

“Between us sleeps our child—art”: Creativity, Identity, and the Maternal in the Works of Marianne von Werefkin and Her Contemporaries

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Abstract

This essay explores the interstices between creativity, procreativity, motherhood, and identity in the works of Marianne Werefkin and some of her contemporaries within German modernism. For the artists Käthe Kollwitz and Paula Modersohn-Becker, artistic creation and motherhood were twin concerns in their self-constructed identities as artists. For Werefkin and Gabriele Münter, the poles of creativity and procreativity were more complexly figured. Whilst mothers and children feature as predominant subject matter in the works of Kollwitz and Modersohn-Becker, and to some extent in the works of Münter, the subject is virtually absent in the works of Werefkin, for whom “art” is the child who sublimates her erotic desire.

One day I happened to assist a doctor at a gynecological examination. When the speculum was in place, the doctor showed me the bottom of the diseased womb. She was a woman in childbed, she had just bled in order to give life; after giving birth she had unexpected complications. The horror... a nauseating odor rose to my nose; the linens stained with blood and pus moved my heart... I cared for the sick woman, approaching her each time with a retch. On the third day this woman cried out to me in sorrow that her husband ‘took’ her that very night. Since then physical love has been a monster to me... For four years we have slept side by side. I have remained virgin, he has become virgin again. Between us sleeps our child—art...¹

1 “Il m’est arrivé un jour d’assister un médecin dans une auscultation gynécologique. Le miroir placé, le médecin m’a montré le fond de la matrice malade. C’était une accouchée, elle venait de saigner pour donner la vie; après l’avoir donnée, elle pourrissait des complications survenues. L’horreur...une nauséabonde odeur me montait au nez, les linges maculés de sang et pus me tournaient le cœur...Je soignais la malade, chaque fois l’approchant avec un haut le cœur. Au troisième jour, cette femme me criait en hurlant de douleur que son mari l’avait possédée cette nuit même. L’amour physique m’est depuis un monstre.... Il y a quatre

The third letter of the first volume of Marianne Werefkin's diaries opens with this visceral account of the aftermath of childbirth and the horrors of postpartum copulation that prompted her early decision to replace physical sexual contact with the nurturing of "the illusory and the artistic," "the beautiful" and "the chaste love" of art.² Although the interstices between creativity, procreativity, gendered and sexual identity are frequently rehearsed tropes within feminist analyses of women's artwork, very little comparative research in English has been undertaken of the variety of discursive frameworks around women, identity, and creativity in the work of women artists associated with German modernism. Whilst for both Käthe Kollwitz (1867–1945) and Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876–1907), artistic creation and motherhood were twin concerns in their self-constructed identities as artists, for Marianne Werefkin (1860–1938) and Gabriele Münter (1877–1962) both of whom remained childless, the poles of creativity and procreation were more complexly figured.

Public political discourse in late nineteenth-century Europe had structured the ideal image of the maternal as the stabilizing force of social order. Ideal mothers were the bedrock of conservative tradition in an age of political uncertainty and change. However, as the century came to a close, widespread cultural interest in aspects of childhood and youth, as twin pillars of innocence and renewal on the one hand, and dangerous but alluring liminal sexuality on the other, began to characterize a shift in consciousness. As childhood historian, Philippe Ariès has observed, if "youth is the privileged age of the seventeenth century, childhood of the nineteenth", then it is "adolescence" in the twentieth.³ As such, the transition from fin-de-siècle to early twentieth century offers a significant historical context for a comparative consideration of Modersohn-Becker's, Kollwitz's, Münter's, and Werefkin's potentially disruptive practices within normative understandings of the pre-First World War German avant-garde.⁴ All four artists began their careers across

ans que nous dormons côte à côte. Je suis restée vierge, lui l'est redevenu. Entre nous dort notre enfant—l'art..." Marianne Werefkin, *Lettres à un Inconnu: Aux sources l'expressionnisme* (Letters to an Unknown. Expressionist Sources), ed. by Gabrielle Durour-Kowalska, (Paris: Klincksieck, 1999), 72–75.

2 Ibid., 75.

3 Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York: Vintage, 1962).

