

## Frau Lou

*Nietzsche's wayward disciple*

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July 24 - 31, 2011

I bought the book back in the late seventies. I read half of it, and retained almost nothing<sup>1</sup>. At the time I might have felt a bit guilty about reading it, after all what was it but simple sensationalism, mindless gossip, admittedly concerning Nietzsche, Rilke and Freud rather than vacuous movie-stars, but the principle was the same. The work, however, has ambitions, it is a scholarly work, with a carefully compiled biography, along with end-notes and footnotes, sometimes overflowing the page. The author is not simply set to narrate the events of the protagonist, but to find meaning in her life, at least as far as it is reflected in her fiction, always self-based; and to explain it with a running Freudian commentary. The book was written in the 60's, and Freud was not yet fully disparaged and marginalized. Those authorial intrusions, however, make the book much longer than it otherwise might need be, nor does it make for clarity but often muddies the water, confusing the reader with a disjointed chronology. Many of the women are referred to by their first names, which not seldom do multiple duty. There is the young woman Ellen, with whom Frau Lou has a mother-daughter relationship, and there is the Swedish feminist Ellen Kay, twelve years her senior. Confusion is ripe. But that are minor blemishes, the major draw-back of the book is how it goes on and on, with little relief. Reading, you feel like sitting at a lecture, your mind drifting. After all extensive analysis of forgotten fictional works, do not engage the imagination, as much as straight-forward gossip. Much can indeed be said for it, and after all it addresses a basic human need.

Now literary personages of the past, brought up before the modern invention of telephone, are gratifying subjects for biographies. They tend to leave behind an embarrassment of riches as to written documentation of their lives. Letters, not seldom (as in the case of Nietzsche) preliminary drafts for letters, and diaries. Lou was no exception, she was throughout her life very conscious about being remembered by posterity, and as a consequence, she edited her own Nachlass, which hence should not be taken at face value, but approached with caution and skepticism, making the task of a biographer arduous. Unless the case of Nietzsche's notorious sister Lisbeth, she did not commit outright forgeries, but she tended to put special spins on the interpretation of events, and if necessary destroying evidence. To out of this contradictory mess to try and fashion a reliable narrative is

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<sup>1</sup> Except that Paul Rée took up medicine after his academic career had floundered; and that her lover Rilke was afraid of his own penis. Both memory fragments are however subtly misleading. Rée did not take up medicine to further his career and earn money, the usual rationale for Ph.D. drop-outs taking up medicine, but instead he treated the poor for free, making atonements so to speak. Rilke was not afraid of his penis while as a lover of Lou, but the saying was retroactively imposed on him metaphorically, as to characterize an effeminate personality.

a forensic project of some dignity, possible only by consulting the papers of those with whom she consorted, thereby multiplying the extent of the undertaking.

Who was Frau Lou (1861-1937)? Not much is said about her childhood and early youth, except a troubled relationship with her father, and a subsequent crush on a Lutheran pastor, whom she wanted to confirm her in Holland. One surmises that she comes from a German family, residing in the cosmopolitan city of St- Petersburg, a foreign enclave in Russia. Early on in life she made her debut in the world, becoming involved with Nietzsche and his admirer Paul Rée in a peculiar three-some, at the tender age of 21. Nietzsche was absolutely thrilled with her. Her undeniable feminine charm, her cleverness and eagerness to learn at his feet clearly played up to his male vanity, but above all the thought that he had found in her a soul-mate towards which he could bare his innermost thoughts must have been irresistible. His sister, who at first had taken to the young adept, dropping the 'Sie' for the more intimate 'Du' early on, soon got to resent her. In fact, disapproving of the ungodliness of her brothers thought, she watched with horror how the young girl brought out the worst of him, as they both vied to outdo the other in philosophical freethinking. Add to this, her attachment to the younger Paul Rée, with whom she would consort for many years, most likely without any consummation. The three-some was bound to be unstable, inciting suspicions on all sides. The whole thing came to a crash, the crises fanned by the sister. There was some encounter in Jena, accusations of Nietzsche out to exploit her as a secretary as well as abuse her sexually. Nietzsche was incensed. there were further recriminations. In the end the great philosopher broke off with the two of them, retreated into solitude and in search of health (of which he always was in short supply), overcoming the incidence, and becoming, as expected from his well-known aphorism, much stronger as a result. The 'affair' only lasted for some months, but would of course leave a lasting legacy as far as Lou's reputation, especially as his fame grew after his breakdown. Incidentally Pau Rée with whom she had broken, died shortly after Nietzsche, from an ignominious mountain accident. But then he had retired from the academic world since many years and become a doctor treating the poor. Lou would cash in on her Nietzsche experience, first in writing an acclaimed and original novel already back in 1883 titled 'Im Kampf um Gott' and later to write the first authoritative study on Nietzsche (in which she perpetrated the myth that his breakdown was not due to purely physical causes, but resulted from the strains of his thinking<sup>2</sup>). The novel was original in its conception, but not surprisingly immature in its execution. Binion points out that she mixed pure fiction with philosophical digressions, the latter tending to outdo the former in bulk. Later on she would learn to separate the two strands, writing purer fiction and reserving her philosophy for essays and books.

