

**WOMEN'S SELF-
PORTRAIT AS SELF-
DISCOVERY:
NEGOTIATING THE GAP
BETWEEN SEEING AND
BEING SEEN IN
DRUSILLA MODJESKA'S
THE ORCHARD (1994)**

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The Australian author Drusilla Modjeska combines historical and fictional characters to weave the text of her 3rd book, *The Orchard* (1994), which plays with two genres, the novel and the essay. The lives of women painters and their fight to pursue their careers are used to illustrate the conflicts in which the fictional characters are immersed. These painters' self-portraits become a way to explore their identities and a vehicle to achieve self-expression by negotiating the gap between seeing and being seen. The difficult relation of women with the visual and with identity is laid down for analysis, while the author proposes a solution, attainable only after a period of solitude.

Artemisia Gentileschi, born in 1593, painted one of her most remarkable works, *Self-Portrait as the Allegory of Painting*, in 1630. This work is considered the beginning of her maturity as a painter. In it, Gentileschi represents herself leaning onto a large canvas, her hands busily stroking and with her eyes set on her task. Her expression is one of deep concentration or even rapture, not acknowledging the spectators who look at the portrait. Characteristically, Gentileschi painted herself not as a gentlewoman or an artisan, which, as the art critic Whitney Chadwick explains, was the fashion of self-portraiture at the time. Instead, the artist represented herself in the act of painting and as "Pictura" herself. She secured this effect by adorning her image with the attributes of "the female personification of Painting: a gold chain, a mask (standing for imitation), unruly locks of hair that refer to the frenzy of artistic creation and colourful clothes in allusion to the painter's skill" (Chadwick,

1999: 113). This is, Chadwick points out, a position unavailable to her male colleagues, precisely because allegorical representations tend to be female, just as those of Justice, Beauty or Goodness. Therefore, Gentileschi's interpretation of herself as "allegorical Painting" does not invest her with the dignity of either a goddess or of a bourgeois liberal artist; the painting transcends the image of the artist herself as if she had set out to represent "the very act of Painting". This is a powerful identification, a message telling us that her painting is an important aspect of her essence, that she is, more than anything else, an artist.

This self-portrait by Gentileschi is one of several others discussed and analysed by one of the characters of the Australian Drusilla Modjeska's novel *The Orchard*, who is carrying out academic research on self-portraiture by women artists. This character, Clara, a young and passionate researcher, sees in Gentileschi's picture the quest of a woman for self-discovery, as she says, "made in terms only she can inscribe" (Modjeska, 1995: 17). The book's main concern is precisely with exploring the ways in which women can establish their own self-identity. Inevitably, Art is signalled out amongst the resources available, specially painting and writing.

The Orchard has a clear-cut structure: three long chapters, that Modjeska calls "essays" preceded by a prologue and followed by an epilogue. The tone in which the work is written is as fictional as it is argumentative. Thus, the book mixes genres and writing styles including: the essay, the biography, the fairy-tale and conventional fiction writing. The narrating voice speaks in the first person, so that in some parts, the book takes the form of an autobiography or a diary; however, between the narrative passages, ideas are developed and supported by quotations and other references, as in any essay.

In a turning point of the book, the 1st person narrator goes through the terrible experience of becoming partially blind. Being unable to see is such a powerful and devastating experience for her that, after it, vision and seeing can no longer be the simple, taken-for-granted ability that generally guides our relationship with our environment. This crisis proves to be central to the book. As she considers her own individual concept of vision and how it is conditioned by views induced within society, she will be concerned with the more general issue of *seeing and being seen as a woman*. Relevantly, her friendship with a group of women painters and art critics will help her to explore the implications of the visual. In the first section of the book the narrator writes: "From my position on the verandah, shaded, and yet open, from which I see without being seen, I watch Clara and Ettie in the garden" (p.13). She presents herself as witness to the experiences of the other characters and, by reflecting on them as well as on the lives of other, historical, women, she will reflect on her own self identity. This 1st person narrator plays an interesting role, since she writes herself into the

book as a signifier of a personal crisis for which the other characters offer what help they can. However, her own story is paradoxically made impersonal by the fact that she is given no name in the book. She is herself a gap, while she discovers and uncovers for us the complexities of her crisis. We accompany her on her path of self-discovery and self-definition, including a lengthy reflection on her education in a boarding institution as an adolescent raised in Britain. Her function can be defined as that of a mediator with which readers can identify, as she goes through her particular "rite of passage" towards a new stage of greater self-awareness.

