference between Browning’s inability to bring a character to life and

Shakespeare's opposite capacity, suddenly states a very interesting principle: "if we are actually deceived, mimicry becomes impersonation" (96).

It is therefore a 'suspension of disbelief' which seems to be required, and "impersonation" is a word which curiously recalls the process of "embodiment," with the fundamental difference that the latter – as seen in the second chapter – indicates not only an intellectual and emotional identification with the character but an almost physical merging of two (or more) personalities which come to form a more inclusive and multiform subject. And while Eliot just speaks of voices,<sup>10</sup> what Michaels, Bhatt and Rich do is give also a physical consistency to their character of Paula. No "embodiment," as the word says it, can be carried out regardless of the 'body.' What happens is that the three poets, while being influenced by the formal developments brought by Eliot and Pound, seem to be closer to Browning's idea of the "subjective poet of modern classification," who is driven by a kind of platonic nostalgia for wholeness:

He, gifted like the objective poet with the fuller perception of nature and man, is impelled to embody the thing he perceives, not so much with reference to the many below as to the One above him, the supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth, – an ultimate view ever aspired to, if but partially attained, by the poet's own soul. Not what man sees, but what God sees – the *Ideas* of Plato, seeds of creation lying burningly on the Divine Hand – it is towards these that he struggles. Not with the combination of humanity in action, but with the primal elements of humanity, he has to do; and he digs where he stands, – preferring to seek them in his own soul as the nearest reflex of that absolute Mind, according to the intuitions of which he desires to perceive and speak. Such a poet does not deal habitually with the picturesque groupings and tempestuous tossings of the forest-trees, but with their roots and fibres naked to the chalk and stone. ("An Essay On Percy Bysshe Shelley" 65-66)

What is even more interesting is that, in order to depict the figure of the "subjective poet of modern classification," Browning too in fact describes him as a painter, as most of all he is a *seer* who paints (in words) with his inner eye:

He does not paint pictures and hang them on the walls, but rather carries them on the retina of his own eyes: we must look deep into his human eyes to see those pictures on them. He is rather a seer, accordingly, than a fashioner, and what he produces will be less a work than an effluence. That effluence cannot be easily considered in abstraction from his personality –

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<sup>10</sup> "for me the voices are most often found together – the first and the second, I mean, in non-dramatic poetry; and together with the third in dramatic poetry too" (*On Poetry and Poets* 99).

being indeed the very radiance and aroma of his personality, projected from it but not separated. (66)

What Browning makes clear is that “action” – which Eliot deemed a fundamental element to create the voice of a character which did not coincide with the poet’s – is not necessary for the poet who conceives his or her poetry as a form of *embodiment*. It is rather the character’s peculiar *gaze*, which, being the trace of its deepest personality, comes to be decisive for the reader who has to decide whether the character is credible or not as other than the poet. The dramatic monologue therefore can attain the same truth as the poetic drama by using various means of expression. First of all the poet can make the character’s consciousness shift from the particular to the general and *vice versa*, so as to represent it as simultaneously turned inward and outward; secondly, the description of context – both in the form of landscapes and of surrounding characters which are important for the speaker – can be combined with the absence of an auditor; and finally, the character’s bodily impressions may be included besides thoughts and feelings as an ineludible part of the character’s experience of life and artistic creation.

It is in particular in Michaels’ “Modersohn-Becker” that all these elements can be observed. The poem, in fact, instead of being an escape from the constraints of finitude, is the space where some sort of extraordinary experience can be welcomed within everyday life. This explains Michaels’ frequent use of the juxtaposition of concrete details and existential feelings, or the need to create a texture of metaphors by combining images taken from the natural surroundings with their inner, or pictorial projections. Paula Modersohn-Becker, who was a painter, can be alive in Michaels’ poem precisely because the latter does not try to interpret or explain in rational terms her emotional experiences or memories but we unequivocally believe her because she turns them into images.

What strikes us is her absorption in what she experiences, and we wish to take part in it because the subject of Paula’s reflections is not herself but her search for a way of representing and giving figurative shape to the feelings and doubts that crowd into her mind. Her striving for expression becomes very intense for the reader too because what comes into prominence is the relationship between the painter’s consciousness and the outside world, between herself and the other artists she came into contact with, or her family members. The peculiarity of the point of view in the poem, going back and forth from the outside world to Paula’s inner one, is also the mark of Michaels’ truthful projection because she does not force any theoretical approach but rather attempts what can be considered an “escape from the self”<sup>11</sup> in order to explore a different

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<sup>11</sup> See Malkoff 1977.

time, place and consciousness so as to take back to poetry the outcome of an extraordinary adventure in seeing. The limits and borders of the self are therefore overcome both in the character's experience inside the poem and in Michaels' experience of writing it. On the other hand, we readers, without acknowledging it, similarly find our way into the poem, as Langbaum says: "The particular perspective also marks the reverse route by which the reader understands the poem. If the speaker reveals himself by moving into conditions, it is through conditions, through seeing what the speaker sees within the limits of his perspective, that we apprehend his total life and therefore our own" (*Poetry of Experience* 205).

As for the "communication between imaginary people" Eliot refers to when he comes to define 'action,' it can equally take place in the dramatic monologue by using the form of the letter addressed to someone (as is the case in Rich's and some of Bhatt's poems) or the form of the journal (as in Michaels' case) where dialogues are reported or just imagined by the speaker. In both cases, the poets are exploiting the reflecting power of the dramatic monologue as if it were a mirror of the character, whose existence is made certain by its projected image. This strategy was quite typical of early Victorian women poets, as their female speakers very frequently confronted a mirror image in search for a truer image of their self.

This is in fact what happens for example in Antonia Webster's "A Castaway," where Eulalie, after dismissing the image of herself that she had earlier noted down in her diary,<sup>12</sup> turns to the mirror to question her reflection:

So long since:

And now it seems a jest to talk of me  
As if I could be one with her, of me  
Who am... me. (Webster 193, vv. 23-25)

And here is what her reflection sends back to her:

And what is that? My looking-glass  
Answers it passably; a woman sure,  
No fiend, no slimy thing out of the pools,

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<sup>12</sup> "Poor little diary, with its simple thoughts, / its good resolves, its "Studied French an hour," / "Read Modern History," "Trimmed up my grey hat," / "Darned stockings," "Tatted," "Practised my new song," / "Went to the daily service," "Took Bess soup," / "Went out to tea." Poor simple diary! / and did *I* write it? Was I this good girl, / This budding colourless young rose of home? / Did I so live content in such a life, / Seeing no larger scope, nor asking it, / Than this small constant round – old clothes to mend, / New clothes to make, then go and say my prayers, / Or carry soup, or take a little walk / And pick the ragged-robins in the hedge?" (Webster 192-93, vv. 1-14)

A woman with a ripe and smiling lip  
That has no venom in its touch I think,  
With a white brow on which there is no brand;  
A woman none dare call not beautiful,  
Not womanly in every woman's grace.