4 See for example David Ehrenpreis, "The Figure of the Backfisch: Representing Puberty in Wilhelmine Germany," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* (Journal of Art History), 67 (2004) 4: 479–508; Diane Radycki "Pictures of the Flesh': Modersohn-Becker and the Nude," *Women's Art Journal* (Fall/Winter 2009): 3–14; John Neubauer, *The Fin-de-Siècle Culture of Adolescence*

the nineteenth *and* twentieth centuries, across their era's transition of interest from childhood to adolescence. And they did this whilst also forging professional roles for themselves as artists in an age of intense debate and conflict concerning the propriety of women's public professional, maternal, and domestic roles. In Wilhelmine Germany, women entering the professions were thought to pose danger to the stability of the social order, precisely because of the implied threat to their roles as mothers and nurturers of the nation. The pressures on women artists to procreate in the domestic realm rather than to "create" in the public sphere were immense and the subject of all four artists' direct and indirect experiences within the first decade of the new century. Of particular interest in relation to these conflicts were the different approaches that Modersohn-Becker, Kollwitz, Münter, and Werefkin, all took to the representation of women and/or children as subject matter during this period, an area I would like to focus on for the rest of this chapter.

Perhaps the most famous examples of the German avant-garde's representations of young girls entering adolescence and puberty can be readily found in many vibrant images of the young models of *Die Brücke* (The Bridge), like Fränzi and Marcella. For *Die Brücke*, numerous renditions of the naked and socially unencumbered Fränzi and Marcella were integral to their Nietzschean ambitions for cultural renewal, symbolized by the hope invested in the new generation of unfettered youth, as well as indexical signs of their own performative bohemian existence.⁵ Yet recent art historical scholarship has begun to re-iterate the radical implications of Modersohn-Becker's engagement with similar Gauguin-inspired themes in her work of a few years earlier.

For Modersohn-Becker, the reiterative depiction of naked and nude women and girls was also central to the construction of her identity as an artist but one which Diane Radycki convincingly claims to have been largely misrecognized in most art historical scholarship until recently.⁶ In Modersohn-Becker's works, the masculinized gaze of Paul Gauguin, the Brücke artists, Pablo Picasso, and other modernists, is supplanted by a radical re-definition of the possibilities for the female nude as an artistic category. Radycki points out

(New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1991); Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998).

- 5 For more on Kirchner's images of Fränzi and Marcella see Sherwin Simmons "A suggestiveness that can make one crazy": Ernst Ludwig Kirchner's Images of Marzella," *Modernism/Modernity* (September 2015) (forthcoming).
- 6 Diane Radycki, *Paula Modersohn-Becker: The First Modern Woman Artist* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2013), 158–182.

that the discursive frameworks in which Modersohn-Becker's art has usually been considered have marginalized her central concern with the depiction of the female nude. Instead, her works have been categorized under the so-called "minor" and "feminine" genres of still-life, self-portraiture, children, and the everyday.⁷ Radycki's revised account helps to rectify the art historical misconstructions regarding Modersohn-Becker's radical contributions to the modernist avant-garde on the terrain of the nude. In her tragically short-lived career, Modersohn-Becker painted over fifty nudes and significantly, more than half of them in the years 1906–07, during her time in Paris.

As is widely known, 1907 was a crucial year in Paris. It saw the production of André Derain's *Baigneuses* (Bathers, Museum of Modern Art, New York), Henri Matisse's *Nu bleu, Souvenir de Biskra* (Blue Nude, Baltimore Museum of Art, Baltimore, Maryland) and Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (MoMA). As Natasha Staller observes, "the contest for the supremacy of the avant-garde was being fought in the arena of the female nude, painted in large scale, painted aggressively, and painted in a resolutely androgynous and anti-feminine manner."⁸ Yet as many commentators have observed, this notorious battle for the nude was a doggedly masculine one. Yet nowhere in the history of modernism is it quite so clear how a female gaze can completely disrupt dominant masculinist narratives than via Modersohn-Becker's radical intervention into the genre, a whole year earlier, in 1906. Within her first few months of arriving in Worpswede in 1898, Modersohn-Becker commented in her *Tagebuch* (Diary) on the powerful nexus between a local mother and child that she had observed during the course of her sketching:

I sketched a young mother with her child at her breast, sitting in a smoky hut. If only I could someday paint what I felt then! A sweet woman, an image of charity. She was nursing her big, one-year-old bambino when, with defiant eyes, her four-year-old daughter snatched for her breast until she was given it. And the woman gave her life and her youth and her power to the child in utter simplicity, unaware that she was a heroine...⁹

⁷ Ibid., 158.

⁸ Natasha Staller, *A Sum of Destructions: Picasso's Cultures and the Creation of Cubism* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2001), 318.

