

Paula Modersohn-Becker and the Discourse of Motherhood in Turn-of-the-Century Germany

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Contemporary feminist art historians have had difficulty reconciling what they view as the paradoxical nature of Paula Modersohn-Becker's artistic production. Modersohn-Becker was a "modern" woman in that she sought autonomy and independence as a professional artist, in spite of societal conventions in turn-of-the-century Germany. However, feminist art historians such as Linda Nochlin, Wendy Slatkin, Griselda Pollock, and Rozsika Parker have aligned her pejoratively with essentialist ideologies which theorize women as bound to nature and their natures by their biological ability to reproduce. Essentialism, in the words of Diana Fuss, "appeal[s] to a pure or original femininity, a female essence, outside the boundaries of the social and thereby untainted by a patriarchal order."¹

Slatkin compares Modersohn-Becker's work to that of male artists such as Gauguin and Maurice Denis who employ the theme of the mother as a fertility symbol, a universal type that equates metaphorically nature, sexuality, and maternity.² She admits the figure's "abstract power or significance," while maintaining that it "reduce[s] woman to an animalistic level, denying her personality, intellect, or full human faculties."³

Pollock and Parker similarly cite Gauguin's paintings as a standard by which to diminish Modersohn-Becker's works. Believing that Modersohn-Becker's female figures are powerful, they feel, nevertheless, that these images are "undermined" by the natural settings and fruit which reductively equate woman to nature.⁴ By equating Modersohn-Becker's imagery to what they perceive as Gauguin's sexist imagery they reduce both artists' works to a stereotype, and, therefore, dismiss these artists without consideration of temporal context.

Nochlin views Modersohn-Becker's mother and child imagery, produced between 1906 and 1907, as "dark, anonymous goddess[es] of nourishment, paradoxically animallike

[sic], [and] bound to the earth," created when the artist herself was "looking forward to motherhood."⁵ Indeed, she was pregnant in 1907, but her personal ambivalence about actual motherhood is well documented.

These too-easy dismissals of Modersohn-Becker's work based upon retrospective views colored by contemporary political concerns obscure the fact that representations of motherhood are symbols with multivalent interpretations. As such, they may be used as weapons in interclass and intraclass conflict to effect social changes. Further, these feminist dismissals ignore the historicity of feminist discourse. Early twentieth century European women's movements may appear conservative to us, but this judging of the past, by the standards of the present, diminishes the real power of this movement within its cultural context. Moreover, it reveals a reductive "presentist" bias that, as Amy Hackett has said, "assum[es] that equality of rights is the essence of feminism."⁶ Furthermore, these feminist dismissals fail to recognize differences between Anglo-American and European ideas of feminism. As Karen Offen has demonstrated, instead of being informed by ideas that assert the similarities existing between the sexes, as espoused in the nineteenth century by John Stuart Mill, for instance, Europeans were more entrenched in the idea that differences did indeed exist, and were to be celebrated. Rather than seeking equality per se, Europeans wanted to assert the fundamental complementarity of this relationship as a means of social reform.⁷ Therefore, as I will argue, Modersohn-Becker's mother and infant imagery should not be limited to interpretation as an aspect of an overall "primitivist" discourse based upon stylistic affinities with the work of famous male artists. It must instead be seen as engaging with the political discourse surrounding the League for the Protection of Mothers, a German women's organization

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¹ Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, Chapman, Hall, Inc., 1989) 2.

² Wendy Slatkin, "Maternity and Sexuality in the 1890s," *Woman's Art Journal* (Spring/Summer 1980): 13.

³ Slatkin 13.

⁴ Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, *Old Mistresses: Women, Art, and Ideology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981) 119-121.

⁵ Linda Nochlin, "The Issue of 'Women's Imagery,'" in *Women Artists: 1550-1950*, by Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, (New York: Knopf, 1977) 67.

⁶ Amy Hackett, "The Politics of Feminism in Wilhelmine Germany, 1890-1918," 2 vols., diss., Columbia University, 1976, v; quoted in Karen Offen, "Defining Feminism: A Comparative Historical Approach," *Signs* 14.1 (Autumn 1988): 124.

⁷ Offen 124.

which advanced its cause primarily through metaphors of the maternal. As I will demonstrate, as a result of her parallel concerns with this movement, her depictions of the mother and child will undergo abrupt changes signaling her engagement with these issues. Thus, Modersohn-Becker's work can be seen not as a passive acceptance of already naturalized prescriptions about women's biological nature, or simply anticipation of her own role as a mother, but as an expression of a leftist progressive movement which sought far-reaching social reform.

