

“Love in a Life”: The Case of Nietzsche and Lou Salomé

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In reading the lives and writing of the men and women of the Victorian period, I think we have been too ready to divide that society into those Victorians whose idea of love carries the purity of its idealism to an abstract and impossible extreme, and those “Other Victorians” who simply reduce love to forbidden sex. The first group appear as great believers in the most metaphysically-charged versions of love, the second as the failed idealists-become-skeptics, who leave the marriage bed for adultery or the brothel. To the observer of this century, the first are simply too complete in their demands upon love; the second group, being perhaps too cynical for love, is hardly less “uptight” for all that. Such a polarization on the question of love seems to be *part* of Victorian reality. It helps explain why the same novel can contain a Becky Sharp and an Amelia Sedley, why the same period can accommodate *The Secret Life* and *The Sonnets from the Portuguese*. But this polarization fails to see the Victorians as experimenters in love, who, in both their writing and life, were engaged in a dialogue about the nature and possibilities of love. I will give an example of what I mean. If one reads the essays Henry James wrote in criticism of George Eliot’s representation of love in *Middlemarch*, one can see that *The Portrait of a Lady* is partly a rewriting of *Middlemarch*, so that the reader gets a more “modern” and realistic interpretation of love. Now marriage is no longer the “solution” to the love problem, but the beginning and ground of its most urgent problems. But since the question of love passes so readily between art and life, this debate is hardly abstract. It needs to be read in relation to the idealisms and compromises of George Eliot’s love for George Henry Lewes, James’s own complex decision not to marry, and the way James’s early rivalry in love for his cousin Minny Temple offers the biographical point of departure for both Isabel Archer and the Milly Teale of *The Wings of the Dove*. James’s art, no less than Eliot’s, is part of a lover’s discourse; but both are also part of a cultural dialogue about love.

All of this is a way of saying that artistic and philosophic investigations of love are not at an abstract remove from, they are always coextensive with, attempts at love within life. To show how this is so, I would like to sketch a love story of this period as it told itself through the lives and writing of two who contested and recomposed the Victorian conventions they lived, not in England but on the continent: the love between Nietzsche and Lou Salomé. I will pass over most of the details of this relationship as it unfolded in eight months between April and December of 1882: their meeting, their falling in love, the rivalry for Lou’s love that opens between Paul Rée and Nietzsche, the idyllic three weeks Lou spends at Nietzsche’s summer retreat in Tautenberg chaperoned by Nietzsche’s sister Elizabeth, and the breakup of the relationship. Since most of this love affair is quite conventional, I will focus upon two salient moments of this relationship, two actions and two events which allow me to gauge its distinctive and experimental character: the arrangement Salomé, Rée, and Nietzsche make to live together, and Lou Salomé’s indiscretion.

In Lucerne, on May 13, 1882, after a good many weeks of negotiations, Lou Salomé, Paul Rée, and Friedrich Nietzsche agreed to form a “holy trinity” to live and study together the following winter in Vienna. To commemorate the moment, Salomé prevailed upon Nietzsche and Rée to be photographed pulling a small cart, with her in the driver’s seat wielding a small whip. At the moment they assumed this playful pose, did the parties to this plan and this picture have an intuition of the pleasure and suffering this act would entail? The forging of this arrangement is an act which is opaque and symptomatic for the way it exceeds conscious intentions and projects these three into unforeseen relations. A collaborative act, it nonetheless expresses contradictory purposes and interpretations. Though Nietzsche and Rée had often projected forming a social and intellectual community outside marriage that would protect a personal independence Lou Salomé was no less determined to guard, none of the triad anticipated the bitter rivalry for her this photo predicts. The triangular arrangement for living is at once a parody of the marriage convention and a substitute for it. By blocking the need to think of marriage it seems to foreclose the very intimacy it also promotes.

Why did two mature men in their thirties and a young woman of twenty-one embark on this arrangement? For Lou Salomé the projected living arrangement expresses the tension between two currents of her life. On the one hand, it allows her to pursue a new more equal relationship with men by sharing a co-equal intellectual quest for Truth. On the other, it forges this independent relationship with men within a sexually and romantically charged scene of rivalry, where two men will vie for her attentions. I can demonstrate these conflicting currents of her motivation by describing how Salomé defends the living plan in a letter written to Gillot, her first love. Gillot was a married Lutheran minister and her confirmation teacher. When Salomé developed a strong passion for Gillot and he fell in love with her, Salomé’s mother devised a protracted tour of the continent to remove her from this awkward situation. When Salomé begins to urge the idea of what she called “the holy trinity” upon Rée, even before Nietzsche arrives in Rome to meet her, her mother has Gillot write her to discourage the idea. Gillot writes that he had conceived her travel and education as part of a “transition” to some more permanent condition (perhaps marriage? marriage to him?).