⁹ "Ich zeichnete eine junge Mutter mit dem Kind an der Brust, in einer raucherfüllten Hütte sitzend. Wenn ich nur eines Tages malen könnte, was ich damals empfand! Eine süße Frau, ein Bild der Nächstenliebe. Sie stillte ihr großes, einjähriges Bambino, als mit trotzigem Augen, ihre vierjährige Tochter nach ihrer Brust griff, bis sie sie bekam. Und die Frau gab dem Kind ihr Leben und ihre Jugend und ihre Kraft in vollkommener Einfachheit, ohne zu ahnen, daß sie eine Heldin war." Paula Modersohn-Becker, letter of October 29, 1898, in *The Letters*

The power of the maternal, vicariously experienced by Modersohn-Becker in this Worpswede passage was indeed to find the pictorial form that she hoped for but not until her final trip to Paris in 1906, and certainly not through recourse to any traditional pictorial tradition. Rather, it was via her radical re-working of the female maternal nude. Within two weeks of observing her “young mother with her child at her breast and defiant four-year-old daughter,” Modersohn-Becker had also begun to think about the nude: “Evenings I’m drawing the nude, life-size. Little Meta Fijol, with her pious, little Cecilia face, marks the beginning...”¹⁰

Child nudes, mostly girls after 1903, kneeling or standing, barely contained in their pictorial spaces, and holding or surrounded by flowers and fruits in an allusive nod to (though palpable departure from), their exotic beginnings in Gauguin, constitute much of Modersohn-Becker’s oeuvre for the next three years. But in 1906, she began in earnest on a series of about a dozen paintings of mother-and-child nudes, of which *Liegende Mutter mit Kind II* (Reclining Mother and Child II, fig. 8.1) is the largest, most ambitious, and most radical.

As Radycki has commented, “the frank exhibition of the body, from breast, to belly to pubic hair, sets this work apart from *all* previous maternities and points not back but forward... Modersohn-Becker is not the end of any exhausted tradition of maternity.”¹¹ Rather, she is “a pioneer of the female body interrupting the body of maternity, interrupting the body of fecundity, interrupting the body of spectacle. And challenging categories, roles and limitations.”¹² *Mother-Nude*, as opposed to *Female Nude* or sacred *Madonna and Child*, is until this point a form of representation without a visual history. Western culture knows it only as the site of masculine trauma, whether in the form of “Freud’s castrated mother or Lacan’s phallic one.”¹³ Modersohn-Becker’s gaze does not flinch. If Matisse’s *Nu bleu, Souvenir de Biskra* (Blue Nude) figures female sexuality as the object of the masculine gaze, Modersohn-Becker’s *Liegende Mutter mit Kind II* figures female procreation as a challenge to the dominance of that gaze. It is a work that re-defines pictorial conventions governing the representation of the female body and it radically shifts the viewing norms for its time.

and Journals, ed. Günter Busch and Liselotte von Reinken (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press 1998), 112.

10 “Abends zeichne ich den Akt, lebensgroß. Kleine Meta Fijol, mit ihrem frommen, kleinen Cecilia Gesicht, bezeichnet den Anfang.” Paula Modersohn-Becker, letter of November 11, 1898, in *ibid.*, 112.

11 Radycki, *Paula Modersohn-Becker*, 170.

12 *Ibid.*, 172–175.

13 *Ibid.*, 173.



FIGURE 8.1 Paula Modersohn-Becker, *Liegende Mutter mit Kind II (Reclining Mother and Child II)*, 1906, oil on canvas, 82.5 × 124.7 cm
MUSEEN BÖTTCHERSTRASSE, PAULA MODERSOHN-BECKER MUSEUM, BREMEN

Similar pre-occupations with the place of the female nude within the oeuvre of an emerging female artist can be witnessed in Käthe Kollwitz's early works, including a sketch sheet from 1900, one of a series of preparatory studies for an etching entitled *Das Leben* (Life, fig. 8.2). As Rosemary Betterton has observed of this work, there is an interesting dialectic set up between the overtly sexualized gaze conventionally constructed for looking at the female nude and its simultaneous “refusal” by Kollwitz's placing of her own head in front of the torso where the reclining head of the nude might be expected to be.¹⁴ Kollwitz disrupts the conventional visual field of masculine desire, of being looked at as object of the gaze, and instead inserts herself as active subject via her self-portrait head. Kollwitz's “inability to resolve the separation between the self-portrait head and the nude body” reveals the strength of the dichotomy faced by all of the women artists under consideration here, between the artist, who has the right to look, and the female body as the normative object of the gaze.¹⁵

14 Rosemary Betterton, “Maternal Nudes by Kollwitz and Modersohn-Becker,” in *An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and the Body* (London, New York: Routledge 1996), 26.

