'THE FULLNESS OF SOLITUDE': DRUSILLA MODJESKA'S USE OF THE FEMALE ARTIST AS ICON OF THE LIBERATION OF THE SPIRIT

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Drusilla Modjeska's *The Orchard* is a part fictional, part biographical, part autobiographical work that takes the reader on a journey towards self-understanding, especially towards freedom from the stereotypes that entrap us all. It expresses the journey towards the Centre of that more stable part in our nature that is not disturbed by the need to perform for, be seen by, others.

It is then at first glance somewhat paradoxical that Modjeska uses as the focal metaphor of her work the visual artist, the person committed to presenting an image to the world. But it is precisely here that Modjeska subverts our expectations: her artists, all female, have, from her perspective, acquired this unusual power of freeing themselves from stereotypes, from the forces that normally entrap us all – male and female alike – by virtue of their challenge to the normal expectations of art and life in their times. A line that the narrator uses in *The Orchard* with reference to her sense of transformation as she discovers her own face anew after a period of sickness is 'A Face not poised for the regard of another'. This quality that she finds in herself, is something she also finds in the women artists she deals with.

The artist to whom Modjeska refers as a touchstone, near the start of her work is the renaissance artist Artemesia Gentileschi. She was raped as a girl – in her father's studio by a man who had been hired to teach the young Artemesia

architectural perspective – and went on to create some of the century's finest work. When her father took this case to the papal court it was Artemesia who was tortured to test whether she was telling the truth:

> At the trial a torture called the sibille was used on Artemesia to test whether she spoke the truth. The sibille was a device made up of a series of metal bands which were clamped over the fingers and pulled tight with strings. The pain was acute, and the damage could range from bruising to broken bones. This was used on the hands of a girl who was not yet nineteen, and already known for her fine control of canvas and composition.[1]

It is worth nothing that this method of torture was not used on her rapist! Ten years after this event the French artist Pierre Dumonstier le Neveu, made a drawing of her hand holding a paintbrush, calling it a drawing of the hand of 'the excellent and wise noble woman of Rome, Artemisia.' It is the image of this hand which Modjeska chose for the cover of her book and about which she writes:

> The conceit of le Neveu's drawing is that the beauty of Artemisia's hand is magnified by the beauty it creates. A masculine compliment... that drains her of all but the simplest of meanings – by which is meant, I believe, that the beauty of the hand is somehow dependant on the masculine appreciation of this hand as creative, productive, of some socially acceptable aesthetic form – the hand of the 'excellent and wise noble woman' ...[2].

Modjeska's superimposition of the glistening ripe pear, fruit of the healthy Orchard, may offer an ironic counterpoint to this idea; the Orchard and the Garden in

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[1] Modjeska, Drusilla, *The Orchard*, Sydney, Pan, 1994, p.16.
[2] ibid. p.17

this book are presented as icons of fruition – a place where, for example, the artist Stella Bowen was able to find, near the close of her life, during the war in England, a fertile retreat: 'the thing about gardens, she wrote... is that *life certainly goes on.* Even in war. She bottled and jammed, planted and hoed... and wrote her memoirs.'[3]

However, while Modjeska uses this male version of Artemesia's hand on her cover, she is ultimately far more interested in, engrossed by, the self-portrait that Artemesia produced nearly twenty years after the rape. This self portrait Modjeska did not want imaged on her cover – as if perhaps to protect its more secret wisdom.[4] About this painting Modjeska, through her protagonist Clara, writes:

> ...she raises her hand to the blank canvas in a gesture that will bring herself into being; what she was to discover from the canvas was more than mere beauty, the illusion of which is easily made. For the woman who survives the sibille... the journey to self-discovery is made on terms only she can inscribe.[5]

This idea is further elaborated later in a paragraph that goes to the heart of what this book as a whole is in quest of:

> In her Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting (1630), Artemesia makes a brilliant move. Where men in the tradition of self-portraiture with which she was familiar liked to adorn themselves with the trappings of their success, trussed up as gentlemen not artisans, she presents herself casually, without the masks either of grandeur or of seduction. Her eyes are not on us seeing her, but concentrated on the canvas... She lifts a hand stained with paint to the blank canvas in order to make the first mark that will create the work of art

[3] ibid. (p.253).
[4] This self portrait be viewed on the following web site: http://btr0xw.rz.uni-bayreuth.de/cjackson/g/p-agentil1.htm,
[5] ibid.p17.