One of the main theses of *The Orchard* is that, for a woman, self-definition can only be achieved after she has fought and overcome the definitions of her made in relation to men, as daughter, mother, wife or mistress; that is, the way she "is seen" within patriarchal society. And after doing so, it is inevitable that she must face solitude. The narrative parts of the book explore the different ways in which the four main characters define "the shape of their own lives" as Ettie puts it" (Modjeska, 1995: 9). In addition, the women are in three different stages of their lives: Louise and the narrator are middle-aged, Ettie is in her eighties and Clara is a young woman. Their fictional lives illustrate the narrator's reflections on "real" women's art, women's self-expression and women's essence.

Ettie, the eldest and most experienced of the characters, their mentor, has lived through extreme predicaments of love, loss and solitude. She has been both, mistress and wife, as well as childless mother, now she is only herself. After a tumultuous relationship with her lover she had a daughter, named Dorothy, whom she was forced to relinquish to her father and his wife. Clara is Dorothy's child, and therefore, Ettie's secret grand-daughter. Despite the obvious scars life has left in her spirit, Ettie is now in peace with herself in her garden, the book's central orchard. Her strong convictions influence the other three women into rejecting any definitions made of them in relation to men and being the agents of their own vision of themselves.

The characters are also all storytellers: Clara tells stories of women painters of the past, the narrator describes her childhood as a pupil in a boarding school back in Britain. Louise tells the story of a man, his wife and his mistress; a reflection on the circumstances of the two women as and how both positions diminish the women's autonomy. Ettie's tales, on their part, bind them all together. They are parables intended to form Clara's mind and to complement her other tales that she tells the rest of them, stories about her own life, the stories she doesn't tell Clara. Storytelling is, in fact essential to the weaving of the book.

The tale “The Orchard”, which gives title to the book and is more often known as “The Handless Maiden”, is presented as a myth that illustrates the situation of women within patriarchy. It is a European folktale of a woman whose hands are amputated by her father in payment of a deal he had made with the devil. In her analysis, C. Pinkola Estés considers it an allegory of the female psyche and the developments it has to undergo in order to achieve full realization. The main climax of the tale, the severing of the heroine’s hands, represents the threat of women’s creativity and her capacity to act being amputated within patriarchal structure; with the father standing for the “ruling order” within her psyche that is to guide her in the outer world (Estés, 1992: 440). The folk-tale then moves on to narrate the maiden’s solitary trials in the forest (the “underworld of the psyche”, according to Estés) and finally has a hopeful ending: the Handless Maiden can recover hands and happiness, after a period of endurance and self-development symbolised by the progressive recovery of her severed hands.

Also interspersed in the text are the stories of women painters, saints (like St Triduana, St Odilia and St Lucy, all of whom blinded themselves to prevent their own lustful thoughts or those of their suitors) and writers (Jean Rhys, Virginia Woolf). These stories are all instances of victories of women over the attempts at depriving them or their ability to make their own choices, whether these come from inside their psyche or are imposed from outside. In many of the tales and pictures described, there are elements related with severed hands “the icons of feminine agency” (Modjeska, 1995: 15), and plucked eyes. Their overwhelming physical presence, separated from the bodies, is an emblem of the rejection of being treated as objects “as the one seen, the reflector of the needs and agencies of others” (Modjeska, 1995: 147); their rebirth is a celebration of the inner strength by which women achieve full awareness of and come to represent their own selves.

Similarly, the visual and its interpretation are pondered upon both by the characters and the narrator. Summing up a well-established feminist school of thought, Mary Ann Doane wrote in 1992: “the woman always has a problematic relation to the visible, to form, to structures of seeing” (Doane, 1992: 233). As in the pun between the words “I” and “eye”, the way we see ourselves and are seen by others conditions our sense of identity. One key conflict between vision and female identity is the fact that the category “woman” is traditionally an object of vision, and this, when interiorised, may render real women passive, if not submissive. Lacanian theory of identity describes it as depending largely on vision, more specifically on a form of pleasurable identification with one’s own image in the mirror.