15 *Ibid.*, 28.



FIGURE 8.2 Käthe Kollwitz, *Self-Portrait and Nude Studies for Das Leben*, 1900, graphite, pen, and black ink, 28 × 44.5 cm
GRAPHISCHE SAMMLUNG, STAATSGALERIE STUTTGART

Whilst Modersohn-Becker's radical approach to the pictorial traditions of "Mother and Child" recasts the genre in order to prize open the category of the female nude, Kollwitz disrupts conventional renditions of serene motherhood by depicting the maternal state as one of physical absorption and psychic possession. Both *Frau mit totem Kind* (Woman with Dead Child, 1903) and *Tod und Frau* (Death and the Woman, 1910) stand outside the western cultural tradition of spiritual and dematerialized motherhood symbolized at its height by the Immaculate Conception and the Virgin birth. *Frau mit totem Kind* visualizes the unspeakable pain of maternal loss whereas *Tod und Frau* hovers in that uniquely liminal space, peculiar to Kollwitz, between symbolism and social commentary. Both Kollwitz and Modersohn-Becker combine the figure of the mother with the representation of the nude—two poles of femininity that are usually kept apart, the publically available erotic body and the privately reproductive one. As Betterton has argued, Kollwitz and Modersohn-Becker's focus on dualities in their artworks between self-portraits and nudes, nudes and mothers, visual representation and maternal origin, was bound up with conflicts around the role of the artist and that of the mother during the period in which they were both working and which they both articulate in their diaries, letters, and journals.¹⁶ However there are interesting and significant

¹⁶ Ibid., 20–45.

distinctions also evident from their own writings. Although Modersohn-Becker's most intensely creative period in Paris came through her choice of separation from her husband and her erstwhile resistance to bearing his child, it was also born of a strong emotional bond with her own mother: "And you my dear Mother, stay close to me and give me your blessing to what I am doing. I am your Child."¹⁷

On the other hand, Kollwitz's *Tagebücher* (Diaries) from the pre-war era are significant in their paradoxical re-iteration of the creative energies afforded to her by her children. Taking 1910 as a sample year, she reflects on dreams of having another baby, of a sculpture she imagines entitled *Schwangerschaft* (Pregnancy) and of the ways in which her relationships with her sons are becoming "slacker" as they grow older:

I am gradually approaching the period in my life when work comes first. When both the boys went away for Easter, I hardly did anything but work. Worked, slept, ate and went for short walks. But above all I worked. And yet I wonder whether the 'blessing' is not missing from such work...formerly, in my so wretchedly limited working time, I was more productive because I was more sensual...Potency, potency is diminishing...¹⁸

Whatever their differences and distinctions, what remains significant for both artists is that artistic creativity is categorically bound up with aspects of maternal identity.

What then of the creative identities Münter and Werefkin, both of whom remained childless? Between 1908 and 1910 the representation of children, especially although not exclusively, young girls, became a thematic focus for the 31-year old Münter in a series of works which were subsequently exhibited at Herwarth Walden's Sturm Galerie in 1913. *Kind in Weiß* (Child in White, 1910, Munich, Städtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus fig. 8.3) was originally exhibited

17 "Und du, meine liebe Mutter, bleib' mir nahe und gib' mir deinen Segen für das, was ich tue., Ich bin dein Kind." Paula Modersohn-Becker, letter to her mother, Paris, May 10, 1906, in Modersohn-Becker, *The Letters and Journals*, 398.

18 "Ich rücke allmählich in die Periode meines Lebens herein, wo Arbeit an erster Stelle steht. Als beide Jungen Ostern verreist waren habe ich fast nur gearbeitet. Dann noch geschlafen, gegessen, ein wenig spazieren gegangen. Aber vor allem gearbeitet. Und doch weiß ich nicht ob einer solchen Arbeit nicht der ‚Segen‘ fehlt...und doch war ich früher in meiner so arg beschnittenen Arbeitszeit produktiver weil ich sinnlicher war... Die Potenz, die Potenz läßt nach" Käthe Kollwitz, diary entry, April 1910, in *Käthe Kollwitz: Die Tagebücher 1908–1943* (Käthe Kollwitz. Diaries 1908–1943), ed. Jutta Bohnke Kollwitz (Munich: btb-Verlag, 2007), 65–66. English translation in Hans Kollwitz, ed., *The Diaries and Letters of Käthe Kollwitz* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1955), 53.