Aye, let me feed upon my beauty thus,  
Be glad in it like painters when they see  
At last the face they dreamed but could not find  
Look from their canvas on them, triumph in it,  
The dearest thing I have. Why, 'tis my all,  
Let me make much of it: is it not this,  
This beauty, my own curse at once and tool  
To snare man's souls, (I know what the good say  
Of beauty in such creatures) is it not this  
That makes me feel myself a woman still,  
With still some little pride, some little – (193-94, vv. 34-41)

In Michaels' "Modersohn-Becker," Paula does not seem to dismiss her diary but rather to speak as if she were writing it perhaps mentally, or just visually, by making use of words like images. What comes out is not so much a mirror image but a way of looking outside and inside at the same time. Something similar happens in Bhatt's poems where Paula questions her images as they are returned to her by her self-portraits, while Rich includes the silent and absent Clara as the repository and sharer of Paula's deepest wishes.

The dramatic monologue is therefore used by the three poets like a *looking glass* in the literal sense of the expression, that is to say *to look* and *be looked at*, thus allowing them the double sight which derives from combining memory and contemplation, past and present, here and elsewhere. In order to make their character alive in their dramatic monologues, Michaels, Bhatt and Rich must also give voice to the painter's wish to escape from the temporal and spatial dimensions so as to enter the timeless nature of her art body and soul. Paula Modersohn-Becker is therefore revived by the three poets who, far from making her the object of their poems, reopen her life in order to draw from it the necessary material to create a projection of her: Paula, a character which includes part of Becker's biographical truth as well as some unexplored potentialities of her short life.

In different ways, Michaels, Bhatt and Rich come to give voice to a very strong subject, which is necessarily deprived of centrality and fragmented, otherwise it could not yield to the

selflessness which is the ineludible condition for any artistic creation. It is true that the dramatic monologue as it is used by the three poets is less ‘dramatic’ and more ‘biographical,’ as Michaels in “Unseen Formations” defines her poems where she tries to “embody an age.” That means that action is less relevant and, as there are no moments of reciprocity between speaker and auditor, the narrative element becomes most significant. Speakers, in fact, especially when they wish to trace lines of connections between historical moments, as Byron observes, “reveal the desire to establish identity through the telling of their stories” (91). The fact that Michaels’, Bhatt’s and Rich’s poems move not only between past and present but also between biographical truth and invention makes the narrative element strictly necessary.

Furthermore, it is that same element which also seems to lead – especially in Michaels’ case – to a retrieval of the “long poem,” whose presumed impossibility in contemporary American poetry is discussed by Dana Gioia in his essay “The Dilemma of the Long Poem.” If it is true that the “vast breath of the epic”<sup>13</sup> is rarely pursued by contemporary poets, one cannot say that the concentration of the short lyric, which seems to be dominating, encompasses all the possibilities that a poet may wish to exploit. This triad of poets’ dramatic monologues show the persisting need to tell stories, and therefore the inevitability of the narrative element. Yet it cannot be denied that Michaels, Bhatt and Rich – like most contemporary poets – avoid using regular versification. What Gioia fails to observe, however, is that it is possible that other “technical means” – as he calls them – may be needed nowadays to give shape to poets’ ideas. As regards the poems analysed in this research, at least two tendencies can be noticed: the first is that a combination of visual images may be used instead of regular versification so as to give the poem a fragmented shape which faithfully reflects the workings of memory; the second is that if Michaels’, Bhatt’s and Rich’s dramatic monologues cannot actually be considered “long poems,” they can certainly be included among “middle length” poems, as Gioia calls them,<sup>14</sup> precisely for the fact that the story they are meant to tell is just evoked in the poems, and awaits to be fully reconstructed by the reader’s imagination.

This is also why not only is there more than one novel behind Michaels’, Bhatt’s and Rich’s dramatic monologues, but their embodiment of various versions of Paula almost calls forth another inclusive novel. As for other “characters of love,” the function of Paula’s existence in the poems consists in hinting at the whole of Becker’s (and therefore the reader’s) self. In this

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<sup>13</sup> *Can Poetry Matter? Essays on Poetry and American Culture* 27.

<sup>14</sup> “[American literature] also needs to foster poems of ‘middle length,’ extended pieces not long enough to fill up an entire volume. Such poems have played an important role in English from Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* to Browning’s major dramatic monologues, but today they are shunned by editors, publishers, and critics alike [...]. Poems of middle length allow a poet to explore a particular theme without overextending it, and they do not require the Herculean effort necessary to complete an epic” (29-30).



sense the dramatic monologue does not feign or, if it does, it is to pursue its own truth: that wholeness is attainable only through the projection of different possibilities. This is why the dramatic monologue – as it is used by Michaels, Bhatt and Rich – instead of moving towards the poets' 'I,' rather goes back to its vocation of serving as a possible healing, a resurrection in the skin of another.

## EPILOGUE

### *The Dream of Translatability: Translation as a Clear Glass*

*“All the others translate: the painter sketches  
A visible world to love or reject;  
Rummaging into his living, the poet fetches  
The images out that hurt and connect.*

*From Life to Art by painstaking adaptation,  
Relying on us to cover the rift;  
Only your notes are pure contraption,  
Only your song is an absolute gift.”*

*W. H. Auden, from “The Composer”*

Even though this section dedicated to the translation of the dramatic monologues by Michaels, Bhatt and Rich comes last, it must be said that – as regards Michaels’ poem at least – translation was in fact the starting point of this research.

Soon after reading *Fugitive Pieces* in the beautiful Italian version by Roberto Serra in 1998, I was eager to read Michaels’ poetry too, as the poetic style of the novel made me feel almost sure that she must have written some. It is easy for me to recall the intense emotion that “Modersohn-Becker” in particular aroused in me, as every time I have reread that poem since then, it never failed to strike me with the same, mysterious intensity for reasons which, conversely, are not at all easy to detect. This is usually what prompts me to translate a poem: emotion combined with elusiveness, which in my eyes is the guarantee of its inexhaustible meaning. As I told Michaels when I met her in Castel Goffredo in 2001, if I suddenly decided to translate her “Modersohn-Becker” for my own pleasure, it was because I yearned to “live inside it for a while.” She was very impressed and even amused by my affirmation. After so many years and especially after reading Langbaum’s *The Poetry of Experience*, I now think that what I meant was that Paula’s experience in Michaels’ poem is so deep and so completely absorbing that one feels that reading is not enough. This research in fact has confirmed my first impression that a whole life is always seeping in the poem, exactly in the same way as strong gushes of light seem to perpetually illuminate Paula Modersohn-Becker’s still lifes. Translation allows one to broaden the experience of reading, as the world created by the poem must be concretely reconstructed with words into another language. When I translate I am more aware than when I

read that every detail is a fundamental fragment of the writer's vision, and that I have to attain the same vision if I want to *see* and recreate that poem in my own language.