> which, as self-portrait... is also the image the artist will produce of herself. Her eyes, averted from us in their concentration on the canvas, on this complex process of bringing herself into being, focus not on the external world that would reflect her back, but on the inner contemplations that will produce herself.

Implicitly here Modjeska ponders the underlying metaphor of the empty space of the canvas related to the idea of 'self-emptying' and the extinction of personality that leads to the center of truth. The fact that the book chooses to focus on this feminist reclamation of the female soul has much to do with the kinds of pressure that are exerted by our culture on the relationships between men and women. These are issues that transcend sexual differences. What Modjeska is writing about here is just as relevant for men as it is for women.

'The inner contemplations that will produce herself': this could stand as the epigraph for the long central section of the book 'Sight and Solitude'. This is an account of the narrator's own temporary loss of sight which plunges her into an enforced separation from the world and into a deeper acquaintance with herself. It is in fact the experience recounted in this part of the book that provides the energy for Modjeska's fascination for those, like Artemesia Gentileschi, who have found ways of drawing spiritual sustenance and strength from enforced or willed separation from the stereotypes that threaten at every juncture. This includes the Australian artists Grace Cossington Smith and Stella Bowen, both of whom became the subjects of Modjeska's next book *Stravinsky's Lunch.*

Before looking more closely at how Modjeska represents these two artists it is necessary to look briefly at what thinking underpins Modjeska's quest for authenticity in both *The Orchard* and *Stravinsky's Lunch.* One of her characters, Alec, in *The Orchard* describes the human

situation as one in which our knowledge about ourselves is very limited. At one point Alec says, 'I know that sometimes we have to wait to the end of our lives before we know the first thing about its shape, its meaning'.[6] In the face of this fact it is he who advises the narrator: '...what we need is a spiritual nothing, a time of darkness and nothing, of being alone with the emptiness and fear and the tears and the loss; that's the way to the only riches it's worth our while trying for.'[7] This theme is explored fully in the section 'Sight and Solitude', where the narrator speaks of a period of temporary blindness as a 'journey undertaken – less by the body than the soul when it is forced into a darkness from which it must find its own rescue and its own source of light'.[8]

This is at the centre of Modjeska's quest in *The Orchard.* The narrator's friend, the aged and worldly wise Ettie, encourages her to 'dwell there, to learn its shape, to feel its edges' and she suggests that this awful experience is not something to be shunned, but to be seen as an opportunity!

> ...for years I had avoided that empty space we call solitude, filling up my life with work and lovers, distractions of every sort. 'Go into it', she said, 'and you'll find it richer than you expect.'[9]

What the narrator becomes acutely aware of during her blindness is how much of our language is studded with references to sight, but how little anyone really sees: 'no one knew what anything was like'.[10] In this more perceptive frame of mind, she is shocked by the grossness of peoples' lives, 'the ambitions and sorrows that stuck to them'.

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[6] ibid. p.70
[7] ibid. p.70.
[8] ibid. p.110
[9] ibid.pp.111-112.
[10] ibid.p.114.

It is here, closely connected to this new insight that emerges after her blindness, that the narrator is struck when she looks at her reflection in the mirror, by 'a face that was not poised for the regard of another'.[11] For once she has been cleansed, purified from the need to live always in the eyes of others, rather than for herself. It is in this context that the story about Artemesia Gentileschi's self portrait becomes such a powerful touchstone.