Lou who had thus been an ardent disciple of Nietzsche had been made sufficiently fecund by the encounter to set up a literary career, going beyond that which directly pertained to her encounter with him. She became a regular contributor of reviews, essays and articles. She not only wrote novels and short stories, but also tried her hand at drama, although with less acclaim. After all a play need to be set up on a stage, while a book may be unreadable without anyone suffering. Her intellectual interests included

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<sup>2</sup> As a child I was at first horrified by the aggressiveness of his denial of God, and thought that his collapse was divine punishment

foremost religion, on which matter she was clearly influenced by Nietzsche. But she also wrote criticism on playwrights, notably books on Ibsen and Strindberg, with an emphasis on their psychology. Naturally she also was a champion of women, writing extensively, if not always consistently, on the role of love and passion in their lives, taking herself naturally as a point of departure. She did marry a few years later, an older man by name of Andreas born in 1846. He was of mixed heritage. German and Malaysian on his mothers side, Armenian on his fathers. He was a linguist, who commanded most of the European tongues, including Scandinavian, but whose speciality was Persian. He was of undeniable intellectual giftedness, but never managed to get around to write his *magnus opus* and thus never made that mark on the world, to which his gifts may if not entitled him enabled him. The marriage was unconsummated, yet they remained married until his death more than forty years later in 1930. Obviously a marriage of convenience, although perhaps not entirely on his side, as one surmises that he has some romantic leanings towards his young bride. Lou would of course not tolerate for long a life of celibacy. She was a striking woman, tall with a hour-glass figure, as revealed by the dust-jacket portrait of her<sup>3</sup>. Soon she was taking lovers, at first to the protestation of her husband, who eventually had to resign. While she as a young woman had consorted with older men, once she entered her fourth decade, her role was to be that of the older woman, whose erotic interest in her lovers, were of the maternal kind. Consequently she had a rather rapid turnover, the majority of young men so favored, remaining anonymous. However, there were serious liaisons with more mature men such as Beer-Hoffmann out of the Vienna based circle featuring Schnitzler and Hofmannsthal, who would then figure peripherally in her varied life. The outstanding young lover was of course Rilke, for whom she would provide the major formative experience of his adulthood, looming larger than his subsequent wife, the sculptress Clara. When they took up with each other, Rilke was still a very young man of no renown, and Lou did not think that highly of his poetry or even his potential as a poet. The relationship would untypically last for several years. It included two trips to Russia, the first with her husband Andreas (the two men went to museums together, when Lou was up for other things), the second, more ambitious one, with Rilke alone. In fact the second one had been carefully prepared, Frau Lou teaching her adept Russian (which he learned well enough to get around and read) and both teaching themselves Russian Art, with an intensity and singleness of purpose, which made people around them wonder whether they were up for some grueling exam. The trips reacquainted Lou with her Russian roots, and predictably she waxed about the Russian soul. They paid a visit to Tolstoi, but he was not in the mood. They persisted anyway, and while the son made a show of hospitality showing them portraits on the walls, they could here screaming and banging on tables, shutting of doors and throwing of chairs. Presumably Tolstoi was in the midst of a domestic crises. Their perseverance, however, brought some fruit, they were later given the choice of either having lunch with his family or accompanying him on a walk. They jumped at the latter. Tolstoi walked along while rambling a monologue, of which Rilke had a hard time understanding anything. From time to tome the count picked up forget-me-nots, holding them in his cupped hands, inhaling their fragrance, only to

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<sup>3</sup> Which comes with no affiliation. When was it taken, where was it taken? A pity that the biography does not come with the costumary photos, of which there must have been many to choose from.

throw them away. This trivial gesture were duly noted in their separate diaries. Later they invited themselves to a Russian peasant poet and were enthralled. The poet had of course felt himself obliged to go at some length to accommodate them, enlisting the help of another count Tolstoi, whom they also visited. There were further visits to Kiev (the people were dull, but the city absolutely beautiful), a trip along the Volga, slumming for a few days in a peasant hut, visiting beautiful Yaroslavl. And so on.