As the recent collection of essays *The Translator as Writer*, edited by Susan Bassnett and Peter Bush, shows, the translators' personal recollections of their encounters and exchanges with the authors of the works they translated can help in bringing the readers' attention to some deep aspects of translation which are not normally taken into consideration by academic studies. One of these is certainly the connection between writing and translating, and the possibility – which Bassnett foreshadows in her book *Comparative Literature* – that we soon come to abolish “the dichotomy between original and translation, between source and copy, and hence [...] the view that relegates translation to a secondary position” (151). If these reflections, which Bassnett derives from Derrida's thought, can be stimulating and even challenging in abstract terms, it is rather the practice of translating which still imposes several limits on an absolute identification of the translator *as* writer. Yet it must be said that the two roles in many cases are closely connected. What is more interesting to underline here is perhaps the “regenerative force” of translating, which Bassnett comes to mention when she discusses the case of translators being also writers, but which intervenes anyway when the translator conceives his or her profession as a creative, and not an imitative, one. In his essay “The Defence of Poetry,” Percy Bysshe Shelley saw the impossibility for the translator to enter the generative process of the poem as “the vanity of translation”:

it were as wise to cast a violet into a crucible that you might discover the formal principle of its colour and odour, as seek to transfuse from one language into another the creations of a poet. The plant must spring again from its seed, or it will bear no flower – and this is the burthen of the curse of Babel. (*The Four Ages of Poetry* 29)

Shelley was so absorbed in demonstrating the supremacy of poetry over any other human activity as regards the capacity to “enlarge the circumference of the imagination,” that he could not conceive anyone apart from the poet to be in possession of the gift of projecting himself into other beings: “A man, to be greatly good, must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own” (33).

This research shows instead how this capacity of projection – without which no embodiment can take place – is precisely what allowed Paula Modersohn-Becker and Rilke not only to create great masterpieces in the respective arts, but also to establish a very productive connection between painting and poetry. In his poem “The Composer” quoted above, Auden seems to offer

an overall and almost concrete (ironical) description of the journey this research has meant to trace, as if all the various chapters were as many progressions towards a hypothetical music which however is the missing link of the chain here.

If chapter one was meant to reconstruct Becker's biography, especially in relation to the development of her art and her close link with Rilke and his poetry, chapter two is the exploration of the dramatic monologues that three poets have written after "rummaging" in Becker's life. Chapter three tries to clarify how we as readers are called to "cover the rift" between Art and Life. Finally, translation – by reopening the three dramatic monologues by Michaels, Bhatt and Rich – strives to spark off a further 'resuscitation' of Paula Modersohn-Becker.

### *Translation as Afterlife*

*"My job was to bring a dead man to life,  
to present a living figure. [...] mask of erudition  
is precisely what I have not assumed;  
it is precisely what I have thrown on the dust heap."*

*Ezra Pound, Letter to A. R. Orage, April 1916<sup>1</sup>*

This extract is taken from a letter to A. R. Orage where Ezra Pound is responding to attacks by scholars on the 'inaccuracy' of his *Homage to Sextus Propertius* as a translation. It is interesting to note that Pound defends his work through a very deliberate metaphor: that of bringing a dead man to life. As Bassnett observes, Pound's view of the task of the translator connects with that of Walter Benjamin, who, in his famous introduction to the German translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux Parisiens* (1923) also uses the metaphor of the translation as afterlife: "a translation comes later than the original, and since the important works of world literature never find their chosen translation at the time of their origin, their translation marks their stage of continued life" (qtd. in *Comparative Literature* 151).

If in my view the difference between the original and the translation can never be completely abolished, it is because I am perfectly aware that my Italian version of the poems which follow not only reflects the state of the Italian language at this particular point, but also my personal tastes as regards poetic language. Furthermore, in the specific case of these dramatic monologues giving voice to Paula Modersohn-Becker, I became aware how scholarship was needed to penetrate their innermost poetical essence. In fact, for the translator who wishes to

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<sup>1</sup> Qtd. in *Comparative Literature* 150-1.

enter, relive and revive the facts and emotions contained in these poems for the Italian reader, knowledge is necessary not only of Becker's life and art, but also of the references which are continually made by the three poets to other artists' works. One example out of many can give an idea of the misunderstandings and mistakes that otherwise a translation can contribute to perpetrate. While translating Rich's poem, I made a quick search on line to see if there were other Italian versions of that poem. I found some fragments of one, presumably by Luciana Spanu who signs the introduction to the poem. At a certain point, when Paula starts describing what she wishes to explore with her painting, the Italian version says "Ovunque intorno sto / cercando / nuove forme, vecchie forme in nuovi luoghi / i segni di *una fonte antica*, diciamo tra le foglie"<sup>2</sup> (my emphasis). "Fonte antica" – which translates "an antique mouth" – is completely wrong, as it is a reference to a letter by Becker where she describes the forms of antique heads that she has seen, and is therefore to be taken literally. The image, however, would not be so clear without having read Becker's letters.

Therefore, if one conceives translation too as a form of embodiment,<sup>3</sup> the translator too, contrary to what many translation scholars have recently theorized, should be as selfless as possible so as to be able to produce a translation of the poems as if they were seen through a perfectly clear glass. It is Anthea Bell, a professional translator from German and French into English, who uses this very simple but meaningful image to define her idea of the translator's work as the spinning of an illusion:

The illusion is that the reader is reading not a translation but the real thing. Of course this is an impossible ideal to achieve – I have two large panes of glass at the bottom of the window facing the desk where I work; one has little distorting flaws in it, perhaps the original late Victorian pane, the other, probably a modern replacement, allows an undistorted view of the garden beyond. In presenting a foreign text in English I would wish it to pass the language barrier as if seen through that perfectly clear, transparent pane of glass, but I'm well aware that a translation is more likely to resemble the pane with the slight distortions. Translators may try to keep themselves out of the end product entirely, but something will inevitably slip in. (*Translator as Writer* 59)

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<sup>2</sup> <<http://www.url.it/oltreluna/attivita%20del%20passato/articoli%20vari%20del%20passato/paula%20e%20clara.htm>>

<sup>3</sup> Madame de Gournay, as early as 1623, very interestingly suggested that to translate was "to engender a work anew. Engender, I say, because [the ancient writers] have to be decomposed by profound and penetrating reflection, in order to be reconstituted by a similar process; just as meat must be decomposed in our stomachs in order to form our bodies" (qtd. in *Comparative Literature* 147).

