
Opening Extract from...

A Book for All and None

Written by Clare Morgan

Published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson

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CLARE MORGAN

Weidenfeld & Nicolson
LONDON

First published in Great Britain in 2011 by Weidenfeld & Nicolson
An imprint of the Orion Publishing Group Ltd
Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane
London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK Company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

ISBN 978 0 297 86373 1 (cased)
ISBN 978 0 297 86374 8 (trade paperback)

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Typeset at The Spartan Press Ltd,
Lymington, Hants

Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

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MEETING

I first caught sight of Beatrice Kopus crossing St Giles. It was just down from the Lamb & Flag, she came out of St John's and crossed over, entirely without looking, it seemed to me, and disappeared into Pusey Street. It was not that she looked unusual in Oxford. She looked, indeed, of that relatively lean and intellectual type you often see there. But there was something that did not quite fit, in the gait, in the disposition. She had dark hair with a hint of something powdery about it. Her hands were long and elegant. She had (I could see it even at a distance) beautiful feet. I came across her again on the corner of Magdalen Street, a fortnight later. It was one of those almost clear days that you get in Oxford when time seems suspended. She hesitated as if she wanted to say something.

We talked for a few minutes on the corner of the street. We were rather in the way, people had to push past us. It turned out that she had been up at Christ Church at the same time I was lecturing at Jesus. I think we met once, she said, at one of John Kelly's parties at St Giles House.

She was back at Christ Church in a visiting capacity. I suddenly remembered she had written a brilliant thesis on Virginia Woolf and a fellowship had been in the offing but nothing had come of it. Great things had been expected of her but she had disappeared.

Someone in a hurry pushed past on the corner of the pavement and jostled her. She staggered forward and I caught hold of her elbow. I could smell her scent, which was sweet and musky. She was back, she said, yes, back (she smiled at me) and working on her subject again. The same subject, she said, but a different emphasis. She was, apparently, working on Virginia Woolf and Time.

I remember she looked slightly anxious while I was talking to

her. I cannot say she had a profound effect on me, at least in the beginning. And yet there was attached to her a sense of – if I say 'destiny' it will seem fanciful. Perhaps I can say at least that even at that early stage there seemed to be the possibility that we might be friends.

I invited Beatrice Kopus to dinner. I thought it better to dine quietly in my rooms. Not that Bexborough College is particularly arcane or daunting, it is one of the newer colleges, entirely without pretension. It has a rather fine cupola added at the end of the 1970s. It is in one of the less salubrious streets in Oxford, there is hardly anything to distinguish it, no porter's lodge, no great gate enticing you yet at the same time preventing you from entering it.

Her husband, I discovered, was someone you read about in the papers all the time. Rich, but not as rich as he used to be. He had been in banking and then moved into construction. You could see, apparently, his bright yellow fleets of trucks and diggers in almost every country. They had *CA CONSTRUCTION* stamped on them in red lettering. You would often see photographs of him with captions like 'Walter Cronk, Frontline Regenerator', posed against the gaunt outline of a bombed-out building. In such images he always appeared well groomed and smiling. I had never seen in any of the features written about him a more than passing mention of his wife.

I was providing gravadlax, bread, salad and a clafoutis from the delicatessen on the corner. For wine, a rather aromatic Pouilly Fuissé that I hoped would take us through to coffee. If anything further were needed, I had a perfectly respectable Janneau Armagnac.

She arrived a few minutes after eight and I hardly recognised her. It was not just the light, which was coming in from the west at a peculiar angle. That light, as I was to see it later, cast a strange luminosity over everything. At the time I was much aware of the precision with which it picked out the objects that surrounded us. The heavy, clawed feet of the mahogany sofa. The carved back of my writing chair. The stains on the cream lampshade that stood by

the window. The rills and intricacies of the Turkey carpet. The little cluster of silver framed photographs on the Pembroke table. The thumbed pages of my article, approximately three-quarters of an inch deep in the middle of my desk.

It was not just the light. It was something in her, she had changed, she had been altered. For one thing she looked younger, significantly, considerably. Her hair was different, fluffed out around her ears, perhaps it was that, or perhaps it was smoother. I noticed her lipstick. If it was brown before, now it was pink and glowing. Her lips themselves seemed full and definite. When she smiled I could see her teeth were uneven. It gave her, I think, a peculiar vulnerability.

The dinner had a timeless quality. I swear, the light did not move from where it was. But suddenly, as though it had happened while we were not looking, it was dark in Oxford. We sat over our Armagnac and the lights on each of the domes and spires came on.

She was, she told me, embarking on a quest and she hoped I would help her. She had always been fascinated by what influences Virginia Woolf might have been subject to. In particular she was investigating now whether Friedrich Nietzsche might have had some influence on Woolf's writing. She was familiar of course with Yeats's indebtedness to Nietzsche, how Nietzsche's influence had in fact turned Yeats into a modern poet. But it seemed to her that very little had as yet been written about his relation to Woolf.

It was because of my recent piece that she had come in search of me. The meeting in St Giles had not been accidental. She knew my habits, she said with a smile, and had hoped to bump into me.

My piece was titled: 'Nietzsche and The Moment: Some Observations on Time in the Work of Virginia Woolf and T. S. Eliot'. It had been politely, if not warmly, received by readers of *English Studies.* I envisaged it as a chapter in the book I intended to complete on the subject, if I had time.