Further, Modersohn-Becker's representations of the mother and infant theme, within this historical context, can be viewed as one articulation of a discourse focused on maternalism, or woman in the constructed role of mother. Carol Duncan has written, in her classic article on the "happy mother" in eighteenth-century French art, that such images were not based on social reality, nor commonly accepted ideals. Rather, they were intended to effect social change by promoting the view that motherhood was the only emotionally fulfilling role for the middle-class woman. Artists moralized the role of the mother through visual associations with the Holy Family. Motherhood was then objectified; it was represented idealistically as a pure state of harmony and bliss.⁸ A century later, German social activists might likewise try to affect social change by employing the image of the mother. Here, however, by defining the mother as a subject, or an active agent capable of defining and fulfilling her own self-interests, activists could then be empowered to resist the societal devaluation of women.⁹

The women involved in the maternalist women's movement wanted to exercise what they felt were their innate female talents: the ability to care for and nurture others, an ability that should be extended beyond the family, to benefit society as a whole. It is this theme that finds resonance in both European and American suffrage movements of the early years of this century.

The rise of socialism in Germany in the 1890s provided a new political framework that allowed women to assert themselves by subverting right-wing mores. With the changes in the political landscape, the idea of the family as a microcosm of society became a point of contention.¹⁰ The employment of women outside the home coupled with the low birth rate in

urban areas brought about debates concerning the changing roles of women in an industrial age. Friedrich Engels's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884) and August Bebel's widely read *Woman Under Socialism* (1883), were the source of much thinking about the redirection of women's roles in society, even for those who might not have been members of the Socialist party.¹¹ Socialist rhetoric categorized women and the working class as two groups united by a history of oppression. Moreover, the female ability to reproduce was considered a form of labor which benefited society, just as the working class provided society with material goods.¹² Women interested in the reformation of women's roles and societal discontent chose the symbol of the mother to assert their political position. They saw their ability to mother as their ability to regenerate culture. They were to be the mothers of society, of civilization renewed. But outmoded sentimental notions of motherhood needed to be replaced by more modern constructions. This was given explicit expression by Ellen Key, a Swedish feminist contemporary whom Modersohn-Becker met in Paris in 1906 through their mutual friend, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke.¹³ Key said "the sentimental belief in motherhood as an always holy and always reliable natural force must be superseded, and this natural phenomenon must be shaped by culture."¹⁴ Key's ideas on motherhood provided the ideological framework upon which the League for the Protection of Mothers was built. "The great social household" was the often repeated metaphor for society as a family.¹⁵ Although many voices existed in this maternalist discourse, the collective notion was that women, as potential mothers, should be allowed to be mothers under the best possible economic conditions. Those choosing not to be actual mothers, were to be assured the agency and the opportunity to nurture others. More than this, those desiring reform embraced the notion that woman was the source of all culture.

Johann Jakob Bachofen's text *Mother Right* (1861) was popular at the turn-of-the-century, and by this point his ideologies had already been incorporated by both Engels and Bebel. Bachofen portrayed the origin of Western culture as matriarchal. He praised the relationship of the mother and child as the "origin of all culture, of every virtue, of every nobler aspect of

⁸ Carol Duncan, "Happy Mothers and Other New Ideas in Eighteenth-Century French Art," in *The Aesthetics of Power: Essays in Critical Art History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge UP, 1993) 4, 20-21.

⁹ Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Meryle Mahrer Kaplan, eds., Introduction to *Representations of Motherhood* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1994) 2.

¹⁰ Richard Evans, "Politics and the Family: Social Democracy and the Working-class Family in Theory and Practice Before 1914," in *The German Family: Essays on the Social History of the Family in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Germany*, eds. Richard J. Evans and W.R. Lee (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1981) 262-263.

¹¹ Ann Taylor Allen, *Feminism and Motherhood in Germany, 1800-1914* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1991) 155 and 209; Evans 262.

¹² August Bebel, *Woman Under Socialism*, trans. from German by Daniel De Leon (New York: New York Labor News Press, 1904) 22 and Conclusion, n.p.

¹³ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke*, vol. 1, trans. and ed. by Jane Bannard Greene and M.D. Herter Norton (New York: W.W. Norton Co., The Norton Library) 387 n. 111.