Translating these poems was like embodying Paula Modersohn-Becker in Italian. Even though – as I said – I consider translation as a creative process which is anyway derivative from the original poems, in this case it was nourished also by many other books and real-life experiences, like meeting Michaels and Bhatt in person and talking with them about their poems, or looking at Paula Modersohn-Becker's paintings in Bremen and visiting her places. My versions, however, are meant to sound original in themselves, as if they were taking place not only in the language but also in the present time of the reader. It is interesting to notice that, with respect to the English language of the poems, Italian is not simply a second language but a third, as – besides the fact that Becker (and Rilke) originally wrote in German – I know for sure that Bhatt read their letters in German while Rich made a two-handed translation of Rilke's *Requiem* into English with Lilly Engler.

May this third language of translation bring not so much peace to Paula Modersohn-Becker, as a lively and uninterrupted afterlife, full of further, unexplored chances yet to come.

Anne Michaels

“Modersohn-Becker”

(da *Miner's Pond*, McClelland & Stewart, 1991)

*“Ci sono vari di gradi di potere nel mondo, ma in nessun caso la differenza di grado è così ampia come fra la volontà umana e il desiderio umano, proprio come l’acqua bolle a una temperatura e il ferro fonde a un’altra”.*

- Fëdor Dostoevskij

I

Lasciarlo non mi ha liberata.

Tutto il giorno, a Worpswede, la pioggia si allunga a terra,  
l’aria come venature di legno; nodi di nuvole.

La corteccia raggrinzita sugli alberi gracili:  
dita troppo a lungo nell’acqua.

Alla fine del sentiero, il mio maglione è imperlato  
di nebbia, un’armatura d’argento.

Dove la strada s’incunea nella foresta,  
cavalli da soma barcollano come sollevatori di pesi.

La neve è sporca di primavera, il fango chiazza  
i piedi degli alberi, sembrano pozze d’ombra.

Sono giorni in cui non viene mai giorno;  
di notte la stessa tenebra ricade dov’era.

Gli sentivo l’odore di pipa fra i capelli.

Prima di andarmene,  
in quella strana quiete di casa invernale,  
le finestre trasalirono ammutolite dal ghiaccio –  
noi seduti vicini sulle scale.

Lui col capo appoggiato alla ringhiera.

Tutti dissero che ero egoista.

La paura è egoista.

Da Parigi scrissi il suo nome su un anno di buste

finché finalmente ne distinsi  
la forma: Otto – due corpi, due bocche.  
La fogna inondata di luci  
e lungo la strada vuota sentii la nostra solitudine  
nella gola di un cane.

Ogni via per entrare in me stessa  
si riempie di sangue.

La gioia vicina allo sgomento; colore,  
il battito caldo che dolora nelle vene.

In questa luce i suoi occhi sono rappresi d'olio.  
Lo studio odora del fumo di legna.  
Gli uccelli pongono le solite domande.

Ho le mani sporche del suo volto.

2

Nel 1900, i quadri di Cézanne erano accatastati contro un muro  
nello scantinato di Vollard. Non ci credevo,  
quei quadrati segreti di colore, là che fermentavano al buio,  
non riconosciuti.

Dopo di che Parigi non fu più la stessa.  
E guardando Rodin che plasmava il pensiero,  
come un cieco apprende i lineamenti di un volto,  
vidi cosa significa fondersi nel lavoro.

Rodin sentì che Clara la scultrice poteva divenire,  
e asportò l'eccesso.

La mia amica venne alla luce fra le sue mani.  
Guardandolo raccogliere i capelli da un cranio di pietra  
come acqua corrente,  
aprendo il viso  
all'amore –  
seni come foglie grondanti d'acqua,  
gambe rigide come radici –



a un tratto capii che anche dipingere  
non ti lascia mai scampo  
dalla consapevolezza della mano umana:  
la sorgente di luce  
è il corpo del pittore.

Pensai che trovare il mio centro acceso  
mi avrebbe insegnato il colore.  
Clara girava attorno alla sua creta mentre io fissavo le tele così a lungo  
da essere trascinata sotto.  
Anche lo spirito ha dei limiti,  
l'umiltà sorge come silenzio,  
il silenzio della luce, l'oro che sorge dai campi.

•

Lasciammo Parigi, il Pont des Arts  
ancora fiancheggiato di violette.  
A Worpswede, le colline bruciavano sotto il vetro di settembre.  
Io e Clara eravamo vestite di bianco per assorbire l'ultima luce,  
come il pane l'ultimo cucchiaino di minestra.

La prima volta che vedemmo Rilke stava spingendo  
dei mobili fuori da una porta. Sottotitolai la scena:  
Lotta, con un tavolo;  
appresi in seguito com'era vera.

Vicino al fuoco, ad ascoltare un concerto da camera,  
quel genere di musica in cui la perdita si infila i guanti.  
Gli occhi di Rilke puntati su di noi.  
Quella notte disse cose come "lasciatemi nella tempesta!"  
e "datemi l'autunno!".  
Tutti sentivano la sua presenza.

Mi seguì fuori;  
ci bagnammo il viso nell'aria fredda.

•

Quello che mancava in me, Rilke lo sapeva.

Notti insieme, tè a mezzanotte  
nel mio studio, dove, disse,  
“tutto diventa misterioso”.

Parlò di Tolstoj, e di come dobbiamo meritarc  
la morte. Da Rilke si impara l'amore  
solo guardandolo tenere in mano una tazza o sbucciare un'arancia.

Tetti neri stillavano da un velo di neve,  
parole su una pagina. Alla finestra, noi con le gambe  
allungate una contro l'altra, erba presa nella corrente.

Ma il suo è un amore che si approfondisce  
solo con la perdita. Fiuta ciò che brucia  
più di quel che sboccia.  
Rilke, non fare lo “scrittore”, resta  
un uomo che scrive!  
“E tu cosa ne sai, Paula?”.

Tra noi era così. Per lui, io ero Paula.  
Ma lui restò sempre “Rilke”.