Her high living lasted approximately for a quarter of a century until the beginning of the First World War, which did not make much of a dent in her diaries or letters. It was an idyllic time, at least if you had the means to take advantage of them. People were traveling a lot, tourism was developed but yet not a mass-phenomenon. Lou moved from one interesting place to another. Berlin, Vienna, Munich, Rome or Paris, with excursions to Scandinavia and Hungary, as well as retreats into the mountains, staying at charming hotels, or at rustic huts, romping about barefoot. We get vignettes of Schnitzler taking off on his bicycle somewhere in the Alps, heading for Munich.

Politics did not interest her, culture did (except music, for which she had no aptitude). She did however suffer the humiliation with her fellow Russians as to the outcome of the Russo-Japanese war. She remarked that the technology of killing had become awesome, and every ambition of perfecting an army necessarily entailed employing it in practice. Of the Balkans she noted that it was a hot-house and would soon explode. As it duly did.

In around 1911 she took up with Freud. Not surprisingly she was very much enamored with psychoanalysis, and she traveled to Vienna to educate herself. Freud was charmed, maybe at first exasperated by her naivety, as she started out also going to the seminars of his arch-rival Adler; but soon she abandoned that horse and became a devotee of Freud. She readily made her own synthesis of Freud's teaching, much to his appreciation addled with amusement. They differed on some minor points, but she was always ready to make up and come around. The relation continued for the rest of her life, and in particular they had an ongoing correspondence throughout the twenties. Lou even took on her own patients, and Freud fretted that she was under-charging, her source of wealth having dried out due to recent developments in Russia.

While her early life had been ambulatory, she was not staying put in Gttingen, where her husband had been offered a specially designed chair on West-Asian languages, He lectured to students at his home, and was apparently quite appreciated by them, keeping on his seminars well passed his mandatory retirement. Married life was predictably enhanced by sharing more and more restricting circumstances, including that of aging. Her literary output was going down, and in her late sixties she was stricken with diabetes and declining eye-sight, spending her time rewriting her life. She dreamed of a future type of man, who would transcend the inhibiting narcissistic psychology of modern man, to be devoted to extrospection instead of introspection, and for whom life would not be seeing it coming until middle age and see it go away afterwards. Death scared her. In face of what awaited her, what comfort could her exalted views on religion and life and death give her? Mere words. At the very end she felt ill. In this death she asked her maid<sup>4</sup>. If so it is awful. Soon she fell into a coma, and died three days later.

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<sup>4</sup> Actually the natural daughter of her former maid with her husband. And also at the time of the writing of the biography the proprietor of the house in Gttingen - Loufried.

Once again what is her legacy? From the purely personal point of view, her life must have been rich and rewarding, with much excitement and little sorrow. Although she extolled the virtues of motherhood, she dreaded giving birth, and most likely she underwent a couple of abortions (one of them probably being the consequence of her relation with Rilke) on which her diary is silent. There is no indication that she regretted leaving no issue. As to her published works, she left about 120 titles. The biographer goes through her thinking, how it related to that of Nietzsche in the beginning and to Freud at the end, to considerable length. However, more out of duty than inspiration, and as a consequence nothing really stick in the mind of the reader. He also takes it as his duty to describe in detail all her fictional work and how the different personages and their conflicts relate to people in Lou's life and their obsessions, suitably transformed. It is of course not clear to what extent she was conscious of this while writing her stories, and the biographer has merely shown that he has been able to decode her message, or whether he has with Freudian zeal unearthed hidden meanings, unknown even to the authoress. Yet to be treated to such details to fiction, although of no doubt charming, at least as period-pieces, is a little too much for a mildly engaged reader.

Shorn of the scholarly apparatus and the biographer's heavily didactical intrusion, bared down to half the size, or even less, concentrating on gossip, vignettes and crucial facts, it would have been a most enticing read. As it is, the reading of it feels, as initially noted, like being present at a lecture in which the speaker drones on while your mind drifts away in search of more congenial meadows.

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