¹⁴ Ellen Key, 1911, quoted in Ann Taylor Allen, "Mothers of the New Generation: Adele Schreiber, Helene Stöcker, and the Evolution of a German Idea of Motherhood, 1900-1914" *Signs* 10.3 (Spring 1985): 419.

¹⁵ Allen, *Feminism and Motherhood*, 3.

existence.”¹⁶ The empowering notion of a matriarchal past was, in socialist thought, in dialectical relationship to the patriarchal present. The utopian ideal was a synthesis of the two cultures as a union of equals.¹⁷ For Modersohn-Becker the meaning of the image of the mother was not fixed. Early in her career she employed the image of peasant mothers to suggest the perceived morality of the laborers and liberal views toward German society. Fritz Mackensen, her teacher at the artist’s colony in Worpswede had employed mother and child imagery. His *Mother and Infant*, 1892 (Figure 1), also known as the *Worpswede Madonna*, depicts an idealized image of the peasant mother. The woman sits in a peat cart, “the throne of the landscape.”¹⁸ The woman is turned in near profile to give the viewer a sense of her modesty and dignity. He forces the viewer into a reverential gaze by suggesting that the viewer is looking up to the subject. This reverential gaze equates the woman who is breast feeding to the piety of nature itself.

In her *Peasant Woman and Child* of 1903 (Figure 2), Modersohn-Becker uses similar subject matter as Mackensen. Although she abstracts the forms, the natural landscape of the field is upheld. The point of view is raised to eye-level, but the sense of modesty remains. This is still a somewhat mawkish representation of the subject.

In her *Silent Mother*, 1903 (Figure 3), Modersohn-Becker gives the canvas a raw, unfinished look to translate her ideas of simple form signifying the perceived unaffectedness and heroicness of the peasant mother. The rough surface metaphorically reinforces viewer recognition of the difficult way of life of a rural peasant. Physical labor is metonymic of the working class. Thus, Modersohn-Becker’s labored surface also signals her identity or at least empathy with the woman depicted, the artist who labors over the canvas, now one with her subject. The treatment of the composition is a statement by the artist that this is a true and sincere representation of what motherhood is really like under adverse conditions. Although the subject is not in a natural environment, her role as a peasant is further signified by her plain and weathered clothing, and by her large, dark hands. The intimate view and the fullness of the woman’s breast prohibits discretion. Her gaze is not fixed lovingly on the child, instead she looks away as though she is totally disengaged from this bodily function. Her beleaguered expression suggests that this moment is but a respite from her more tiresome obligations.

Modersohn-Becker viewed these women as heroic,¹⁹ addressing them intimately, and with subtle distortions that do

not allow for a fixed perspective. This shift in treatment of the subject parallels her own shifting viewpoint regarding motherhood. She has chosen to reject her teacher’s form of expression, and subsequently no longer aligns herself with his more sentimental ideology.

It is in 1906 that she appropriates images and techniques that aligned her with so-called primitivism. Concurrent changes in her images of motherhood question the notion of biology as destiny and suggest the idea that artistic creation is analogous to the creation of life. Modersohn-Becker was constructing an identity that might resolve the ongoing conflict between societal expectations of women and their personal desires. Images such as her *Reclining Mother and Child* of 1906 (Figure 4), and *Kneeling Mother and Child* of 1907 (Figure 5) are the most indicative of this ideology that gives primacy to women’s role as mothers. This shift occurred while she was separated from her husband and living in Paris in 1906, where she gained new tools, both formal and ideological, with which to explore the complexities presented by the potential to mother. She was exposed to the works of Gauguin and Cezanne. She met and painted a portrait of the professor Werner Sombart, one of the earliest members of the League for the Protection of Mothers.²⁰ It was also during this time that she met feminist Ellen Key. Her 1906 and 1907 images of motherhood, appropriate the maternal metaphor to convey ideas of a universal life force and the power of women to create, which would have held further symbolic meaning for her as an artist, as well as a woman, seeking autonomy from convention. This is particularly true when considering that during this time she was experiencing personal upheavals. By February of 1907, after a reluctant reconciliation with her husband, she was pregnant. As the experience of motherhood moved from the abstract to a reality for her, she problematized and questioned the mixed implications of motherhood.

In *Reclining Mother and Child*, the image is separated from a recognizable setting. In opposition to Nochlin’s and Slatkin’s perception of this image as animal-like, I would posit that in her own language she is monumentalizing the form to suggest a personification of the eternal and symbiotic nature of the mother and infant. Unlike the obviously class-based images of the subject, the woman is nude, suggesting a natural state of being which was Modersohn-Becker’s vehicle for transforming individual mothers into the universality of motherhood itself. If unclothed and lacking obvious signifiers of class, this Italian mother,²¹ as an immigrant, is representative of the lower classes.

