CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

'No woman has radiated a stronger or more direct influence in German-speaking lands in the last 150 years than this Lou von Salomé from Petersburg.'[1] KURT WOLFF

The hazy greatness which surrounds the name Lou Andreas-Salomé usually emanates from other names accompanying it, luminous among them Friedrich Nietzsche, Rainer Maria Rilke and Sigmund Freud. It is occasionally thought, when she has been heard of only as someone with famous friends, that Lou Andreas-Salomé was one of those collectors of geniuses in whom the essential thing is their 'remarkable flair for great men'[2]; but this says almost nothing about her. A glance into her correspondence makes one ask not only what it was in her character and life that led to this astonishing series of encounters, but also what it was that enabled her to be so unambitious in relation to them, to remain so secure and independent a personality. When one discovers that she was herself a celebrated thinker and writer in her time, one is led to ask, further, what was her own philosophy? What ideas did she hold – in particular on the topics she wrote about most and best: religion, sex (in both senses of the word) and psychoanalysis?

These topics are directly linked to the main themes of her biography. Her unusual experience of love and, closely interwoven with this, her unusually intense experience of religion, were the factors which more than anything else influenced her character and determined the events of her life. Preoccupied by these two experiences, she moved from one kind of inner liberation to another, to become at last the forceful and — as she was often called — 'sovereign' person whom one meets in most of her non-fictional writing and correspondence. As for the third theme, the study and practice of psychoanalysis were the culmination of her career and the cause of her personal fulfilment.

Of particular importance is the book she wrote on Nietzsche – a considerable work in itself and one showing how deep was her engagement with the philosopher, despite the brevity of her friendship with the man (which lasted less than eight months). To us the names of Nietzsche, Rilke and Freud are likely to stand out with something like equal prominence, but to her they were certainly not of equal importance. Moreover, if we read her memoir, *Looking Back* [*Lebensrückblick*], we find there three other men, all of them fairly distinguished but none

winning fame, whose importance to her was much more profound and lasting, though they must appear to posterity as a mere necessary background to the meetings with the great. These are Pastor Hendrik Gillot, Dr Paul Rée, and Professor F. C. Andreas. Her relationships with these men, who all passionately loved her, were inwardly most dramatic. Each relationship started with a kind of instantaneous, irresistible recognition and each was highly unconventional. At seventeen, she worshipped her teacher as if he were God; at twenty-one, she set up house for four years with a man she was glad she could never be in love with; at twenty-six, she made a marriage that would last for forty-five years and yet never be consummated.

Because Gillot, Rée and Andreas were such an important part of her formation, I have dwelt on these early encounters at far greater length than any later ones excepting those with Nietzsche, Rilke and Freud. Beside them the latter three may even acquire a certain plainness. Nietzsche (whom Lou met in 1882 at a turning-point in his thought) was after all to her merely a brilliant older scholar, a teacher, helper and temporary friend; the effect she had on him was immense, but she was later to say that she could think him out of her life.[3] With Rilke (whom she met in 1897 at the very beginning of his career as a poet) she had a fairly normal love affair, deeply important to her, lasting three years and to be followed by nearly three decades of friendship; but again the drama, the immensity of feeling, were chiefly on his side. And with Freud (whom she got to know in 1912 when, having expounded his fundamental theories, he was turning to work on new ones) it was, one could say, no more than an excellent twenty-six-year friendship and, to some extent colleagueship; in this case there was really no drama on either side, unless sheer depth of gladness can be accounted dramatic; again what is most noteworthy about the relationship is the eminence of the man. If sections of this book are dominated by her acquaintance with these influential persons, it is for the sake of our interest in them and may well be out of proportion to their significance in her life.

