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**A Painter and Her Poet:
Rosemarie Beck and Marcia Nardi in 1950s New York**

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“I’m growing more like Marcia every day,” grumbled Rosemarie Beck in her journal in 1960. “Ach, the difficulty of being, of being oneself!”¹ Beck’s complaints convey a fraught sense of self as well as the role of personal foil played by her friend, the poet Marcia Nardi (1901-1990). Little known today, these two women achieved significant artistic recognition in the 1950s. The Whitney Museum of American Art’s purchase of Beck’s painting, “Number 3, 1954” created a buzz about her as the best woman painter in America.² Nardi published her first book of poetry in 1956 with Alan Swallow Press and won a prestigious Guggenheim fellowship in 1957. Within a few years, however, Beck and Nardi’s friendship foundered and their intellectual collaboration sputtered. Given the rich partnerships between painters and poets around the New York School, with which Beck was affiliated, what happened to her and Nardi?

It’s hard to tell. The written evidence of their relationship is scattered and neither woman’s papers have been fully collected and archived. This situation is acute, since each was a prolific correspondent. Beck’s family established a [Foundation](#) to promote her legacy but if Nardi is remembered at all today, we have to thank Elizabeth Murrrie O’Neil. O’Neil sought out Nardi as part of her graduate [research](#) in the late 1980s, and published *The Last Word: Letters between Marcia Nardi and William Carlos Williams* in 1994. O’Neil’s investigations brought her

¹ Journal #4, p. 130. Rosemarie Beck’s journals are held by the Rosemarie Beck Foundation. Used with permission. Also see [1955 Annual Exhibition of Contemporary American Painting](#), November 9, 1955-January 8, 1956 (New York, NY: Whitney Museum of American Art, 1955).

² Journal #2, p. 138.

to Rosemarie Beck. With the proviso that the correspondence between Nardi and Beck's husband, the writer Robert Phelps, be used "to shed light on [the poet] and the effect she had on others," Beck bequeathed to O'Neil a cache of letters.³ Those letters are not yet available to researchers but my reading of Beck's personal journals (held by the Foundation) show the painter and poet in regular contact in the 1950s. Son Roger Phelps remembered a stormy friendship, with his mother, in the end, "less sympathetic" than his father. At some point, his parents "pretty much closed the door" on Nardi.⁴

Before this break, Nardi was one of a handful of women Beck described as her "loyal & not jealous" artist friends, a circle that also included the musician Jacquot Marcault and one of her paintings students, Diana Korzenik. Beck and Nardi attended [Yaddo](#) artist's retreat together in 1953 and Beck's journals note regular conversations with Nardi—one lasting seven hours—in Beck and Phelps's Greenwich Village apartment at 6 East 12th Street. Twenty years Beck's senior, Nardi needed home comforts and intellectual companionship. Holed up in her studio painting and playing the violin all day, Beck was a great talker who craved sharp engagement. She once giped her teacher Robert Motherwell that their correspondence would never have much "life in it" because she and he had "no point of antagonism."⁵ Nardi provided many points of antagonism, maybe too many. "Never can have *understanding* with Marcia," complained Beck.⁶ Nardi was an open, if wounded soul; Beck was arch and calculating. Beck's keen mind and stable home life made her an attractive friend and Beck and Phelps also helped Nardi financially, an element that became sticky in their relationship.

³ Elizabeth O'Neil email to author, 14 September 2014.

⁴ Roger Phelps email to author, 15 September 2014.

⁵ Journal #5, p. 128.

⁶ Journal #3, P. 194.