•

Fuori a pattinare sul laghetto di Natale;  
lampade come gufi fra gli alberi.  
Schiacciai ventagli di abete rosso e affondai il viso nelle mani  
come in un libro. Rilke intanto leggeva in casa,  
la sua bella testa china in cima al corpo  
come un gambo “spezzato” dalla linea d'acqua in un vaso.

Sposò Clara e presto lei si mosse in orizzontale,  
una polena su una nave, incinta della loro figlia.

La barriera invisibile di lui in mezzo a loro;  
uccelli che sbattono contro il vetro.

•

Una volta sposata, la mia estetica divenne fisica,  
una conoscenza che non riuscivo a dipingere:  
un mucchio di farfaro,  
con le punte gialle che si arricciano sul tavolo;  
la camera da letto bianca di betulle, i visi freddi,  
il tepore di noi sotto i vestiti – a volte  
cioccolata, una coperta – finché il buio  
rotolava sopra la luce, lasciando solo  
i piccoli intervalli delle stelle.

La bellezza accidentale  
delle cose portate in casa da fuori,  
foglie e resede schiacciate raccolte nei maglioni:  
la vita impreveduta che torceva i nostri giorni.  
Seguire le sue tracce: il dondolio ininterrotto della sedia, pipa accesa,  
la mela che cambiava colore sul piatto.

Solo l'amore vede ciò che è familiare per la prima volta.

La luce mutare il viso di Otto, mutare  
lui.

L'inverno tingere i muri d'azzurro.  
Immaginare lui nudo, anche mentre era lì in piedi,  
nudo.

•

Aperta dalle colline;  
il giallo metallico estenuante delle foglie di betulla  
in mezzo ai denti;  
il gelo verde della foresta sulle spalle.  
Il ghiaccio mi riempiva le vene,

il laghetto del colore dei fantasmi annegati, frastagliato come un'ombra.  
Gli alberi premevano per spuntarmi dalla gola,  
le foglie mi affollavano gli occhi e  
guardai. Colma di riconoscenza, zeppa di forme e colori.  
Tenni mio marito dentro di me fino a sentire il suo volto nel mio,  
finché la mia pelle fu cieca di troppa attenzione –  
e ancora non sapevo nulla, ancora  
la mia mano era stupida.  
I miei occhi divennero neri, io con il pennello in mano,  
strozzata sul filo di una canzone.

•

Ricominciasti da capo; da dove tutto ha inizio:  
il corpo. A lezione di disegno dal vero,  
per addestrare la mia mano a vedere.

A Parigi da sola,  
mentre la mia famiglia aspettava che mi arrendessi  
così avrei potuto tornare a essere “felice”.

Ogni giorno, il fallimento mi ribolliva in gola  
e non accennava a spostarsi.

•

L'ossessione è il sacrificio della luce  
alla ricchezza dell'immersione.  
Ma l'amore è separazione,  
la membrana dell'arancia che si divide,  
la superficie d'argento  
che muta il vetro in uno specchio.

C'è un fallimento in ogni scelta.

L'arte emerge dal silenzio;  
silenzio, dal posto di ciascuno nel mondo.

•

Non che il colore catturi la luce,  
è la luce che si libera dal colore.

Immaginai l'autunno a Worpswede, il filo rosso  
aggrovigliato dei cespugli vuoti, un cielo di ceramica  
crepato dai rami. Sprofondai dentro di me,  
inspirando come se le mie ossa fossero cedro.

Non mi sono mai sentita così vicina all'amore  
come in quella città, completamente sola.

Le stelle sono cuspidi guizzanti di serpenti;  
il chiarore stellare, la fragile pelle che si lasciano dietro.

I miei sogni desideravano Otto, foresta, casa.  
Mi svegliai e lo spazio era vuoto, a parte i quadri:  
la mia figliastra che suona il flauto,  
vocali sorde che scivolano fra gli alberi,  
scorrendo dietro di lei;  
i capelli neri di mia sorella legati stretti,  
morbidi come un visone, la sua treccia una coda intrisa d'acqua lungo la schiena.

Poi mi sentii impazzire – le mie due vite, simultaneamente.

Due bianchi: la neve sulle betulle.

•

Il compimento è senza parole,  
il silenzio della pelle che prende il sopravvento.

Ma quando non stai parlando con la pelle,  
devi amare col linguaggio.

Rilke direbbe che è ancora più intimo –

l'istante in cui le parole diventano immagine,  
balzando dalla sua gola al mio occhio interno.

•

Il primo giorno di primavera, con Otto in giardino.

Mia madre attraversò l'erba, a braccia aperte,  
come una bambina che aspetta di essere sollevata.  
In viaggio verso di me dalle cinque di mattina.

Portammo il tavolo fuori in veranda,  
apparecchiammo con i piatti azzurri.  
Il mio vestito tondo come la tovaglia che fluttuava.

3

Rami intinti, che gocciolano.  
La pioggia entra dappertutto, la sua ombra animata  
riempie ogni superficie.  
I sogni che di solito evaporano alla luce  
restano bagnati di buio.

Essere alla ricerca di qualcosa che non riesco a trovare  
mi rende stranamente soddisfatta.  
Mi riempie di tempo.

Da sempre prego ringraziando  
per la fame: invisibile, che odora di terra,  
pesante come il bestiame in un campo che s'oscura,  
i corpi animali che accostano il muso al terreno,  
le collane di campanacci.

•

Ogni quadro è un modo di dire addio.

## MODERSOHN - BECKER

La pittrice tedesca Paula Becker (1876-1907) considerò entrambe le incombenze – i doveri familiari e la sua arte – con pari sollecitudine; la sua breve vita fu segnata da un terribile dissidio fra le due. Lasciò la colonia di artisti di Worpswede, dove viveva con il marito, il pittore Otto Modersohn, per andare a Parigi. Tornò al suo matrimonio e più tardi quello stesso anno, all'età di trentun anni, morì improvvisamente, poco dopo aver dato alla luce la loro unica figlia.

Sujata Bhatt

(da *A Colour for Solitude*, Carcanet, 2002)

“Autoritratto con i capelli rossi ramati, 1897/98”

Hai il fuoco nei capelli –

però l’hai trovata:

la donna più vecchia

che si nasconde nel tuo giovane volto –

il tuo volto di ventiduenne.