This experience of self-purification, borne of a period of solitude leads to a huge internal change:

> When you are threatened and afraid, unable to live by the capacities and capabilities that have gone without question all your life, a great deal about how you live changes: your values, your sensory perceptions, even your loves and friendships... by being forced to live within a curtailment not of one's own choosing, there can be a corresponding expansion in the heart's capacity.... It is this I came to glimpse... It is the emptiness that brings you slap up against that naked reflection in the mirror.... I came to see that what is required of us at such times is not performance – that endless dance of display – but the simple task of being.... In solitude as I had discovered, it is not so much a knowing of ourselves that is forced on us as an unknowing.[12]

It is in the section 'Sight and Solitude' in *The Orchard* we learn that the narrator's sight 'had become compromised just as I was beginning research on a group of artists'. These included Cossington Smith. With the hindsight of Modjeska's own intensive work on Cossington Smith in *Stravinsky's Lunch* the close autobiographical parallels between the narrator in *The Orchard* and Modjeska herself

[11] ibid.p.117.
[12] ibid.pp.124,127.

become apparent. What this process of solitude has essentially achieved for the narrator, now as she begins again to reflect on art, is a different kind of seeing: 'What I needed to do, but how I did not know, was learn to see from another part of myself.... I held my hands level with my breasts and said: 'I must learn to see from here.'[13]

The fruit of this seeing becomes apparent in what she has to say about Grace Cossington Smith:

> In 1948 Grace Cossington Smith painted one of her few self portraits... it is the only one I know in which she is wearing spectacles.... The painting has, however, everything to do with sight: with seeing, with being seen, wanting to be seen; and with not being seen.... A private face, a face without compromise: the face, it seems to me, of a woman who has renounced the vanity of being seen, and yet presents herself in her not-to-be-seen-face.[14]

It is in this context that Modjeska here goes on to discuss several of Cossington Smith's most well known paintings of interiors. In these paintings Modjeska reads a personal history that has a quietly heroic aspect in the context of the times in which they were produced:

> In the last phase of her work, Grace Cossington Smith was painting our of a daily solitude, living alone in the family house where parents had died and from which siblings had departed. Do we see here the representation of a spinsterly existence: single beds, neat cupboards, empty hallways? Or the riches of solitude: empty rooms filled with possibilities? Doors opening onto hallways, windows opening onto verandahs and gardens, drawers and cupboards allowing us to glimpse their treasures? To my eye

[13] ibid.p.135
[14] ibid.pp.135-136.

> these interiors are by way of being self-portraits of a woman who has resolved the tension between her own ability to see and the seeing, or being seen, that is required of her: a woman who has fully withdrawn from the gaze of the world to discover not a defensive retreat, but the fullness of a solitude that society deems empty.[15]

About the most famous of these interiors, *Interior with Wardrobe Mirror* (1955), held by the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Modjeska continues:

> In it the mirror of a wardrobe door swings open in the centre of the painting, where it invites our own reflection – and in that invitation we see the absence of the painter whose image should face directly into that shiny surface. Instead it reflects a door which opens across a verandah, across a lawn, to trees and a distant sky. Where the artist should stand, stands instead an invitation to the world, to all that is beyond. That is the fullness her solitude has produced.[16]

Modjeska's comments on Artemsia Gentileschi clearly stand behind this interpretation of Cossington Smith's work.