Nardi's poems were sticky in the best sense. "Over and over I read Marcia's poems," Beck noted in her journal; they took her imagination "many fathoms deep." She admired their "genuine theatricality" as works of art, compared to the distressing and "pathetic" drama that was Nardi's life as an impoverished, unmarried mother.⁷ Nardi's poem "And I knew the body a sea," first published in 1950, was as a major inspiration for Beck. Her artist's statement to the Whitney for "Number 3, 1954," mentioned the poem by name as part of the painting's genesis. "How rich a muse it is," Beck wrote in her journal, "it will be with me a long time."⁸ Another painting she did based on Nardi's poem Beck later called "the germ of all my future subjects" and she regretted not having a photograph of it. "It's the one picture I miss most of all," she claimed.⁹ The themes of loss and the creative process are exquisitely done in Nardi's poetry and highly resonant for Beck. Beck made several sketches and a portrait of Nardi, probably at Yaddo. She described the portrait to O'Neil as "not a very good painting, but it is a good likeness of Marcia."¹⁰ It is hard to miss the promise of the women's connection, at least on Beck's end of the relationship.

So who was Marcia Nardi? Born Lillian Massell in 1901 in Boston, Nardi dropped out of Wellesley College in her junior year, moved to Greenwich Village, and took her new name. She published reviews and poems in literary magazines and was on her way to a writing life when her lover abandoned her after the birth of their son in 1926. Nardi went on the ropes. She spent the Great Depression in poverty, working various jobs as a waitress, editor, store clerk, and even farm hand. A marriage in 1943 to a fellow artist failed to stabilize her family life or finances and

⁷ Journal #2, p. 131.

⁸ Journal #3, p. 18.

⁹ Journal #3, p. 219.

¹⁰ O'Neil email to author, 14 September 2014.

her teen-aged son went sideways into petty crime and mental health crises. In 1947, Nardi moved to Woodstock, New York, where she likely met Beck and Phelps among other artists who lived in town or who stayed at the nearby Maverick Colony. Nardi divorced her husband in 1950 and moved back to Manhattan, where her connection to Beck and Phelps deepened. Around the time of her Guggenheim, Nardi came to the attention of composer Lee Hoiby and wrote a libretto for an opera called *Beatrice*, performed in 1959. After these accomplishments, however, Nardi published only sporadically, with her last poem appearing in print in the *New Yorker* in 1971. Marcia Nardi lived the final twenty years of her life in relative obscurity in the Boston area, estranged from her family, and died 1990.

As O’Neil has documented, in 1942 Nardi struck up an epistolary friendship with William Carlos Williams after she sought him out for medical attention for her son. Williams praised the poems Nardi shared with him as “some of the best writing by a woman (or by anyone else) I have seen in years.”¹¹ After helping her get published in the journal *New Directions*, Williams excerpted some of Nardi’s letters in his long poem *Paterson* (1947-48), never crediting her publicly (though he did inform her of his intent beforehand). The copious letters Nardi wrote to Williams in the 1940s are a brimming testimony to the class and sexual politics she experienced as an aspiring poet. Page after page, she shred the scrim of meritocracy that hid power plays and exclusion in the literary world. “But when it comes to things like jobs, like friendships, to one’s life outside of bed, I demand the right not to have to be beautiful, to be positively ugly even, and also to be any age at all, whether 16 or 60, and still be able to hold my own as an intelligent human being,” Nardi declared. “And that right has always been denied

¹¹ Williams to Nardi, 10 April 1942 in Elizabeth Murrrie O’Neil, ed., *The Last Word: Letters between Marcia Nardi and William Carlos Williams* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1994), p. 9.

me.”¹² Her critique showed up in Williams’s *Paterson*, but he did not engage her. Nardi fared little better with other friends, at least according to Beck’s journals.