Another element of disproportion is that at least one relationship of great importance to Lou Andreas-Salomé is neglected – that with Dr Friedrich Pineles, known as Zemek; this is because almost nothing is known about it. And only perfunctory mention is made of the large number of other gifted and well-known people she knew with various degrees of closeness. Names of distinguished men cluster round hers throughout her biography, so numerous that some commentators assume she knew everyone, and reel off lists of friendships almost at random: one[4] tells us she was a friend of Kafka (in which there is not a gleam of truth), another[5] that she counted 'among her friends' Turgenev, Tolstoy, Strindberg, Rodin, Rilke and Schnitzler, whereas she never met Turgenev, scarcely knew Rodin or Strindberg, and had only

the slightest acquaintance with Tolstoy. But a true list of her friendships would be remarkable without any such additions, for during five decades she made acquaintances in artistic and learned circles in Berlin, Munich, Vienna, Paris and Petersburg, and the full story of them would be something approaching a history of modern European culture.

A more than ordinary strength of character, eluding definition, seems to have carried Lou Andreas-Salomé through her life. One might perhaps see it as a matter of powerful will, and suggest that she knew astoundingly clearly what she wanted and made sure she got it; one could, alternatively, see it as a matter of great faith and trust and say, as she sometimes said, that she was governed all her life by something she had no control over. At the age of twenty-one, she wrote: '*Goals* have not been a choice for me, and I have *never* really known the feeling of choice, but have found in myself something very like the necessary working of natural forces.'[6] At seventy-five, she told a visitor that she could not understand why, when she had done the most obvious and natural things, catastrophes resulted;[7] she could have said the same about benefits resulting from her actions. Whatever it was — will, fate, or the belief in fate, or perhaps belief in herself – it was something which others always sensed in her and were attracted by. Nietzsche called her 'courageous as a lion';[8] Rilke said: 'she moves fearlessly among the most burning mysteries, which do nothing to her . . . I know no one else with life so much on their side';[9] her friend Helene Klingenberg said of her that she had 'an enormous readiness for life, a humble and most courageous attitude of holding herself open to it';[10] Anna Freud said of her after her death: 'the unusual thing about her was what ought actually to be quite usual in a human being – honesty, directness, absence of any weakness, self-assertion without selfishness.'[11] Recent critics who did not know her have sometimes felt put off by the very qualities that attracted her friends. D. Bassermann, for example, who was fascinated by the 'natural force of unbroken power'[12] in her and describes her as 'daemonically primordial' and also (lifting a phrase from Freud's obituary of her) 'without any feminine frailties and almost without any human ones', adds that she was a 'virago, lacking only a bit of real humanitas to be a figure out of antiquity'. Of course, not every acquaintance liked her (though all except Nietzsche's sister were in some way very drawn to her). Rilke's friend Loulou Albert-Lasard evoked her uncommon vitality and powerful gaze, but also wrote with sarcastic humour that whenever Lou Andreas-Salomé travelled to any big town she would first write to all the luminaries living in it so as to have them lined up on the station platform as her train steamed in.[13] But both the idea of the virago and the image of the gatherer-up of great men at railway stations are belied by the impression of peacefulness and receptiveness she made on so many. Freud

called her an 'understander par excellence';[14] people continually came to tell her about themselves; she was 'such an apt student that her teachers appear to have grown wiser in her presence':[15] she was a patient and successful psychoanalyst. Few people can ever have been loved, admired, worshipped and clung to by so many others as she was.