Feminist challenges to Psychoanalytical theories have been pervasive, as they laid open the injustice inflicted on women by reinforcing their passivity and

their need to conform to specific canons, determining their own inner judgement and undermining her self-esteem. Quite early, Freud's and Lacan's definition of primary identification provoked the most radical opposition in the work of Luce Irigaray. For her, looking into the mirror for a woman carries with it negative implications, because what the subject sees is her own lack (lack as far as she doesn't see the Phallus, the signifier of identity itself in the phallogocentric doctrine). Irigaray's counter-theory proved that the patriarchal definition of women's sexual identity as "passive", as opposed to masculine "action", is false and has been used by patriarchy to put her in the position of "a commodity" within the dominant scopoc economy, "the beautiful object of contemplation" (Irigaray 1977 (1985): 26). And it is this traditional passive role that has caused women's conflict with the representation of the self. Particularly in visual art, the patriarchal structures of seeing deny her capacity to create by implying, "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey, 1975: 19), not being the agent of representation but an object for the satisfaction of scopoc drives.

Another aspect of the conflict of women's identity with the visual is that, as Modjeska's narrator says, "We live in a culture that encourages us to see ourselves as others see us" (Modjeska, 1995: 63). Jenijoy La Belle, in her book *Herself Beheld*, observes that "Almost any type of crisis, but particularly a personal loss, seems to initiate in many female characters a need for literal, as well as mental reflection. When such women look into their mirrors, their psychological condition sometimes its visual correlative in at least a momentary inability to recognize themselves". She adds that what they are trying is to "see who they are by seeing how they are seen by others" (La Belle, 1988: 100-103). John Berger summarised the feeling of being contemplated from outside in a well-known paragraph of his book *Ways of Seeing*:

Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women, but also the relation of women to themselves. The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. She turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight (BERGER, 1972: 47).

When it comes to creating an expression of one's own self through a self-portrait, this inability to see oneself except through the eyes of society, creates tension by forcing the individual to step outside herself. For women who are writers (or painters) the act of writing or painting themselves implies a negotiation between seeing and being seen:

For a woman author there is nothing obvious about writing that much despised pronoun at the beginning of a sentence and pronouncing it feminine. A man writes "I" as he sees, and in writing it is therefore seen. The

relationship is clear. When a woman writes 'I' she must reconcile seeing with being seen, and negotiate the transposition of the first term to her own use. How is she, the object who is seen, to see herself, both seen and seeing? She cannot assume the same authority when she begins the sentence (Modjeska, 1995: 141).

As a visual art, painting encourages and takes pleasure in vision, and it especially invites to reflect on vision and ways of seeing. Different definitions of sight and seeing come through the narrative in *The Orchard*. On the one hand it is considered an active intellectual activity equivalent to understanding and knowing. But this is confronted with its passive counterpart of being seen, implying lack of control and knowledge, that is, an acceptance of external views imposed on the self. Once more, the binary structure of the patriarchal process of “seeing” separates a subject and an object, linked by the power of the observer over the observed, who thus, becomes vulnerable and passive through the sacrifice of her own creativity. Breaking this binary structure, the book proposes more meanings involved in the process of “seeing”. One of them is a mythical power, that of the castrating medusa, that turns whoever looks at her into stone. This form of looking, associated to the evil version of women agency, is negative because it draws on hatred and death. There is yet another possibility, and that is seeing as “self-expression”, as “seeing oneself” not in a passive but in an active and self-fulfilling way. This form of seeing is carried out through the self-portraits by women painters and, for the writers, through their capacity to write themselves into a story, which is the case of Jean Rhys, Hildegarde, Virginia Woolf, or the narrator of the book itself.