Marcia Nardi’s critique was rooted in her experience in the 1930s, when poets were kept out of WPA programs. This exclusion fed stereotypes about poetry as elitist or worse, dispensable. Nardi boiled at the complacency of writers on the WPA who agreed to do the guide books, interviews, and other non-creative projects when no such restrictions were placed on actors, playwrights, painters, or sculptors. “Even old-time vaudeville and circus performers were maintained as such” she fumed, but the “intellectuals themselves” were, she felt, overly accommodating to the government’s demands and “utterly indifferent” to the plight of poets.¹³ As an unmarried mother scrambling to survive, Nardi had a hard time qualifying for any New Deal relief, which targeted legally married women: widows and deserted wives.¹⁴ She came by her rhetoric about rights for artists in the crucible of a major crisis that was not just personal but national. In the 1930s, Marcia Nardi had lived at the intersection of questions about the role of art in society, about the viability of individualism and meritocracy mangled by a ruthless economic depression, and about how society might support, empower or, more ominously, discipline needy women when the menfolks were so down and out. Rights discourse held out some order, leverage, even hope in a harsh context that deprived and punished Marcia Nardi as a free thinking, creative, and sexually liberated woman.

Beck was of a different generation and distinct cast of mind. She was a teenager in the 30s, so no stranger to scrimping, but her family managed to send her to Oberlin College in the

¹² Nardi to Williams, 29 September 1942, in Elizabeth Murrie O’Neil, ed. *The Last Word: Letters between Marcia Nardi and William Carlos Williams*. University of Iowa Press, 1994), p. 52.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Double check New York State database.

war years. She met Phelps at school and married him soon after graduation. The daughter of Hungarian immigrants to New York City, Beck remained something of a Europhile.¹⁵ She was a trained violinist who adored Beethoven and Mozart and didn't get it about jazz; she deeply admired Kierkegaard and regarded *Invisible Man* as a "bad book (work of a negro)."¹⁶ Neither rights talk nor solidarity politics resonated for Beck as an artist. She was "against the presumption (such as Marcia's) that I deserve anything for merely being what I am."¹⁷ Beck was drawn to ideals of nobility, purity, and transcendence, prone to quoting sages and poets in her journal about the nourishment to be had from suffering. She thought Nardi unfair for chiding her and Phelps about being middle class since Beck paid the bills at home as a working artist. Beck's choices were at least implicitly feminist as her earning power could enable her survival outside of marriage. But her stance could easily slide into a defense of individualism and meritocracy, ideologies which lurked in the shadow of the leverage that her marriage and college degree afforded her in the post war sexual economy and employment marketplace.

A love of literature grounded Beck and Nardi's friendship. They trawled the greats together for inspiration and insight, with gender high on the list of topics. At one point, they debated the "truly feminine," defined as a specific "weakness": the craving to be "mastered" by a man. Of their favorites, neither Dickinson, Woolf, nor Millay (nor Weil nor Stein, of course) ever succumbed yet Beck acknowledged: "I know what [Nardi] means because I am of the same

¹⁵ It's hard to imagine Beck preening herself about American culture as did Edmund Wilson, explicitly in comparison to Europe. Looking back on the 1920s, he wrote in his diary: "We had it in common that we were struggling with New York, stimulated by New York....More interesting, and perhaps more profitable, after all, than Europe. This is where the new culture, the new civilization, has really been produced; the new American internationalism" (Edmund Wilson, *The Fifties*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1986), p. 217. By contrast, Beck felt more constrained, even fatalistic. "We cannot escape our time," she often wrote. "By which I mean there is no salvation left to us but of a personal one" (Journal #2, p. 107 & 110).

¹⁶ Journal #5, p121

¹⁷ Journal #2, p. 124.

‘weakness.’ ” Femininity was not just about the sociology of straight marriage that one either succeeded or failed at, fifties style; it was a Concept. Beck acknowledged that Nardi created beautiful art out of the idea of the feminine but she remained skeptical. “But how many poems can one make of this idea?”¹⁸

Holding on to a sense of embodied, historically grounded self may have been difficult for men *and* women artists at this time, perhaps especially those painters working in abstract modes. Beck noted that she and her mentor and friend Philip Guston voiced and shared the “anguish of being bodiless” as artists.¹⁹ Her journal noted some talk about recuperating the body’s potency by conceiving creativity to be an “ ‘aesthetic erection.’ ”²⁰ But the distaff was more slippery and Beck detested the watery associations with gestation and female arousal. The “amiotic flux” of Woolf’s prose made Beck queasy, though she bowed to its beauty and power.