Salomé’s response is a kind of manifesto of her intention to win her own freedom by challenging Victorian convention: “Just what do you mean by ‘transition’? If some new ends for which one must surrender that which is most glorious on earth and hardest won, namely freedom, then may I stay stuck in transition forever, for that I will not give up. Surely no one could be happier than I am now, for the gay fresh holy war likely about to break out does not frighten me: quite the contrary, let it break. We shall see whether the so-called ‘inviolable bounds’ drawn by the world do not just about all prove to be innocuous chalk-lines.” There is a youthful zest and exuberance in the way Salomé here endorses an idea of life as a condition

of ongoing transition, and joins a "gay fresh holy war" against convention. To the Germans with whom she is now waging this war, this convention weighs much more heavily. Thus in this same letter to Gillot, there is a note of condescension in the way she describes her efforts to persuade Rée to embrace the idea of a trinity. She describes her assault on the "inviolable" bounds of convention as a scene of seduction: "[Rée] too is not completely won over yet, he is still somewhat perplexed, but in our walks by night between 12 and 2 in the Roman moonlight, when we emerge from the gatherings at Malwida von Meysenbug's, I put it to him with increasing success."¹ These walks shocked Malwida, and she cautioned against them. They cannot but help remind the modern reader of the scandal caused by Daisy Miller's indiscreet nighttime rendezvous under a moonlit sky at the Colosseum, or the much more thoughtful way Isabel Archer contemplated Gilbert Osmond's proposals in an Italian setting. Lou and Daisy and Isabel are all women who come from a less inhibited place, in possession of a beauty which is complicated with their independence of spirit; all three trigger a rivalry for their affections; and each is intent on finding a risky new way of living in a European world too much defined by strict convention.

Salomé sought to insure her independence of any one man, not by removing to a distance from all men, but by stationing herself between two men that loved her equally. Thus this very description of moonlit walks could not but have caused Gillot some difficult moments, at the same time that it challenged him to be clear about the proposal he may have hinted at. When Salomé visited Rée at his Prussian family estate in Stibbe, she kept a portrait of Gillot in "an ivory picture frame." When Salomé visits Nietzsche at Tautenberg in August, "the ivory picture frame" was again placed on her dressing table, but the image to be found within was of Rée. One should not be in too much of a rush to accuse Salomé of confusion or duplicity in her use of male rivalry. It is one way she works within Victorian constraints to win the freedom and equality she seeks. The arrangement allows her to fight a system which left her largely powerless to shape her own life. At one moment when her mother seemed a particularly intractable problem, Salomé writes to Rée, "It is unpleasant to be able to do nothing but plead in a matter so close to one's heart" (Binion 53).

In letters to his closest friends in June and July of 1882, Nietzsche expresses his joy with his new "find" Salomé, and justifies the projected living arrangement, in a particular way: living with her promises to bring about a new concordance between his life and thought, and this, in turn, will make possible the writing of *Zarathustra*. He expresses much the same idea, in a more indirect fashion, in a letter to her at the same period. This letter helps us to understand the meaning Nietzsche is giving to this new love. Nietzsche's letter to Salomé of July 3rd is organized around a series of explicit messages. He begins by expressing his joy and gratitude at the way an excess of gifts has coincided in their arrival this day: "Now the sky above me is bright! Yesterday at noon I felt as if it was my birthday. You sent your acceptance, the most lovely present that anyone could give me now; my sister sent cherries;