Telling her life story, I have relied whenever possible on the way she told it herself, opening up and expanding the accounts she gave (mainly in *Looking Back*). Where she affixed ornate labels and provided compound wrappings, I have tried to decipher the labels and to undo the parcels. Some empty areas I have populated with names, dates, places and books. But, for the general view, I have usually taken her at her word about herself; she said these things happened and had these kinds of importance, and there is no reason to suppose it was otherwise, despite (to mention the most energetic of her posthumous depreciators) Rudolph Binion in his *Frau Lou*, which, from an unexplained position of antipathy, treats her throughout as a subtle liar about herself. One thing that makes Lou Andreas-Salomé difficult for us to appreciate, and which may have made up one of the strands of that antipathy, is the peculiar pathos of her style, which is especially conspicuous in her memoir. It has been called an example of *Jugendstil* (or art nouveau), by which may be meant an excess of the heavily decorative, a certain amount of rather humourless idiosyncrasy in the invention of new forms, and a habit of hinting at things of indescribable mystery and unfathomable significance. These qualities her autobiographical writing at any rate does have; it is somehow swollen, it is naively sententious, and it is unnecessarily secretive. But as this is so very different from what is reliably reported of her personality, I think one has to keep in mind that none of it could have been true of her voice, and one should listen for something more vivid beyond the thick curtain of the written style. In certain works, such as the *Three Epistles to a Boy*, and in many diaries and letters, one does overhear the persuasive fluency her speech itself must have had. In her *Freud Journal*, especially, one glimpses the rapt process of responsible and elaborative thinking that must have made her conversation absorbing. In the stories and novels one looks in on the passions that lay like a warming and threatening fire beneath her academic pronouncements. But in general her writings are not adequate to convey what she was. People called her a 'genius', but these are remote from being *works* of genius. There is a lush wordiness in nearly all she wrote which ranks it far below any grandeur.

On the other hand, taken together, the writings add up to something worthwhile. They are impressive for a certain sustained and unbothering vigour, as well as for the consistency of thought in their wide ranging over different subjects. They are interesting, too, as the work of a woman dedicated to an intellectual life at a time when this required

more courage than it does nowadays, and of a woman thinking alone. The trouble critics often had in categorising her arose from the solitariness of her thought. While other notable women attached themselves to causes (social reform, perhaps, or female emancipation) or to an eminent husband, perhaps to a brilliant salon, or, as actresses and dancers, made their person their gift, Lou Andreas-Salomé, who appeared to be always purposefully moving in a definite direction, actually had no cause. She joined no movement, was wholly unpolitical, was neither a feminist nor an anti-feminist (though she occasionally satirised feminists and was called a reactionary). She did not link her life to that of a great man and she was, more than anything, cerebral – it was her mind that she gave. When, at fifty, she became an adherent of psychoanalysis, she was not so much joining a movement as finding in that movement a roof, a house, for the family of ideas she had already borne and brought up, an edifice of names for an already assembled but loosely labelled world-roaming luggage of thoughts.

As well as her major essays, she wrote a great deal which I treat as minor work – especially about poetry and drama, and about the Russian character and Russian culture. She also produced a multitude of fictional works — indeed she spun out words all her life as naturally as a silkworm spins silk. The fiction was received with a great deal of praise. One critic said in 1898: 'the fictional work of Andreas-Salomé has the effect of hymns in the thunderous sounding of an organ. It rings out full and stirring, and dies away in tones celestially light'.[16] As literature, it has not much to offer us now. None the less, it is interesting as soon as we become interested in the personality of the author, for it contains image after image of the girl and woman she felt herself to be, of the girls and women around her, and of the men who fascinated and disappointed her. I am therefore giving – in a final, separate section – full accounts of most of her fiction.

Lou Andreas-Salomé held the principle that women ought not to let their writing be central to their lives, and this guided her own behaviour. If one had asked her why women have not achieved things comparable to the achievements of men in the arts, sciences and philosophy, and also why she herself did not try to become the much better writer she doubtless could have become (to judge by many signs and by Nietzsche's saying she 'could learn to write in a day'[17]), she would probably have answered, to both questions: lack of ambition. This, she told Freud, was 'a great lack but a legitimate one in women, for what use is ambition to us?'[18] The whole business of devotion to perfection in artistic achievement would have seemed to her (for herself at least) a sort of sidetracking, and a denial of the fullness of experience that she already enjoyed and that she believed she enjoyed *as a woman*. She was, above all, utterly glad to be female. And I think an important

benefit from studying her life and her work is that they acquaint us with someone who, in spite of the moral and professional constrictions laid upon women in her time and in spite of her own emotional problems, found no conscious disadvantage in being a woman. She was convinced that women are the happier and the superior sex; she worked at theories to establish this, and never cursed her lot, nor laughed at it.