Beck’s perspective resonates with scholar-poet Maggie Nelson’s characterization of women around the New York School: “impatien[t] with an emphasis on dependence or difference as opposed to an empowered assumption of equality.”²¹ In this context, Beck and Nardi’s stances become clearer, and, of course, showed up in their artistic approach and content. For example, Nardi’s poems sometimes analogized creativity to very deep bodily experience but Beck warred with such modes of expression. “What I fear and sort of loathe in my heart about this limpidity of femininity is the lack of form,” snorted Beck in her journal. Beck’s truth was the artist as “imperturbable” instrument and creativity as a state beyond gender: “no sex in art.”²² Nardi had no problem with writing “genuinely out of a strictly female emotional world” as long

¹⁸ Journal #3, p. 228-229.

¹⁹ Journal #4, p. 112.

²⁰ Journal #3, p. 164.

²¹ Maggie Nelson, *Women, The New York School, and Other True Abstractions* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2007), p. 44.

²² Journal #6, p. 54.

as one “steer[ed] clear of the intimate personal lyric” or the confessional mode (which Beck also detested).²³ Beck’s friends did not seem overly priggish about gender. “Your desire to accomplish is like a man’s,” encouraged her long-time correspondent Bernard Malamud. “Begin then.”²⁴ Beck also seemed to acknowledge that anyone could wield a phallic style of power. She described the ability to paint as “an anonymous, firm muscle standing at attention to the mind and spirit” and sometimes approached her canvas with “the powerful sense of carving up space as if it were a roast turkey.”²⁵

I’d suggest that what undermined Beck and Nardi was less conflict over gender in artistic expression than the sexual politics in the lives these women tried to live. Both women were, in a sense, abandoned wives puzzling out new identities. “[T]he ugly woman, me,” grumped Nardi to Beck in one of their talks. Nardi identified herself as “the same as [Jean] Genet but worse, a woman,” a bit self-dramatizing, perhaps, but drawing attention to a double standard that more easily excused (or even glamorized) outlaw behavior for men than for women.²⁶ For her part, Beck struggled with the “imposed asceticism” of her dry marriage, a situation she dubbed a “new singleness.”²⁷ Beck had plenty of intellectual stimulation from men but almost no sexual outlet. Nardi had plenty of sex but no trusted, special someone to feed her “mental life.” Society tried to tamp these women into a 1950s riff on the Virgin/Whore dichotomy: Frigid Wife/Tramp. They fought the pressure mightily, but not together.

²³ Flap copy on first edition dust jacket, Marcia Nardi, *Poems* (Denver: Alan Swallow, 1956).

²⁴ Bernard Malamud typed letter, signed, to Rosemarie Beck, 6 February 1961, The Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

²⁵ Journal #2, p. 73; Journal #6, p. 35.

²⁶ Journal #2, p. 219.

²⁷ Journal #5, p. 137; Journal #2, p. 65

Instead, Beck pushed Nardi away. “I ought not to listen to Marcia because she believes that women are weaker, more susceptible and more excusable” than men for sexual adventuring. A hotly provoked Beck wrote that she could never “excuse [the] flesh’s weakness” no matter how strong the goad of loneliness or desire.²⁸ By contrast, Nardi fretted not at all over the “very strong sensual animal” side of her nature, crisply informing Williams in one instance: “my morality has to do with other things.”²⁹ In the Victorian era, an abandoned wife might garner sympathy among peers but in the post war context of technical equality and educational opportunity, a forsaken wife was seen as a blameworthy discard; in a word: ugly. With no social permission to blame anyone but themselves for their sexual and marital “failings,” Beck and Nardi took their anguish out on each other.