Teubner sent the first three page proofs of *The Gay Science*." Then Nietzsche salutes himself for the completion of an arduous phase of his philosophic project: "I had just finished the very last part of the manuscript and therewith the work of six years [1876-82], my entire *Freigeisterei*. O what years! What tortures of every kind, what solitudes and weariness with life! and against all that, as it were against death *and* life, I have brewed this medicine of mine, these thoughts with their small strip of *unclouded* sky overhead. O dear friend, whenever I think of it, I am thrilled and touched and do not know how I could have *succeeded* in doing it – I am filled with self-compassion and the sense of victory." This victory is so "complete," that even his "physical health has reappeared, I do not know where from, and everyone tells me that I am looking younger than ever." Finally he assures Salomé that his commitment to the living arrangement is complete, and he has no consideration for either his sister's plans or going South alone. After explicitly projecting his future toward her, he closes the letter expressing a blend of caution, trust, and confidence: "Heaven preserve me from doing foolish things – but from now on! – whenever you advise me, I shall be *well* advised and do not need to be afraid. . . . I want to be lonely no longer, but to learn again to be a human being. Ah, here I have practically everything to learn! Accept my thanks, dear friend. Everything will be well, as you have said. Very best wishes to our Rée!"

Behind its more explicit messages, Nietzsche's letter to Salomé carries a fictive design of more covert meaning which express the scope of Nietzsche's demands on her. In sending her "acceptance" of the proposal that she stay with Nietzsche in Tautenberg, she has given a gift (of herself) which has brought back his health, youth and vigor. In the long heroic self-description of his "triumph" in finishing his writings of the free spirit, Nietzsche transforms himself into the intrepid hero of romance: he has overcome "tortures," "solitudes," "weariness," and finally even "death." In this way, her gift is no longer freely given; it is a reward for Nietzsche's bravery. Lou Salomé is put in the position of the maiden who has offered herself to the conquering knight who has returned in triumph with the holy grail. Quite ironically, the letter's grandest compliment to her sagacity and independence subordinates her to Nietzsche's work: she is not to be Nietzsche's "student" but his "teacher." For though it had been an understood assumption of their relationship that Nietzsche was to function as her teacher, by giving her the role of the teacher, Nietzsche not only implies that he can be as receptive and compliant as a pupil; he invites her to subordinate her itinerary and interests to his needs for companionship and socialization. In this role, she is not to show the narcissism of the student, but the selfless generosity of a teacher (and woman).

Nietzsche's exuberant letters following the arrangement of the living plan all demonstrate the same idea: what can happen now between him and Salomé may be important personally, but it also is somehow fundamentally secondary. It is research, background work, a time out for pleasure, eating cherries, and learning to be "human" – all this on the way to the more important work that lies ahead, writing *Zarathustra*. But there

1. Quoted from Salomé's letter in Rudolph Binion in *Frau Lou: Nietzsche's Wayward Disciple*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton UP, 1968), p. 50.

is something problematic about the very degree of confidence Nietzsche here expresses in the living arrangement. In separating himself from the accustomed support of his sister, and the blue skies of the south, Nietzsche strikes a note of caution. He is "united to Lou," "by a bond of firm friendship," "so far as anything of the sort can be firm on this earth"; and he surmounts his own self-caution – "heaven preserve me from doing foolish things" – with an enunciation of his faith that when she advises him, he will "be *well* advised." This expression of trust in her implies what he does not quite acknowledge: that by beginning this love, and this experiment with convention, Nietzsche is embarking upon dangerously uncharted seas.

The only serious threat to Nietzsche's relationship with Salomé, and their projected living plan, comes with the action/event which can be grouped under the rubric of "the quarrel." While at the Bayreuth festival, according to Elizabeth, Salomé criticized Nietzsche to his Wagnerite enemies and, flaunting the Lucerne photo, "told whoever would or wouldn't listen that Nietzsche and Rée wanted to study with her and would go with her anywhere *she* wanted" (Binion 74). Elizabeth's report of these events to Nietzsche, and the heated arguments between Elizabeth and Lou Salomé that follow, almost prevent Salomé's visit to Tautenberg, and lead Nietzsche to cancel the whole living arrangement more than once. The indiscretion and the quarrels show how a relationship aglow with convergent intentions becomes complex. They are the most telling index of her refusal to be coopted, in a passive and compliant manner, into the writing plans Nietzsche's letter of July 3rd has given such grandiose expression. The living arrangement has always been vulnerable to this kind of crisis. To develop a daring anti-traditional relationship like the trinity, it is essential to put out of play the prior claims of the society one inhabits, with its interests, laws, and morality. But, how does one exclude – one never can exclude – this social law from intruding into a privately contrived society imagined as a place where a select few can live freely, apart from convention's constraints? In this instance the social law comes to Nietzsche and Salomé in the form of a jealous sister. On the journey to Tautenberg, Salomé counters Elizabeth's comprehensive disapproval of her, by venting her anger at Nietzsche's vacillations. She seeks to disabuse Elizabeth of her ideal notions of Nietzsche's purity. Here is a small part of the exchange Elizabeth records in a letter to a friend. "Of the arrangement Lou says: 'Besides, were they to pursue any aims together, two weeks wouldn't go by before they were sleeping together, men all wanted only that, pooh to mental friendship! . . .' As I, now naturally beside myself, said that might well be the case with her Russians only she didn't know my pure-minded brother, she retorted full of scorn (word for word): 'Who first soiled our study plan with his low designs, who started up with mental friendship when he couldn't get me for something else, who first thought of concubinage – your brother! . . . Yes indeed your noble pure-minded brother first had the dirty design of a concubinage!'"