¹⁶ J.J. Bachofen, *Myth, Religion and Mother Right: Selected Writings of J.J. Bachofen*, trans. by Ralph Manheim, with a preface by George Boas and intro. by Joseph Campbell. Bollingen Series (New York: Princeton UP, 1967) 79.

¹⁷ Allen, “Mothers of the New Generation,” 427.

¹⁸ Gillian Perry, “The ‘Ascent to Nature’-Some Metaphors of ‘Nature’ in Early Expressionist Art,” in *Expressionism Reassessed*, eds. Shulamith Behr, David Fanning, and Douglas Jarman (Oxford and New York: Manchester UP, 1993) 57.

¹⁹ Gunther Busch and Liselotte von Reinken, eds., *Paula Modersohn-Becker: The Letters and Journals*, ed. and trans. by Arthur Wensing and Carole Clew Hoey (New York: Taplinger Publishing Co., 1984) 112; Journal entry dated October 29, 1898.

²⁰ Allen, “Mothers of the New Generation,” 423.

²¹ Christa Murken-Altrogge, *Paula Modersohn-Becker: Leben und Werk* (Cologne: DuMont and Buchverlag, 1980) 77.

The "primitive" yet sympathetic handling of her form also signals her "base" or foundational status in society. This evokes Bachofen's assertion that motherhood is the basis of culture, it is the one constant underlying all other transitional structures.²²

Kneeling Mother and Child alludes to notions of matriarchy and fertility in its ritualistic arrangement. The mother's kneeling position on a white circular pallet connotes an act of submission and sacrifice. The woman is dark, but her womb is highlighted to evince her fertility. The mother's dark skin and the tropical vegetation behind her signifies her exotic Otherness. However, there may be a more pointed reference indicated by her dark skin, as Bebel had cited the German protectorate of Cameroon in West Africa as evidence of the existence of a matriarchal past.²³ Thus, Modersohn-Becker appears to invoke a so-called primitive matriarchal past which nourishes the present. Civilized German bourgeois society is signified by the pale-skinned blond baby whom she cradles and nourishes. If not the actual child of the woman, the infant is, nevertheless, the fruit of a woman's labor, just as the upper-class survives upon the fruit of lower-class labor.

This public dialogue surrounding the female role of mother was constructed by many voices in German society. While maintaining motherhood is the ultimate function of women, the maternal proponents simultaneously challenge societal expectations based solely on biology.

Modersohn-Becker then frames the public discourse in private, contemplative terms. Unknown to her at the time, her art, and consequently her self would be sacrificed to motherhood: she died from complications from childbirth. Yet, her ambivalence about her pregnancy is evidenced in letters to friends. She avoided discussing the pregnancy. Instead, she lamented about not being able to attend the Cézanne retrospective at the Salon d'Automne in Paris.²⁴ In a letter to her sister, rather than expressing happiness, she states, "never again write me a postcard with the words 'diaper' or 'blessed event'."²⁵

Perhaps the maternalist ideology to which Modersohn-Becker subscribed is restricting by today's feminist standards, for motherhood is most often framed in terms of constraints rather than liberation. It does not allow for autonomy as a woman. The maternalist discourse of Modersohn-Becker's time provided the tools by which she could question social mores. The symbol of the mother provided a strategic point from which reform-minded women could subvert the right-wing status quo. It is a strategic point because of its unifying factor. It was a malleable metaphor because everyone had some concept of motherhood. Women could address the power structures by reconstructing the dominant language for their purposes. The protean maternal metaphor was employed to suggest "new life" for a society willing to embrace "motherly" traits. The women of this time did not portray an immaculate image of woman as mother. They sought to change women's lives for the better in early twentieth-century Germany in the hopes of an ideal tomorrow. Paula Modersohn-Becker, in her mother imagery subverts the societal and artistic canons by implying the harsh realities of the present while questioning the idea of a transcendent eternal.

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Figure 1. Fritz Mackensen, *Mother and Infant*, 1892. Kunsthalle Bremen.

²² Bachofen 79.

²³ Bebel 25.

²⁴ Busch and von Reinken, eds., 425; in a letter to Clara Rilke-Westhoff, dated October 21, 1907.