FIGURE 8.3
*Gabriele Münter, Child in White, 1910, Oil on
 Cardboard, 44.7 × 39.7 cm*
 STÄDTISCHE GALERIE IM LENBACHHAUS,
 MUNICH

under the title *Mädchenkopf. Weiße Bluse* (Head of a Girl. White Blouse, 1910). According to Reinhold Heller, the “white blouse” of the title was assigned by Münter to distinguish it from four otherwise identically entitled works which Heller ascribes as functioning primarily as typological studies of form, rather than as individual portrait likenesses.¹⁹ Indeed comparative works from this period such as *Knabenporträt* (Portrait of a Young Boy, 1908, Gabriele Münter und Johannes Eichner Stiftung, Munich) and *Mädchen mit Puppe* (Young Girl with Doll, 1908–09, Milwaukee Art Museum), firmly testify to Münter’s bold formal and experimental use of paint, Fauve-inspired color palettes, loose brushwork, and bounded forms.

Following Heller, it could be suggested that although the children depicted in Münter’s work of this period serve as traditional subject matter learned and practiced from her training at the *Damen-Akademie* (Ladies’ Academy), they also become vessels for her vanguard explorations of flattened planes of surface color. As for Modersohn-Becker and *Die Brücke* especially, the representation of pre-pubescent children seems to be inextricably bound up with the labors of modernism. As Shulamith Behr has observed, “the theme of childhood was of consistent relevance to Münter” since “the notion of youth responded to

19 Reinhold Heller, *Gabriele Münter: The Years of Expressionism 1903–1920* (Munich, New York: Prestel, 1997), 118–119.

various intellectual and aesthetic imperatives at the turn of the century."²⁰ For artists in particular, Nietzsche offered a compelling metaphor of futurity in the child as a regenerative principle, the creative person being aligned with both the newborn child and the act of procreation.²¹ The figure of the child in early twentieth century German modernism was regarded as a source of "untainted and authentic culture."²² *Mädchen mit Puppe* (Girl with a Doll) of 1900 was one of Münter's first drawings on the theme and it was one that she was to return to again and again throughout her career.

Although it was typological studies of young girls such as her 1908 *Mädchen mit Puppe* (Young Girl with Doll) that typified Münter's artistic production between 1908 and 1910, *Knabenporträt* (Portrait of a Young Boy) from 1908 is a rarer example of a more psychologically intense study of a child from this period. The girl sits demurely cradling her toy doll, whereas the boy demonstrates apprehension and anxiety, clutching his jacket and poised as if about to run from the scene. Barnaby Wright has suggested that Münter may have found it harder to "establish a coherent symbolic typology of boyhood" which is perhaps why this work remained un-exhibited.²³ Interestingly, Modersohn-Becker also found it more difficult to engage in representations of boys and stopped painting them altogether after 1903. Furthermore, on the rare occasions that Werefkin included children in her work, they were also predominantly, though not exclusively, girls rather than boys. And even Kollwitz, regularly favored either androgynous child-types or gender-specific girls over the representation of boys.

It is clear then that mothers, children, and concepts of the maternal feature as predominant subject matter and/or drivers in the work of Kollwitz and Modersohn-Becker and, to a much smaller degree, in the works of Münter—albeit in very different ways. However, the subject is virtually absent in the works of Werefkin. Yet in Werefkin's series of diaristic *Lettres à un Inconnu* (Letters to an Unknown, 1901–05) concerns about sexual identity, childbirth, and artistic creativity are also expressed at a crucial transitional moment in her life and career. It is thus worth mapping the psychic journey expressed in these diaries

20 Shulamith Behr, "Beyond the Muse: Gabriele Münter as *Expressionistin*," in *Gabriele Münter: The Search for Expression 1906–1917* (London: Courtauld Institute Gallery, 2005), 51.

21 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also Sprach Zarathustra. Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen* (Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A book for everyone and nobody) (Chemnitz: Ernst Schmeitzner, 1883–85), 107.