What does the quarrel evidence? First, and most blatantly, Salomé's desire for a sense of control. Thus the Lucerne photograph is now given a new meaning. Taken as a jest on a lark two months before, when shown at Bayreuth, coupled with a disclosure of the projected living scheme, it becomes a warrant

of Salomé's mastery. By insisting, quite accurately, that the men would follow her choice as to the site of their winter residence, Salomé found a way to make her mastery seem quite complete. But Salomé's casual disrespect for Nietzsche also indicates something else. Like the graduate student who seems ready to say almost any scathing thing about their professor, at Bayreuth and Jena, Salomé is protecting herself against an intellectual engulfment by Nietzsche at the very moment when she is opening herself up to his influence as part of her own intellectual project. When Nietzsche simply cancels their plans, she must have felt her actual powerlessness most acutely. How pleasant it must have been to have found in these vituperative scenes a way to express her anger with Nietzsche by making his devoted sister squirm.

Salomé's tirade brings to the fore what is contradictory and symptomatic about the whole living scheme, and subsists as a problem in Salomé's relationship with Nietzsche. When the plan for a trinity is formed, sex is quite explicitly left to one side. To conceive the "holy trinity" is for Salomé and Nietzsche and Rée a critique of the way marriage had turned relations between men and women into a crude material and sexual transaction. It is also an assertion of faith in a particular ideal: that men and women can know each other in and through a shared intellectual quest. This idealism is implicit in Salomé's judgment of Nietzsche for "soiling" the study plan with "low designs." But the "trinity" was from its beginning always flirting with becoming a "melange a trois" – and a pretty kinky one at that. Thus, even before Nietzsche meets Lou Salomé, a letter to Rée about the living plan assumes the arch and cavalier style of men sharing talk of the women they intend to share: "Greet the Russian girl for me, if that makes any sense: I am greedy for souls of that species. In fact, in view of what I mean to do these next ten years, I need them! Matrimony is quite another story. I could consent at most to a two-year marriage, and then only in view of what I mean to do these next ten years" (Binion 49). Here superiority to marriage is not ideal, but an effect of masculine license and licentiousness. Of course, Nietzsche's words strike a pose much more aesthetically controlled than the ardent passion he ends feeling for Salomé. Nonetheless, when Nietzsche's and Rée's feelings for her intensify, the term whose exclusion made the trinity thinkable – sex – returns. At Stibbe, Rée describes to Salomé this letter in which Nietzsche limits interest in her to a "two year marriage," and this becomes the "concubinage" with which Salomé shocks Elizabeth. From the beginning the trinity was fascinating – whether to the eager principals or the skeptical observers – for the way it triggered curiosity and suppositions. But when the officially-excluded term returns, sex appears as the ulterior motive which threatens to make the plans for study, and the whole intellectual life, a pretext and charade.

Space does not allow me a full description of the way this love becomes a crucial moment of collaboration in the separate intellectual careers of Lou Salomé and Nietzsche. For Salomé knowing Nietzsche helped advance her study of two subjects upon which she would write books: religion and Nietzsche's philosophy. The arrangement is also a first attempt at a compromise formation that seeks ways of living which the Victorian definition of women's place made appear incompatible: a social