²⁵ Busch and von Reinken 422; letter to Milly Rohland-Becker, dated October 1907.



Figure 2. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Peasant Woman and Child*, c. 1903. Hamburger Kunsthalle.



Figure 3. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Silent Mother*, 1903. Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum Hannover.

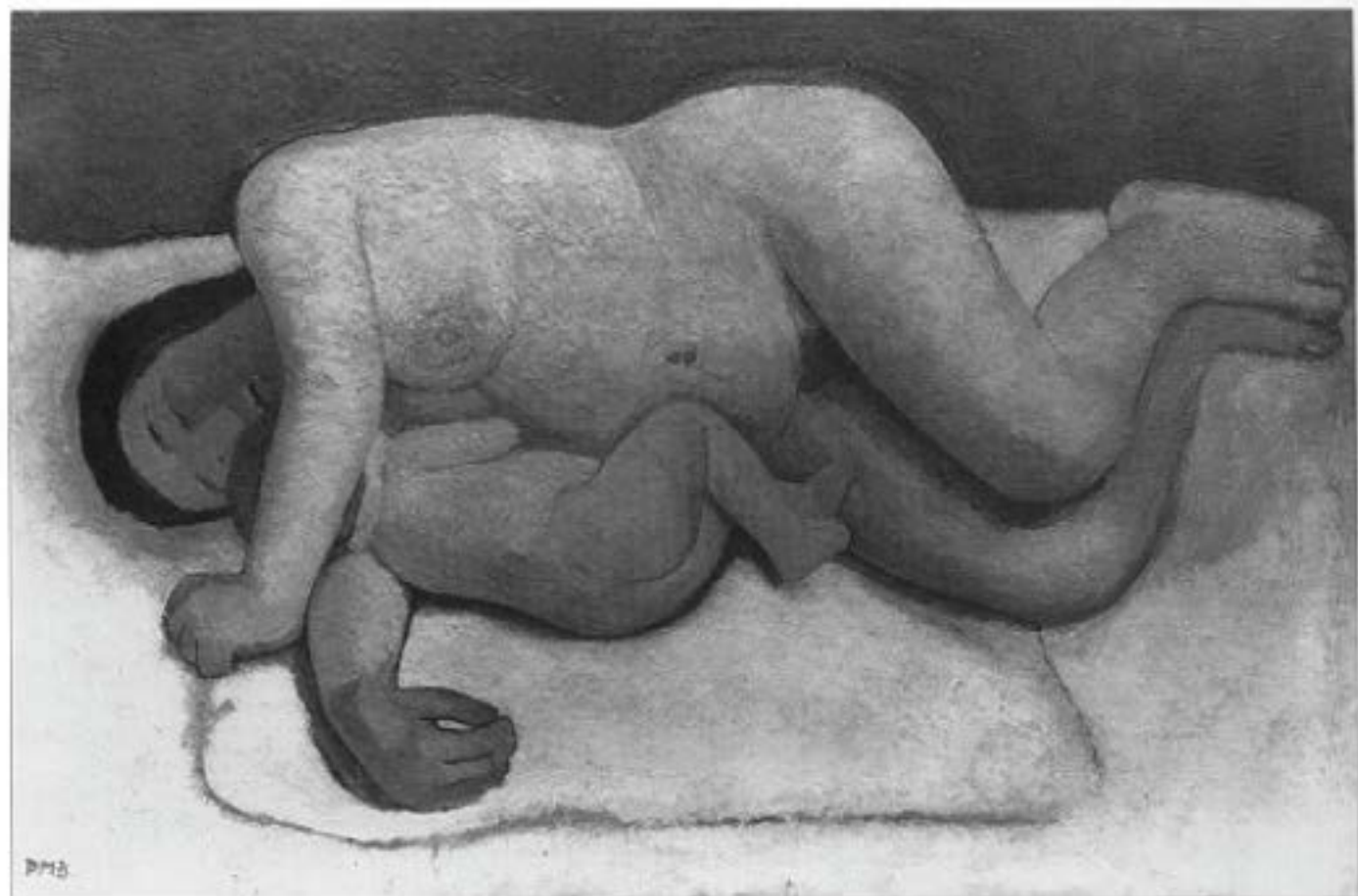


Figure 4. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Reclining Mother and Child*, 1906. Böttcherstrasse Bremen.



Figure 5. Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Kneeling Mother and Child*, 1907. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin Preussischer Kulturbesitz Nationalgalerie.