22 Behr, "Beyond the Muse," 51.

23 Barnaby Wright, *Portrait of a Young Boy* 1908. Catalogue entry in *Gabriele Münter: The Search for Expression 1906–1917* (London: Courtauld Institute Gallery, 2005), 78.

since they chart the emergence of a strong conviction towards modernism after a lengthy period of artistic inactivity. The woman and artist who emerges from the other side is transformed from a passive “servant of the arts,” who once sublimated all of her desires (sexual, maternal, creative), to a woman of artistic vision and intellect, secure in her own path to modernist abstraction.

Lettres à un Inconnu were begun in 1901, one year after Werefkin’s 40th birthday and the same year that the 20-year old Helene Nesnakomoff (1881–1965) became pregnant by Werefkin’s partner, Alexei Jawlensky (1864–1941). As is widely known, for the preceding six years Werefkin had stalled her own artistic career in order to nurture and support Jawlensky’s. Indeed, her diaries speak to a widely-held Nietzschean reverence for “the artist” as an almost supernatural being and a category from which at the time she believed herself to be excluded because she was a woman.²⁴ She refers to the agonies of her relationship with Jawlensky explaining that she abandoned her art “when I believed that I would be able to serve it better by abstaining so another could succeed.”²⁵ It was to be another four years before she stopped the diaries and returned to painting. It was during this period that she used her diaries to both excise her agonies about Jawlensky’s betrayal but also, crucially, to develop her own artistic ideas.²⁶ In an entry of 1902, she comments bitterly of Jawlensky that “the man to whom I have given all: my spirit, my heart, my inspiration and my affection, my cares, my concerns, my energy, my faith and my confidence, to whom I have opened all the treasures of my genius and of my soul, who enjoyed understanding and help—this man looks upon me with indifference and prefers kitchen maids to me.”²⁷ However, in subsequent, much later entries of 1905,

24 Werefkin, *Lettres à un Inconnu*, 96.

25 “J’aime l’art avec une passion si désintéressée, que l’orsque j’ai cru voir que je pouvais le mieux servir en m’abstenant pour qu’un autre arrive, je l’ai fait.” Werefkin, *Lettres à un Inconnu*, 79 and 98.

26 Werefkin and Jawlensky had met in the studio of Ilya Repin in 1891 and when, on the death of her father in 1896, Werefkin became beneficiary to an annual pension of 7000 rubles, the couple travelled together to the European capital of art, Munich, along with two of Werefkin’s servants, including the 15-year old Helene. Whilst training under Repin in Russia, Werefkin had begun to make a name for herself as an emerging ‘Russian Rembrandt’ due to her predilection for painting the local Jewish peasant population from the village in a realist manner.

27 “Et l’homme à qui j’ai tout donné: mon esprit et mon Cœur, mon inspiration et mon affection, mes soins et mes soucis, mon soutien, mon énergie, ma foi et ma confiance, [lui] à qui j’ai ouvert tous les trésors de mon genie et de mon âme, qui jouit de la comprehension et de l’aide qu’il trouve en moi, cet home me regarde indifferent et me préfère des filles de cuisine.” Werefkin in 1902, *Lettres à un Inconnu*, 100 Also cited in Mara Witzling, ed.,

there is a clear sense that the former gnawing pre-occupations with Jawlensky have been replaced by meditations on abstraction and the search for new directions in her own artistic practice, or as Natalya Tolstaya has suggested, an array of potential new "scripts for paintings."²⁸ Thus, in an entry of 1904 she writes:

One evening, in the raw light of electric lanterns, in the desert of streets depopulated by cafés and theatres, against the grey of walls, the Sisters passed by, all in black with a thin border of white on their capes. In the emptiness which surrounded me, in the emptiness I carried inside me, their somber figures appeared to be enormous. It was a moral act which passed, filling with its grandeur the nothingness which exists around triumphant egoism. My thought followed the Sisters along the tortuous streets which led to their community. It marched next to their silence, it listened to their hearts beat. My thought came back to me so cold....²⁹

As Mara Witzling observes, when Werefkin did start painting again, "her style had been radically transformed."³⁰ Although these troubled early years in Munich lacked painterly activity, they did not lack intellectual stimulus. A regular salon held at the Werefkin-Jawlensky's home at Giselastraße 33 had become the center of the Munich avant-garde and the seedbed for the newly formed *Neue Künstlervereinigung München* (New Artists' Association Munich, NKVM). It was also here that Werefkin's renewed vision towards modernist abstraction was nurtured and developed. By the time she painted *Die Landstraße* (Country

"Marianne Werefkin," in *Voicing our Visions: Writings by Women Artists* (New York: The Women's Press, 1991), 137.