The self-portraits by women painters illustrate what Modjeska considers attempts at the negotiation between the seer and the seen in a woman artist. One example is that of the Australian painter Grace Cossington Smith¹, a relevant figure in Australian art, who is most famous for using landscapes, familiar objects and interiors as her subjects. The latter were to dominate her work in the final part of her career, after the death of her father in 1948. In *The Orchard* her self-portrait is described as an exception in her work, “painted just before the first of the interiors” (Modjeska, 1995: 136): “...she paints herself stark and unadorned. A private face, a face without compromise: a 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” (Modjeska, 1995: 135). Then, Modjeska considers the most characteristic theme of the painter’s later life. For her narrator, the interiors are equivalent to self-portraits “of a woman who has resolved the tension between her own ability to see and the seeing [...], a woman who has fully withdrawn from the gaze of the world to discover not a defensive retreat,

1 Modjeska has recently written a book about the lives of Cossington Smith and Stella Bowen.

but the fullness of a solitude that society deems empty.” (Modjeska, 1995: 137). Cossington Smith’s self-portrait is then contrasted with another painting of the series of interiors, *Interior with wardrobe mirror*. In this canvas there is a mirror on the door of a central wardrobe, as if it were “inviting the looker’s reflection”. However, what is not shown, but, considering the arrangement of space and point of view, *should be there*, is the reflection of the painter herself: “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” (Modjeska, 1995: 137). In the self-portrait the narrator saw tension between seeing and being seen; in the interiors the absence of the inhabitant of those interior spaces does not imply lacking for Modjeska, but a form of self-expression that has solved the conflict with self-identity by rejecting being seen and finding a positive, brightly coloured and brightly lit, view of her own self-chosen domestic environment. Modjeska’s interpretation of these paintings builds on a vindication of solitude as the way to find the calm to explore one’s inner self. Homely life and the domestic, a much deprecated feminine space, also become vindicated as sources of creative power.

Stella Bowen is considered in the chapter entitled “The adultery factor”. It is her life rather than her work that attracts Modjeska’s attention to this painter. She is used as an example of how being “a wife or a mistress” “amputates” or at least limits women’s creativity. Externally imposed definitions such as these are considered to be the circumstances that cause women’s inability to create of which “*The Handless Maiden*” is a myth. Drawing from her memoirs, the story of Stella Bowen’s life with Ford Madox Ford is reconstructed and contrasted with other stories of infidelity to illustrate the central one: the story in which the narrator herself was mistress to a married man. The whole chapter, thus, becomes the result of the meditations of this reproachful ex-mistress trying to reconstruct herself out of a definition made in relation to a man. Stella Bowen devoted eight years of her life to Ford, while they lived together and she procured the right atmosphere for him to work in. She became a “nurturer” instead of a “creator”. Because we have access to Bowen’s own impressions on her life with Ford, her case is often quoted as an example of women artists who get close to men of great talent and recognition (as Camille Claudell did with Rodin, or Françoise Gillot with Picasso). Germaine Greer quotes the following passage:

My painting had been hopelessly interfered with by the whole shape of my life, for I was learning the technique of quite a different role: that of consort to another and more important artist, so that although Ford was always urging me to paint, I simply had not got any creative vitality to spare after I had played my part towards him and Julie [her daughter] and struggled through

the day's chores" (Stella Bowen's memoirs as quoted by Greer (1979) 2001: 53).

Stella Bowen states quite at large her feelings within what was clearly an amputating relationship, which, according to Greer, has been the case of a significant number of women artists: "[...] generally speaking, artistic women tend to marry not for support and comfort, but for esteem. They marry 'upward'. A female artist almost always seeks love where she feels admiration, from another artist, her senior and her superior, at least in her eyes" (Greer, (1979) 2001: 54). In Bowen's case, the story leads on to a series of infidelities on Ford's part, one of them with the writer Jean Rhys. This "affair" is signalled out in *The Orchard* as the one that caused their final separation, and because Rhys's own experience of it is reflected in the novel *Quartet*, which she wrote at the time. According to Modjeska's account in *The Orchard* some time had to pass for both women to become independent of this part of their lives.