relationship with men that would include intellectual equality, emotional intimacy, and personal independence. For Nietzsche, the experiences of 1882 compel a decisive shift in his thought. In *The Gay Science* Nietzsche's narrator overcomes obstacles by practicing a kind of aesthetic finesse of the negative. But the breakup of his relationship with Salomé, and the nasty mutual recriminations that follow, bring an unforeseen kind of negativity. It is an acute challenge to Nietzsche's brightly affirmed ethos for saying "yes" to life. As the locus of unexpected passion and conflict, Salomé becomes a figure in Nietzsche's life for the resistant "other," the contingent which traverses life, displacing it out of its intended directions. Nietzsche is shoved, quite rudely, toward a confrontation with the problem of the will. He wills to have Salomé, but she will not have him. He wants the self-composure which accompanies an affirming and unified will; instead, Nietzsche must try to swallow conflicting passions, many of which are quite galling. The experiences of the year, as they unfold around the axis of the passion for Lou Salomé, test, confound, and displace the philosophic postulates of *The Gay Science* which first seemed to give this love so much support. In the task which he takes up in the midst of his blackest feelings of loss – writing *Zarathustra* – Nietzsche fulfills, short-circuits and sometimes

even reverses the themes and positions of *The Gay Science*, as they are refracted and realigned around a quite new, and much more conflictual, concept of the will operating within interpretation. This way of placing love in relation to Nietzsche's intellectual work means that Salomé and the Salomé episode can be *neither* something uncalled for, completely exterior, and radically contingent in its happening, *nor* something choreographed by Nietzsche, a simple repetition of his desire. She is not even an "aporia" implied by Nietzsche's text. Rather this episode is *both* something which unfolds in a space invented for Lou Salomé by the text of *The Gay Science*, and, in this happening, something that exceeds or violates that place and space. And this helps explain why the Salomé episode must be thought of, not as a measured application of philosophical "theory," to living "practice," but as that which comes between *The Gay Science* and *Zarathustra*, not as a bridge, but as a fissure, a violent displacing, a challenge, a mockery and – even a joke. The fact of love, as traumatic experience, has interrupted the writing of philosophy, and then collaborated in its revision.

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Wilde's Closet Self: A Solo at One Remove

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Stimulating and charming in a number of ways, Kerry Powell's "The Mesmerizing of Dorian Gray" does Oscar Wilde's novel a grave injustice by attempting to subsume it under the heading of mesmeric literature. In order to do so, Powell enlarges the genre to include Madame Blavatsky's theosophy and the "Hindoo" tenet of metempsychosis. This latter he somewhat untowardly divests of its karmic necessity and makes a matter of dominant will:

It is this transmigration of the spirit – a transcendence of bodily self – which primarily inspires Lord Henry's wish to dominate Dorian Gray. To influence him, Wotton says, would be "to project one's soul into some gracious form, and let it tarry there for a moment" (12).

Arguing that the mesmeric books which came to Wilde for review at *The Woman's World* "carried on a tradition which had been shaped by Hoffman, Hawthorne, Gautier, and others among the brightest in Oscar Wilde's own constellation of literary heroes" (10), Powell does not significantly differentiate among them, nor, indeed, among works by any single author; for example, such wilful metempsychosis as he proposes reduces Aminadab to soullessness in Hawthorne's "The Birthmark,"¹ is called "the Unpardonable Sin" in "Ethan Brand," and is clearly devilish in "Young Goodman Brown," where

the main character is vanquished both by his own evil velleity and the answering infernal power wielded over him by the serpentine "twisted staff" of "the elder person" whom he meets in the woods.

Powell's theory of the wilful invasion of one personality by another is not without erotic connotations since natural coitus is intended to infuse personality (personhood); yet he rather naively reads "imponderable fluid" (13) denotatively and relates it only to animal magnetism. Wilde himself describes the fluid as "subtle." If we take the fluid to be a metaphor for Lord Henry's desire to procreate, or multiply, himself by filling Dorian with himself, by making him something more than a dupe, a persona-clone, we come closer to the underlying central image of the book. The "twisted staff" of this "elder person" consists of worldly wisdom, cynicism, and malice; the "power" it confers is damnable sterility.

Powell, however, takes pains to dismiss as inconsequential certain stock Mephistophelean features with which Wilde furnishes Lord "Harry"; for example, his pointed beard. It is crucial to Powell's mesmeric thesis that we think of Lord Henry as nothing more than a suave and fastidious avatar of Giuseppe Balsamo, the notorious Cagliostro. The novel, he would persuade us, is not about good and evil but theosophical musical chairs, "flitting personalities, to-day one person, to-morrow

1. The usurpation of one soul by another (really a "spirit") is not theosophy. See my essay 19-21.