28 Natalya Tolstoya, "Marianne Werefkin: The Woman and the Artist," *The Tretyakov Gallery Magazine*, 3 (2010): 100–109. Special Issue *Switzerland-Russia On the Crossroads of Cultures*. Online access via: <http://www.tretyakovgallerymagazine.com/img/mag/2010/098-109.pdf>.

29 "Un soir, dans la lumière crue des lanternes électriques, dans le désert des rues dépeuplées par les cafés et les théâtres, contres le gris des murs, passaient des sœurs toutes en noir, un mince bord blanc à leurs capes. Dans la ville qui m'entourait, dans la ville que je porte en moi, leurs sombres figures m'apparurent énormes. C'est un acte moral qui passait, remplissant de sa grandeur le néant que fait autour l'égoïsme triomphant. Ma pensée a suivi les sœurs le long des rues tortueuses qui conduisent à leur communauté; elle marchait à côté de leur silence, elle écoutait battre leurs cœurs. Ma pensée m'est revenue aussi froide qu'elle est partie." Werefkin in 1904, *Lettres à un Inconnu*, 167. Also cited in Witzling, "Marianne Werefkin," 144.

30 *Ibid.*, 129.

Road, fig. 8.4) in 1907, Werefkin's mature approach to modernist abstraction was combined with her sensitivity towards the uncanny resonance of post-impressionist and symbolist forerunners like Emil Bernard, Maurice Denis, the Nabis, and perhaps especially, Edvard Munch. This resulted in a highly evocative and atmospheric series of works of which *Die Landstraße* is a powerful early example and possibly one of the most enigmatic from this period. Although it is not a direct illustration of the diary entry cited above, there is certainly a sense here of the somber mood evoked by that account. The technical precision of Ilya Repin's pictorial realism, in which Werefkin had been trained, has been replaced by a heightened sensitivity towards surface color, textured brushstrokes, and flattened form. Although there had been an almost ten-year gap in her practice, it is clear from her diaries that her artistic and intellectual vision had not been dormant. Indeed, an earlier quite extensive entry had already signaled the new directions of her thinking. In volume 3 (1904–05), a long entry about color is perhaps one of the clearest indicators of her renewed discovery of herself as an artist in which she reflects on the relationships between color and form and the artists' role in shaping them.³¹



FIGURE 8.4 Marianne Werefkin, *Country Road*, 1907, tempera on cardboard, 68 × 106.5 cm
FONDAZIONE MARIANNE WEREFKIN, MUSEO COMUNALE D'ARTE MODERNA,
ASCONA

31 Werefkin in 1904–1905, *Lettres à un Inconnu*, 165–167.

Diary writing was an established and widespread practice amongst women from the Russian nobility in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It was a practice that borrowed heavily from French literary styles and genres, such as the epistolary novel; Werekfin's early twentieth-century version continues in this tradition. The diaries themselves are in the form of a journal made up of three notebooks: 1901–02, 1903–04, and 1904–05. Each entry in each notebook is addressed as a letter to a fictional "other," an alter ego through which Werekfin explores her inner ideas and emotions in an exhortation to multiple selves. Indeed, throughout them, she refers to several forms of herself, including *moi-homme*, *moi-femme*, and *moi-artiste*, in her efforts to begin the process of self-integration that allowed her "to start painting again, to be an artist, rather than a servant of the arts."³² Gesine Argent and Derek Offord have noted that: "Ego-writing was considered a means of acceptable self-realization for Russian noblewomen" in the era immediately preceding Werekfin's, confined as it was to the private, domestic sphere.³³ Jürgen Habermas has also observed that diaries and other forms of ego-writing in the modern era existed on a continuum between public and private genres.³⁴ Russian noblewomen's diaries of the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth century usually had a specific addressee, such as a sister, friend, lover, or husband and were often intended to be read aloud to a circle of family and friends. Indeed, young women were exhorted by their families to keep diaries of their travels and share them with their circle. Habermas comments that "the diary became a letter addressed to the sender, and the first person narrative became a conversation with one's self addressed to another person. These were experiments with the subjectivity discovered in the close relationships of the conjugal family."³⁵ Epistolary diary keeping was also a peculiarly feminine activity among the nobility and the letters were often intended for a specific recipient, to be sent either in instalments or as a complete work once finished.³⁶

Yet notwithstanding its epistolary format, Werekfin's diary is clearly a private document not intended to be shared, and her recipient, a fictional

32 Witzling, "Marianne Werekfin," 129.

33 See Gesine Argent and Derek Offord, "Ego-writing in French: The diary of Anastasia Lakushkina," in *The History of the French Language in Russia*. Online access via: <https://frinru.ilrt.bris.ac.uk/introduction/ego-writing-french-diary-anastasiia-iakushkina>.