Nardi served as a negative foil and object lesson. Beck warned herself to “avoid desperate situations like Marcia’s,” whose lonely plight probably stayed her hand when she contemplated divorcing Phelps.³⁰ Beck got spooked when Nardi showed up at the apartment alarmingly “derelict” and ready to “scrape the bottom” in order to survive, which I take to mean prostitution.³¹ Fact is, Marcia Nardi worked shit jobs, asked her friends for money and employment help, slept with men without apology, and indicted just about everyone who failed to remedy the “miserable position” of the poet in society as complicit with keeping poetry the prerogative of the leisure class.³² Sly by temperament and better protected, the trappings of respectability allowed Beck to present herself as socially normal. Beck also obeyed the code of the bourgeoisie (never talk about money in public) and was an immigrant striver to boot. By

²⁸ Journal #2, p. 20

²⁹ *The Last Word*, p. 97

³⁰ Journal #5, p. 124.

³¹ Journal #2, p. 78.

³² Nardi to Williams, 29 September 1942, in *The Last Word*, p. 65.

contrast, Nardi pressed the nose of the bourgeoisie into a poverty—her own, personal poverty-- that they much preferred to ignore. Along the way, she called out the enabling complacency of well-placed writers, especially their phony leftism.

The period's psychologizing of femininity didn't help. Beck repeatedly berated Nardi in her journal as "infantile," the psychiatric label for a woman unable to sustain a relationship with a man.³³ The queer-baiting atmosphere of the 1950s also burdened same sex friendships at this time (to mention only one of its many harms) and there was no language for female solidarity that wasn't fusty and compensatory. Of the audience for her paintings, Beck sighed: "I have only women admirers—all non-professionals or students."³⁴ Nardi would probably have rejoiced at such a situation. To be sure, Nardi sometimes wore people out. She came to the house "trailing her problems, as always," griped Beck. "Marcia and her stone," she moaned after another visit, tsk-tsking at Nardi and other "miserable friends" who had nothing but "weakness of character" to blame for their woes. But Nardi also got fed up with Beck and Phelps. "She calls us both shits," noted Beck after one "miserable fight." "The revelation of what we are sickens her."³⁵ Nardi frankly bartered her sexuality for companionship or money but Beck sacrificed hers for respectability and for long, long stretches stayed in her marriage out of a "helpless loyalty."³⁶

What to make of the Beck–Nardi relationship? Beck moved among a group of New York painters who had a special attachment to "their" poets. Motherwell's now iconic paintings of abstract expressionism, "Elegies to the Spanish Republic" (1948-1965), had their impetus in a Harold Rosenberg poem from the late 1940s. As the New York School's eloquent interpreter,

³³ Journal #3 p 194.

³⁴ Journal #5, p. 165.

³⁵ Journal #4, p. 117.

³⁶ Journal #2, p. 140.

Motherwell reminded audiences that the French surrealist poets between the wars “demanded” that painters give the proceeds from “a picture each year” for their support.³⁷ Marcia Nardi would have benefitted from such a practice. Placed alongside the gorgeous art volume *21 Etchings and Poems, 1960*, or *The Poems* by James Schuyler adorned by Joan Mitchell’s silk screens, Beck-Nardi is mostly claws, tatters, and wistfulness. Shadowed by the big gay dramas around Auden, O’Hara, and Capote as well as the quieter angst of the closet, these women’s social-sexual struggles unfolded mostly off stage, experienced as private failure and loss. Rosemarie Beck and Marcia Nardi have yet to be fully reckoned with in the history of sexually and intellectually liberated women in New York that arcs at least from Goldman to Sontag. They endured by making beautiful art, inventing themselves over and over again at the easel or on the page in a context that all too easily ignored or exploited them.

³⁷ Frank O’Hara, *Robert Motherwell with Selections from the Artist’s Writing* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 59