Hai la pelle scolorita –

la tua pelle

è un sottile guscio d’uovo – la luce filtra –

la pallida luce cade sulle screpolature –

fragile, gialla –

la tua pelle è pergamena

la tua pelle è carta di riso –

la luce filtra – il ghiaccio aderisce ai vetri –

ombre di vene – così azzurre – ombre

di ossa quasi sporgenti –

e l’attaccatura dei capelli color malva s’incrina,

filamenti di capillari rotti –

Qualcosa ti ha fatto

voltare e levare uno sguardo

tagliente – un rapace –

Sei così smunta

e la vecchia

che vive nel tuo giovane volto

diventa più forte –

un rapace – sei

non chiedi affatto scusa

per essere affamata, così bisognosa –



“Autoritratto con scalfitture, 1903”

Le scalfitture sono intenzionali,  
deliberate. Questo è il tuo nuovo metodo:  
strato su strato di colore –  
un fiume melmoso –  
e poi entri  
con un coltello affilato  
per scavare fuori la luce.  
Per trovare la luce sotto il limo, l’acqua salmastra –  
per trovare i tuoi primi colori pallidi  
inghiottiti dal colore melmoso.

Qui c’è la tua luce graffiata via – estratta  
da un punto profondo dentro la tela.

Pennellate corte e veloci,  
così brusche – che lasciano la superficie  
sconvolta eppure intatta.

Come l’ala sinistra di una ghiandaia azzurra  
trovata nell’erba – ripiegata come se  
fosse un ventaglio di piume, un mazzetto vorticante –  
Le piume troppo fresche, troppo azzurre  
per essere cadute – Le piume  
troppo numerose per essere state scartate  
da un solo uccello – E poi la curva  
dell’ala sta nel palmo  
della mano di una donna:  
le ossa non rotte  
le piume non sciupate –  
non sparse, non separate  
ma tenute insieme come un’ala – intatta –  
Eppure c’è  
luce graffiata – L’azzurro  
grattato via dalla ghiandaia – L’ala  
staccata di netto – Era un falco

o un gatto? Azzurro di perdita profonda,  
violenza penetrata nelle piume –  
colori di occhi allarmati –  
Le cicatrici ci sono  
anche se non si vedono –  
quei segni impressi nella terra.

Questo è il volto di una quattordicenne.  
Perché l'hai confuso con il tuo?  
Tu hai ventisette anni –  
Perché? Perché è così scuro?  
Anche la tua collana è melmosa,  
cerca di spuntare  
sopra il colletto alto  
della tua camicia bianca.

Perché hai  
quest'aria da quattordicenne  
dopo due anni di matrimonio?  
Perché le scalfitture, la luce graffiata?

Qual è il movimento  
dietro questi segni?

Se solo avesse saputo  
come toccarti –  
Se solo Otto avesse –  
Se solo Rilke avesse –  
Se solo tu avessi sussurrato:  
“Rainer!”  
Se solo gli avessi mostrato –  
Se solo avessi mostrato  
a Otto –

C'era un uomo  
che prendeva il pesce  
a mani nude  
se voleva.

Prendeva uccelli, uccelli canterini –  
Uccelli canterini schiacciati nei pugni  
se voleva –  
Raccontavano questa storia a Parigi.  
Era un marinaio di Goa.  
Quello era il movimento  
dietro le scalfitture, la luce graffiata –  
Quello era il *tuo* movimento – il tuo modo di entrare  
nella tela con un coltello –  
sfigurandoti fino ad assumere  
il volto di una quattordicenne –

“Lei indossa il suo vestito verde, 1905”

Lei indossa il suo vestito verde, è  
lo sfondo e il primo piano –

Un vestito verde del colore  
dei gambi degli iris,  
quelli sullo sfondo –

Un vestito verde  
del colore dei gambi degli iris contro l’erba –

Verde su verde su verde –

Lei è il primo piano  
e lo sfondo –

Il suo volto assorto perché  
sta ascoltando un uccello in distanza –  
un solo uccello – insistente –  
che chiama, continua a chiamare –  
Il suo canto squarcio, fenditura –  
che si leva e cade  
e ancora si leva nella quiete.  
Il suo canto si aggrappa alle foglie –  
Una melodia  
che deve aver commosso Bach –

Il suo volto assorto perché gli iris  
si sono spalancati di colpo nel caldo:  
Petali azzurri ricurvi  
come tante piccole lingue azzurre  
che assaggiano l’aria –

Quei cuori gialli non possono più nascondersi.

Anche le pietre nere, le pietre nere

ovali della sua collana

ti vedono –

È giugno: Pieno di ombre umide,  
nuvole purpuree – pioverà  
nel giro di un'ora. Gli iris oscilleranno  
nel vento – qualche gambo verrà  
piegato dalla pioggia – spezzato –  
e il suo vestito verde si infradicherà

insieme all'erba

dove i gambi giaceranno

spezzati –

Ma lei si allontanerà

ridendo – si allontanerà lentamente

indugiando nell'umidità verde –

“Autoritratto risoluto, 1905”

Se la verità è impossibile  
allora sei brava  
a dire bugie?

Donna di Pompei, dell’antica Pompei,  
ti sei resa così  
regale, quasi matronale  
con tre figli a casa.

Ma il volto del mosaico è il tuo –  
Tuo è il volto nell’affresco.

Oro liquido  
addensato attorno alla tua gola –

E l’oro è dappertutto:  
tremolante nei tuoi occhi  
cosparso sui tuoi capelli –

Risoluta  
contro il Vesuvio –

Pompei ti balena negli occhi  
come se stessi per dire,  
“Ti sfido –”

“Autoritratto nel mio quinto anniversario di matrimonio, 25-5-06”

Diventerò ambra.

Dafne voleva  
diventare un albero.

Penso  
che sia stata lei a scegliere l'alloro dolce,  
lei che scelse le foglie sempreverdi.

Ma devo andare  
più a fondo, nell'ambra.

Già questa luce,  
questo mattino di sole di maggio  
a Parigi  
ha mutato l'ambra dei miei capelli  
nella varietà color ruggine –  
più rossa che dorata.

I miei occhi: ambra brunastra  
più scintillante della collana  
che indosso oggi – grandi grani  
ovali d'ambra – così pesanti.

È troppo caldo, troppo presto,  
ma non importa. Sono mezza nuda. È più facile  
dipingere quello che voglio dipingere  
in questo modo spoglio.

Come sarei  
se fossi incinta?  
Così? I miei capezzoli, ancora pallidissimi  
diventerebbero ambra.

E il mio sangue?





Sì, il corpo, questo corpo di donna  
che è mio –

Devo andare più a fondo  
nell'ambra.

Dovrei avere un figlio?

E se lo avessi?

Davvero il mio corpo saprebbe  
insegnare qualcosa di nuovo alla mia anima?

“Autoritratto con cappello e velo, 1906”

Con questo cappello e questo velo,  
con questo sottile velo giallo,  
sono Euridice  
all’inferno –

Euridice in una stanza  
infernale dove le tende sono rosse  
come i papaveri al sole –  
rosse come i semi maturi  
che una volta Persefone ha addentato.