34 Jürgen Habermas *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1991).

35 *Ibid.*, 49.

36 Argent and Offord, "Ego-writing in French: The diary of Anastasia Lakushkina," in *The History of the French Language in Russia*. Online access via: <https://frinru.ilrt.bris.ac.uk/introduction/ego-writing-french-diary-anastasiia-iakushkina>.

other, is “the unknown” or “the unknown one,” a version or multiple-version of her selves: “It is myself outside of myself.”³⁷ The decision to write in French is also an interesting one. Amongst Russian noblewomen of Werefkin’s mother’s generation, French was predominantly reserved as the language for writing in *genres intimes*, such as letters, journals, and memoirs, whereas Russian was the language reserved for everyday verbal communication, as well as the language of masculine diary writing which normally took the form of a chronicle, rather than the more fragmented epistolary form. For the Russian gentry, French was the language of writing about love and expressing romantic sentiment and devotion. Moreover, French literary writings provided models for Russian women wishing to express their love in what was deemed an appropriate way.³⁸ In Werefkin’s case, it seems that the use of French in her diaries serves to create privacy and intimacy and simultaneously allows her to keep within appropriate bounds of feminine expression. Importantly, I think, it is also a language peculiar to the feminine and therefore consciously separate from Jawlensky’s sphere of influence.

When Werefkin decided to paint once more, she initially turned to genre scenes inspired by the subject matter of French Impressionism. *Biergarten* (Beer Garden, 1907, fig. 8.5) clearly takes inspiration from Édouard Manet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, and their circle whereas *Frühlingssonntag* (Sunday in Spring, 1907) moves further towards the flattened forms and planes of color derived from French post-impressionism and symbolism. Both works include women with children (a young boy in *Biergarten* and girls in *Frühlingssonntag*) as ciphers of everyday life but observed at a distance, slightly outside the scenes being portrayed.

It also seems that the melancholic distance of observation pertains to many of Werefkin’s major works of this era, including *Herbst/Schule* (Autumn/School, 1907, fig. 8.6) in which the return of children to school becomes symbolic of the cyclical change of the seasons, from summer to autumn. However, the symbolic resonance of Werefkin’s children can perhaps be seen most cogently in *Wäscherinnen* (The Washerwomen, 1911), one of Werefkin’s six contributions to the first NKVM exhibition in 1909. Here a blank-faced child is positioned in the wings, an alternative to the melancholic stares of Münter’s “types,” this instead is a child in time, watching, waiting, observing as the cycles of life unfold.

Although they approach the subject of sexual, creative, and maternal identities very differently, it is clear for all four examples, Modersohn-Becker, Kollwitz, Münter, and Werefkin, that the desire to create is intimately bond

37 “C’est mon moi hors de moi.” Werefkin in 1905, *Lettres à un Inconnu*, 171.

38 Argent and Offord, “Ego-writing in French: the diary of Anastasia Lakushkina,” in *The History of the French Language in Russia*. Online access via: <https://frinru.ilt.bris.ac.uk/texts>.



FIGURE 8.5 *Marianne Werefkin, Bier Garden, 1907, tempera on cardboard, 54 × 73 cm*
FONDAZIONE MARIANNE WEREFKIN, MUSEO COMUNALE D'ARTE MODERNA,
ASCONA



FIGURE 8.6 *Marianne Werefkin, Autumn/School, 1907, tempera on cardboard; 55 × 74 cm*
FONDAZIONE MARIANNE WEREFKIN, MUSEO COMUNALE D'ARTE MODERNA,
ASCONA

up with a sense of self-consciousness about their identities as woman and as such as both sexual and actual or potential maternal beings. For the slightly older Werefkin, the diaries were a way of mediating on a transitional point in her life and career in which her active sexual identity was sublimated for her artistic one. It therefore remains interesting that of all four artists, Werefkin's engagement with children in her work is always at a distance. They are never the subject of portraits but they are often present *symbolically* as signs of the passing of time and the cycle of life.