Bowen was a skilled portrait painter who also liked to paint "windows and hands", symbols of independence and agency. In Rhys's case it took two more novels about victimised ex-mistresses and a period of silence before she produced what is considered to be her most accomplished work and also a relevant feminist counter-text, *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Stella Bowen's self-portrait, painted three years after leaving Ford, is described in the final chapter of the novel, "The Orchard". The sad look in her eyes is interpreted as coming from knowledge of the experience of being an exile, an Australian living in Paris, and later on in England, that has to find her own self in hard conditions.

The third woman artist considered in *The Orchard* is Artemisia Genthileschi. Greatly admired by Modjeska, she is the most relevant example of the triumph of women's artistic expression over the attempts at frustrating their capacity to create. The most important source of knowledge about her life comes through the records of the trial in which she was involved in 1612, when she was about 19 years old and had been raped by Agostino Tassi, her father's collaborator and her teacher. During the trial, and in order to establish the true facts, she was subjected to torture by the use of the sibille or thumbscrew. The court, according to Germaine Greer's account of it, was specially concerned with finding out not only whether she had been abused but if she was a virgin before the episode and whether she had become a prostitute afterwards. These were key issues, as they would determine whether Tassi should be forced to marry her. Artemisia kept to her version, but apparently the court were not convinced and Tassi spent some time in prison and was then released with no clear resolution for or against him (Greer, (1979) 2001: 191-193). The sibille could have damaged her hands permanently but, as with the Handless Maiden, she managed to avoid permanent injury and her personality was somehow fortified

by the ordeal (or at least so it appears from the vigour and preciseness of her work); soon she was painting again, and particularly it was at this time that she began a series of paintings that was to become a popular motive in her work, that of *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (the earliest extant version of this theme has been dated in 1612-13). This was already a topic frequently portrayed in her father's workshop, where she began to work quite early. She got commissions to repeat this painting several times, so that five signed versions have been preserved (Bornay, 1998: 52), but the most famous was her second, a remarkable painting both in composition and performance. It also stands out because of the strength and air of concentration in the cruel act displayed by the main character, which is enhanced by the composition. The painting is interpreted in Modjeska's book as the expression of a fantasy of revenge by a wronged woman. This view is based on the account given in Mary Garrard's biography of Genthileschi, whose interpretation of the paintings depends very much on biographical data. This linking of life and work has consistently been rejected by other feminist art historians and critics. They see it as one of the tools that have been used by traditional male criticism to undermine the work of female painters with the suggestion that their achievement is an oddity that can easily be explained by the circumstances and is therefore alien to genius itself. Griselda Pollock gives a more cautious study of the work, based on historical contextualization, and which still conveys a celebration of the great quality of this painting (Pollock, 1999: 115-124). Whichever the circumstances in which it was painted, Artemisia's *Judith Slaying Holofernes* is a powerful expression of women's agency and strength:

The effects she strove for were grand ones: the predominant theme, a celebration of human and especially female potential, was profoundly alien to the prevailing artistic temper. It has often been noticed that Artemisia's female figures are strong rather than charming; one is often puzzled by the impression of massiveness conveyed by Artemisia's spatial organization and her exaggeration of certain features, especially the size of hands. The women are unconsciously voluptuous, engrossed as they are in their own activities (Greer, (1979) 2001: 195).

For the narrator in *The Orchard*, Artemisia's famous painting is, despite its cruelty, a celebration of women's agency that reverses the myth of amputation. She considers it in a subchapter entitled "Fantasies of revenge", giving the topic of the painting sexual undertones that, according to Bornay, and Pollock among others, it did not have in the biblical original. Thus the picture becomes an example of the type of subconscious feeling described by Freud in "The Uncanny", in which any amputation, but especially beheadings and severed hands, are considered a symbol of castration (FREUD, 1997: 208).

However, it is in the *Self-portrait as the Allegory of Painting* that Modjeska, as most of Artemisia's critics, sees the greatest emblem of her triumph over the patriarchal structure of seeing that renders women passive. And this, even though it is certainly a characteristic of her painting, as Pollock explains at length, that Artemisia's women are potent, physically strong and active agents (Pollock, 1999: 123). On her part, the self-portrait implies a new canvas that is being painted by the artist as we observe her. Modjeska explains the complex structure of seeing created by the painting:

Male artists, as the masculine subject of a portrait, could not also be the object that they painted, as art was thought to reside in the beauty of the feminine form; but Artemisia, as woman, could be at once subject and object, process and image, the creator and the art itself. She lifts the hand stained with paint to the canvas in order to make the first mark that will create the work of art which, as self-portrait (and we can see her lean to catch the mirror out of sight behind, or beside, the canvas), 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. It is the image she is to create that will face us, not the artist who paints it (Modjeska, 1995: 144).