E adesso si è assunta lei l’incarico –  
Ha fatto entrare di nascosto  
il profumo dei fiori d’arancio,  
introdotto saette di luce verde mare –  
e l’aria marina  
con ombre turchesi –

A volte mi sento come se  
fossi sottacqua.

Ho scelto di venire qui.

Ma sono condannata.  
Condannata a restare aggrappata  
a queste rose che ho in mano, tinte  
di uno strano colore – lavanda rosaceo –

Lavanda rosaceo che stona contro  
le tende rosse, i pannelli rossi  
del cappello intorno alle orecchie –

Lavanda rosaceo: le ultime due rose  
che Orfeo ha lasciato  
per me – Se solo mi avesse

dato fiori bianchi

o anche gialli –

allora non mi sentirei

così vistosa,

così fuori posto –

“Autoritratto, frontale, con un fiore nella mano destra, 1906/7”

Questo è il mio volto che mi saluta  
in un sogno – fuori fuoco – è  
un volto visto attraverso la nebbia, la foschia –  
un volto visto attraverso la pioggia, attraverso  
un vetro striato di pioggia – Com’è sbavato  
e sfuocato quasi per sbaglio,  
come se non riuscissi a trovare i tratti  
del mio stesso volto.

Questo è il volto che Otto deve vedere  
oggi – fuori fuoco – sul punto di svanire –  
perché io l’ho lasciato per sempre.  
Sono in piedi davanti a fiori color prugna:  
Enormi cespugli – quei rododendri –  
E nella mano destra ho  
un fiorellino bianco per Otto.  
“Lasciami andare.” gli ho scritto –  
“Lasciami libera.” E lui prenderà  
il fiore bianco con il gambo biancastro –  
quasi cinereo così come l’ho dipinto.  
Lo chiamerà la sua rosellina bianca  
senza sapere che è un’erbaccia  
simile al gelsomino –  
Lo chiamerà il suo piccolo bucaneeve di petali  
senza sapere che i petali sono selvatici –  
E il bianco gli ricorderà il chiaro di luna.

E anche adesso, mentre  
torno da lui, incerta –  
per un necessario compromesso –  
E anche adesso  
mi guarderà e mi dirà  
“Finalmente –  
finalmente sei tornata”.

Ma non noterà mai  
che il mio volto è cambiato,  
che il mio volto è diventato  
irraggiungibile –  
per sempre fuori fuoco  
per lui –

“Autoritratto con due fiori nella mano sinistra, *Paula Becker a Clara Westhoff*, 1907”

Adesso che sono davvero gravida  
di un figlio – non ho la forza  
di dipingermi nuda davanti a uno specchio.

Se potessi, andrei  
a Parigi adesso –

Clara, mi scrivi da Berlino,  
da Oberneuland –  
ma parli delle lettere di Rilke,  
le parole di Rilke  
piene di luce di Cézanne –

la grande mostra di Cézanne a Parigi –  
dove dovrei essere con *te* –  
presto sarà finita.  
E questa volta non ce la farò a vederla.

Dai miei occhi, dalle mie palpebre gonfie,  
puoi vedere quanto io sia pesante,  
quanto letargica –

Così adesso aspetto  
che tu mi porti le lettere di Rilke,  
quelle che mi hai promesso –  
ho bisogno delle parole di Rilke  
per portare Cézanne nella mia stanza  
a Worpswede –

Quanto a me,  
ti regalo i colori del vasellame.

Sono vestita di un azzurro tranquillo:  
azzurro di un bricco da latte di ceramica –

Perfino il cielo oggi sembra lattiginoso.

Due fiori perché

ho un secondo cuore

che batte dentro di me.

La mano sinistra perché deve essere quella.

Desidero questo figlio.

Questi fiori sono per te, Clara –

per te, Cézanne –

“Era per gli iris azzurri? *Kunsthalle Bremen*, 1985”

Il fatto che tornassi ossessivamente davanti al tuo autoritratto con gli iris azzurri ha turbato i guardiani.

Il fatto che mi allontanassi dal tuo autoritratto con gli iris azzurri ha turbato i guardiani.

Erano gli iris azzurri fluttuanti attorno al tuo volto, erano i tuoi occhi castani illuminati da qualcosa negli iris azzurri?

Come potevi sapere, come potevi sentire tutto questo che so e sento degli iris azzurri?

Ero al piano di sopra con altri quadri, altri pittori, ma incapace di concentrarmi su di essi perché sentivo già il tono di voce che avrebbero richiesto i tuoi occhi castani.

Così sono corsa di nuovo giù per stare con te.

Lo sguardo che è passato fra di noi deve essere durato a lungo perché sentivo l'odore della luce che dagli iris ti scendeva sul volto.

Lo sguardo che è passato fra di noi era così pieno di comprensione che ho immaginato di vivere con te e discutere con te se fosse il caso di mettere l'aglio nella minestra.

Fissavo gli iris azzurri ma in gola sentivo l'amaro fresco e pungente del crescione.

Quando finalmente ti ho lasciato, ho notato che tre guardiani mi stavano seguendo.

Ora che sono arrivata a casa ero furiosa con loro perché avevano assistito a tutto questo.



Adrienne Rich

“Paula Becker a Clara Westhoff”

(da *The Dream of the Common Language*, Norton & Company, 1978)

Paula Becker 1876-1907

Clara Westhoff 1878-1954

diventarono amiche a Worpswede, una colonia di artisti vicino a Brema, in Germania, nell'estate del 1899. Nel gennaio del 1900 passarono circa sei mesi insieme a Parigi, dove Paula dipingeva e Clara studiava scultura con Rodin. In agosto tornarono a Worpswede, e trascorsero l'inverno insieme a Berlino. Nel 1901 Clara sposò il poeta Rainer Maria Rilke; più tardi quello stesso anno, Paula sposò il pittore Otto Modersohn. Mori di emorragia dopo il parto, mormorando, *Che peccato!*