The other artist who is featured in *The Orchard* as an additional exemplum for this exploration of liberation of the spirit is the almost unknown Australian expatriate artist Stella Bowen, who becomes featured in *Stravinky's Lunch*.[17]

In *The Orchard* Bowen is introduced early in the book as an example, like Artemesia Gentileschi, of a highly talented creative woman whose early life was restricted by

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[15] ibid.pp.136-137.
[16] ibid.p.137.
[17] Modjeska, Drusilla, *Stravinsky's Lunch*, Sydney, Picador: Pan Macmillan, 1999.

masculine demands. In Bowen's case the subservience was initially more willing than Gentileschi's. Bowen, on her maiden voyage to England fell in love with and became the mistress of the then well known English novelist Ford Madox Ford. Through him she came into contact with the literary illuminati of the early decades of the 20th century: Ezra Pound, Wyndham Lewis, Edith Sitwell amongst others. While, in her own words, Bowen received 'a remarkable and liberal education' through her relationship with Ford, she soon discovered 'the lack of symmetry in a partnership between a man who did not doubt the greatness of his writing, and a woman who was struggling to name herself as an artist.'[18] As in the case of Stravinsky, as outlined in *Stravinksy's Lunch*, Ford was a man who could tolerate no noise while he was working: 'even whispering was not permitted while he was at his desk'. Modjeska who takes up Bowen's story much more fully in *Stravinky's Lunch*, tells us there that she used to describe her role with Ford as that of 'shock absorber' and 'on the whole shock absorbers don't get to paint.'[19] It is in the face of these circumstances that Modjeska gives us an account of Bowen's huge achievement as she works towards finding her own inner space for commencing her true creative work. In the wake of Ford's relationship with the writer Jean Rhys, Bowen separated from Ford, taking with her their daughter Julie.

It was from this time on, Modjeska writes, 'that she would make the shift from seeing herself in the reflection of Ford's eyes to looking through to the mysterious otherness... of her own nature.' She produced a self-portrait in 1928, the year she ended her long intimacy with the father of her child. About this portrait Modjeska writes:

> There is ambiguity and immense complexity in the expression... what it is, that complexity, is not

[18] *The Orchard*, p.38.
[19] *Stravinsky's Lunch*, p.64.

> immediately apparent. Stella Bowen makes no apology and tells no story; the background is without feature – there are none of the trappings of the artist – and the clean lines of the composition draw us to that expressive face. There are no brushes, no easels, no model, no background studio. Just the face, in paint, of the woman who paints. This is not a painting about what she does as an artist; it is a painting about what she feels. Meet my eye, this self-portrait says, and tell my what you see. Woman? Mother? Lover? Artist? [20]

Later in the book Modjeska describes this phase of Bowen's life as one in which her eyes turned from seeing herself in the reflection of Ford Madox Ford's eyes and became absorbed by 'the mysterious otherness of her own nature.'[21] As Bowen herself said in her autobiography *Drawn from Life* she had been kick-started into 'the effrontery of taking up painting as a profession' by the demise of her relationship.

Three years later she held her first exhibition in Paris. Like Artemisa Gentileschi, and Grace Cossington Smith, Modjeska sees in and through Stella Bowen's art of life, someone who has succeeded, in escaping 'from fixed positions, those false gods that trap us.'[22] This attitude of mind, a quiet indifference in the face of real difficulties, becomes most evident for Modjeska in Stella Bowen's autobiography *Drawn from Life* published in 1941 and recently republished. Bowen drew herself for the cover

> a quick sketch, nothing fancy. There she is, once again with her hair drawn back, but carelessly this time, as if she has not given it her full attention... she looks past us into a very uncertain future, but there is no anxiety in the face, and remarkably little tension. It is a

[20] *Stravinsky's Lunch*, p.14.
[21] ibid.p.101.
[22] ibid.p.151.

> modest drawing for a queen, but there is dignity, and strength, and freedom.[23]

For Modjeska, the life and work each of these women, Artemesia Gentileschi, Grace Cossington Smith and Stella Bowen provide a potent reminder of the social constructions that keep us all, women and men alike, at some distance from our most authentic selves. These three artists, by virtue of their artistic determination, each found a way of subverting that crippling human trait of living only in the eyes of others. Each found a way towards what Modjeska herself discovered in sickness: 'A Face not poised for the regard of another'. And the result for each, in Modjeska's vision was an approach to 'The Fullness of Solitude'.

[23] ibid.p.151