In fact, the spectators never get to see the picture that is causing the artist's rapture; it is involvement and creation themselves that are being represented without acknowledging the look by anyone but herself. This destroys the common structures of seeing: whereas the canvas has for its own sake a great capacity of attraction of the look, in this case it is not the picture but the artist, in the act of painting, that we are made to look at.

The portraits painted by the fictional characters are also statements about how they see themselves and are seen by others. This is particularly true in Ettie's case. Towards the end of the chapter entitled "Sight and Solitude" she puts together the three paintings that summarise the story of her life, for the sake of the narrator, now beginning to overcome her crisis and gradually recovering her eye-sight. They are two portraits painted by the men in her life: Jock, the married man she was mistress to, and whose child she bore and lost to the rival woman; and Gerhard, her husband and mate in later life, who understood her better than anyone else. Jock's portrait has an element of naivety about it: "He was flirting with cubism at the time, and at the same time painting a monument, or so he thought, to a pure love" (Modjeska, 1995: 155); but Gerhard's is crude: "There, in Gerhard's portrait, [...] is the capacity for darkness and for light that had warred in Ettie for so many years. The tendons of that splendid neck taut and unyielding" (Modjeska, 1995: 156).

The third picture is extremely symbolic. It is Ettie's own painting of an eye, her eye, bound to the ground by the plants of a garden. She painted it at the moment in which the one tragic event of her life took place. She had become pregnant and was forced to sacrifice her child to her lover and his wife. That was the last time she painted. Her eye appears, not completely chopped off, but tethered to the ground, as if her ability to see and therefore to represent what she sees, was forever bound, restrained by forces inside or outside her. She never again painted but devoted herself to the tending of her garden, the one realm in which she could retreat from a painful reality, find her own self and give expression to her creativity. The garden itself is a space of vision; Louise remembers the first time she saw it as a dream (Modjeska, 1995: 9). These three paintings represent three stages in her life that have a secret message. She is to join them and give them to Clara as a present that hides the truth that she has never wanted to tell her: the fact that Clara is really her grand-daughter.

When the narrator of *The Orchard* goes through her period of blindness and solitude, she also looks in her mirror. She does it the morning after attending a party in which she realises how little she can see of other people's faces and that she is now "no longer part of that controlling order of seeing and being seen" (Modjeska, 1995: 116). The face she sees in the mirror is strange to her at first; but then she realizes this is her true face, her private face, free of the vision of other people, "a face that has ceased to live for, or in, the regards of others" (Modjeska, 1995: 117). Not knowing how others see her leaves her alone with her own vision of herself. Her solitude allows her an insight, a new vision, into herself. In solitude she finds the seeds of wisdom and creativity (Modjeska, 1995: 132) – "For it is in solitude, rather than blindness itself that we are relieved of *the constant flood of language that pours meaninglessly over everybody, everywhere* and opened to other, more mysterious images, realms, and sources of knowledge" (Modjeska, 1995: 131). She also, with Ettie's help, comes to terms with the hatred she had directed to the man who "had encouraged in her a love he could not honour" (Modjeska, 1995: 151), because "grief brings understanding" (Modjeska, 1995: 154), and understanding makes hatred impossible. Her process of self-definition goes on to considering her education and closes with her finding a new peace of mind in her own newly acquired orchard. But, like in the case of Artemisia's self-portrait and Cossington Smith's *Interior with Wardrobe Mirror*, her readers never get to see her image, her definition of herself, which, we assume, is expressed in a letter she sends to a friend from her childhood. For the readers of *The Orchard*, the possibilities stretch into the future, since we are left with an invitation to decline all external definition and find our own internal, not to be seen face, our true identity outside the codes of vision.

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