L'autunno è come rallentato,  
l'estate qui resiste ancora, anche la luce  
sembra durare più del dovuto  
o forse sono io che la sto usando fino all'ultimo filo.  
La luna rotola nell'aria. Non volevo questo figlio.  
Sei la sola a cui l'ho detto.  
Forse vorrò un figlio, un giorno, ma non ora.  
Otto ha quel suo modo calmo, compiaciuto  
di seguirmi con gli occhi, come per dire  
Presto avrai il tuo bel da fare!  
Non c'è dubbio; questo figlio sarà mio,  
non suo, e i fallimenti, se fallirò,  
saranno tutti miei. Non siamo brave, Clara,  
a cercare di impedire queste cose,  
e quando ce l'abbiamo, un figlio, è nostro.  
Ultimamente, però, mi sento oltre Otto o chiunque altro.  
Adesso intuisco l'opera che voglio creare.  
L'energia che ci vuole! Ho la sensazione  
di progredire, con pazienza, con impazienza  
nella mia solitudine. Ovunque cerco nuove forme  
in natura, vecchie forme in nuovi posti,  
i piani di una bocca antica, per dire, fra le foglie.  
So e non so  
che cosa sto cercando.  
Ricordi quei mesi passati insieme in studio,  
i tuoi forti avambracci sprofondati nell'argilla bagnata,  
io che cercavo di trarre qualcosa dalle strane impressioni

che mi assalivano: fiori e uccelli  
giapponesi su seta, gli ubriaconi  
che si rifugiavano al Louvre, la luce del fiume,  
quei volti... Ma sapevamo davvero  
perché eravamo lì? Parigi ti snervava,  
ti sembrava troppo, eppure andavi avanti  
con la scultura... e poi ci incontrammo di nuovo lì,  
entrambe già sposate, e io pensai che tu e Rilke  
sembravate entrambi snervati. Sentivo una specie di infelicità  
fra voi due. Certo, anche io e lui  
abbiamo avuto le nostre difficoltà. Forse  
ero gelosa di lui, che ti portasse via da me,  
forse ho sposato Otto per riempire  
il vuoto di te.  
Rainer, naturalmente, *sa* più di Otto,  
lui crede nelle donne. Ma si nutre di noi,  
come tutti loro. Da sempre, la sua arte  
è protetta dalle donne. Chi di noi potrebbe dire lo stesso?  
Chi di noi, Clara, non ha dovuto fare quel salto  
al di là del nostro essere donne  
per preservare la nostra opera? o è per preservare noi stesse?  
Il matrimonio non fa che acuire la solitudine.  
Sai, stavo sognando che ero morta  
mentre partorivo.  
Non riesco a dipingere o a parlare e neppure a muovermi.  
Mio figlio – credo – era sopravvissuto. Ma la cosa buffa  
nel sogno era che Rainer aveva scritto un requiem per me –  
una lunga, bellissima poesia, dove mi chiamava sua amica.  
Io ero amica *tua*  
ma nel sogno non dicevi una parola.  
Nel sogno la sua poesia era come una lettera  
a qualcuno che non ha il diritto  
di essere lì ma deve essere trattato con cortesia, come un ospite  
che arriva il giorno sbagliato. Clara, perché non ti sogno?  
Quella foto di noi due... ce l'ho ancora,  
io e te che ci fissiamo con uno sguardo duro  
e il mio quadro dietro di noi. Quanto lavoravamo

fianco a fianco! E quanto ho fatto da allora,  
cercando di creare secondo il nostro proposito,  
che ad ogni costo avremmo riversato la massima intensità  
in ogni soggetto. Senza reprimere  
niente perché siamo donne. Clara, la nostra forza è  
ancora nelle cose che ci dicevamo:  
che la vita e la morte si prendono per mano,  
e la verità va conquistata, lottando per arginare il senso di colpa.  
E adesso sento arrivare l'alba e il nuovo giorno.  
Adoro svegliarmi nel mio studio, vedere i miei quadri  
animarsi nella luce. A volte mi sento  
come se fossi io a calciare dentro di me,  
me stessa che devo allattare, amare...  
Se solo tutta la vita avessimo potuto fare questo  
l'una per l'altra, ma non possiamo...  
Dicono che una donna incinta  
si sogni la sua morte. Ma la vita e la morte  
si prendono per mano. Clara, c'è così tanto  
che voglio fare, vedo una vita davanti, e provo amore  
per te, la sola persona  
che, per quanto io lo dica male,  
sentirà tutto quel che dico e che non posso dire.

1975-1976

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## Estratto per riassunto della tesi di dottorato

Studente: Monica Pavani

matricola: 955644

Dottorato: Studi Iberici ed Anglo Americani (Scuola di dottorato in Lingue, culture e società)

Ciclo: 24°

Titolo della tesi: In the Skin of Another

Abstract:

Questa ricerca intende indagare le ragioni di una fascinazione multipla: perché la pittrice tedesca Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907) dopo la sua morte perseguita Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) come un fantasma che non trova pace nell'aldilà? E ancora, perché la sua esperienza di artista continua a perseguitare tre poetesse contemporanee – la canadese Anne Michaels (1958), l'indiana Sujata Bhatt (1956) e l'americana Adrienne Rich (1929) – che hanno scritto dei monologhi drammatici per darle voce?

Le ragioni di un'ossessione non si possono afferrare razionalmente. Le tre poetesse fanno parlare la Becker in prima persona per esplorare la sua vita dedicata alla pittura ma continuamente minata da un senso di fallimento. Con l'utilizzo di diverse strategie ma mossa da simile urgenza, la loro poesia persegue una forma di 'incarnazione', nel tentativo di trovare un nuovo modo di *vedere* e di dare voce ai desideri più profondi di Paula, in un'epoca in cui essere donna e artista rappresentava un conflitto interiore di non facile soluzione.

This research aims at exploring the reasons for a multiple fascination: why does German painter Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907) after her death haunt Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926) as a ghost that can find no peace in the hereafter? and, what is more, why does her experience as a woman artist go on haunting three women poets of the present time – Canadian Anne Michaels (1958), Indian Sujata Bhatt (1956) and American Adrienne Rich (1929) – who have written dramatic monologues giving voice to her?

The reasons for an obsession cannot be grasped in rational terms. The three poets let Becker speak in the first person so as to explore her life devoted to painting but constantly undermined by a sense of failure. Through the use of different devices but urged by a similar need, their poetry courts a form of 'embodiment,' aimed at finding a new way of *seeing* and of giving voice to Paula's deepest yearnings at a time when to be a woman and an artist represented an inner conflict far from easy to resolve.

Firma dello studente

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Firma del dipendente addetto .....

Ai sensi dell'art. 13 del D.Lgs. n. 196/03 si informa che il titolare del trattamento dei dati forniti è l'Università Ca' Foscari - Venezia.

I dati sono acquisiti e trattati esclusivamente per l'espletamento delle finalità istituzionali d'Ateneo; l'eventuale rifiuto di fornire i propri dati personali potrebbe comportare il mancato espletamento degli adempimenti necessari e delle procedure amministrative di gestione delle carriere studenti. Sono comunque riconosciuti i diritti di cui all'art. 7 D. Lgs. n. 196/03.