I agreed with her that the links that had been made so far between Woolf and Nietzsche were rather tenuous. An article

suggesting that Nietzsche's rejection of God is reflected in Woolf's desire to break the hegemony of the logical sentence – that was the kind of thing that had come out so far.

Beatrice Kopus was swirling her Armagnac thoughtfully. She had a red scarf wrapped round her shoulders, of that very direct red you seldom see in Oxford.

She asked me whether there was any evidence that Woolf read Nietzsche. Whether, for example, she had his works in her library.

I told her that this connection had not yet been established. It would, of course, I said, have been impossible for her not to have come under his influence. *Thus Spake Zarathustra* was published in 1896 in England, only a decade after it was written. Of the Bloomsbury set and others of her kind that Woolf mixed with, most would have read it. The first *Complete Works*, the Oscar Levy edition, came out in 1909–13.

She asked me whether that was the one based on all the materials that Elizabeth Nietzsche had doctored, making her brother appear to be an arch Jew-hater. I said that in the view of most contemporary Nietzsche scholars these early works were a travesty. But still, in many respects the Levy was considered a highly influential text.

I thought I saw Beatrice Kopus shiver, so I got up and switched the gas fire on. It sputtered into life in a series of small explosions then settled down to a quiet but oddly invasive hiss.

The ghost of a young woman standing alone at the edge of the room and holding her glass while the party surged round her suddenly came back to me, like a genie or a water nymph.

She asked me, perhaps it was more for form's sake than anything, about my interest in Nietzsche.

There must be something, she said, leaning forward suddenly, that fires up your interest. Something that keeps on making you want to find out.

Her expression was not inquisitive. Rather, it was hopeful. As if she were looking over a brink and into something. As if that

something might be miraculous and she did not want it to disappear.

I got up and went to my desk, to the pile of buff- and magenta-coloured folders that were stacked in order next to the telephone. I selected the second folder down. All the images I possessed of Nietzsche were carefully interleaved between plain white sheets of A4 paper. On the top was Munch's painting of him, the solitary and contemplative figure, rather clerical in his dark coat and with his hands folded. He is standing on the slope of a hill, a road it looks like, and over his shoulder way down below him is a tiny cluster of buildings, a castle, a church even, or perhaps the angular turret of a European university. There's a lake too, although the perspective is such that it could be hills, your eye moves from one interpretation to the other, it can never be at rest.

I took out the second image, inserted in a clear plastic folder so that no inadvertent fingermark should mar its pristine beauty and its clarity. I handed the picture to Beatrice Kopus, who looked at it closely then held it away from her and smiled, a beautiful smile, a joyful smile, that lit up and encompassed everything in the room.

She is very beautiful. Was she a lover of Nietzsche's?

I took the image back and looked at it. Louise von Salomé tilted her head away from me and looked out into a distance I had no access to. Her neck was bare, a tissue of something gauzy was flung over her shoulders. Her hair, very thick and long and wavy, was thrust up in a bun at the base of her skull from which wisps and tentacles cascaded into the sepia void of the background. It seemed for one moment as though she turned and looked at me. No doubt I was superimposing another image in my mind and that is what created the illusion. But the power of her look, the plea almost, set my heart beating so violently that for a minute I could not speak.

The tale is very compelling, I said, putting the photograph carefully back in the folder, stowing it away. Nietzsche wanted to marry Lou Salomé and so did his friend Paul Rée, who was acting as intermediary on Nietzsche's behalf.

A wonderful duplicity was clearly in place then, Beatrice Kopus said. How modern. How intriguing.

Unfortunately, I said, it has intrigued a number of people. There was a film that came out in the 1970s, Italian, art-house – at least, it purported to be. Rather a focus on the – ah – troilism aspect, if I remember rightly.

How long were they together? she said.

I told her that whether they were ever together was a fact that had been hotly debated.

The relationship lasted from May 1882 until the autumn, I said. It had a profound effect on Nietzsche. It is directly out of its possibilities in the beginning, and the despair that he felt in its aftermath, that *Thus Spake Zarathustra* came.

When she had left I felt, perversely, that there had been a victory. About what and over whom I had no notion. The prospect of the next meeting, which we had arranged for the following week, consoled me. I got ready for bed but I could not settle. There was a faint scent of her in the room still that I breathed without meaning to. I was suddenly aware of how extremely silent it was. I could have been anywhere, at any moment in history, the only person living. It was cold now and I pressed down as deeply as I could under the duvet. I slept fitfully, dreaming at first of Munch's castle, changed somehow and spectrally beautiful. Then later, I thought I dreamed of Friedrich Nietzsche and Louise von Salomé, but found it was not them, it was I who was walking with Beatrice Kopus, and the lake spread out below us under the moonlight, ridged and intricate and without end.

Not many people know that in the early years of Nietzsche's incarceration in Binswanger's asylum in Jena he tried to kill himself. When the madness first overcame him in January of 1889 he was fetched from his lodgings in Turin by his friend Franz Overbeck, a Jew, and taken with difficulty by train to Basel, and put in the care of Wille, the eminent psychologist. He was wild and raving. He sang and shouted. In his lodgings in Turin he had been endlessly thumping the piano. It is not easy to be a friend in such circumstances. Perhaps friendship was more thoroughgoing in those days.

The first his friends knew of the madness were the letters he wrote them. To Franz Overbeck he wrote, *It is all over. I have seen Armageddon.* He signed himself, *The Crucified.* To his late arch-enemy Wagner's wife, Cosima, now also an arch-enemy, he wrote: *Ariadne: I love you. Dionysus.* Franz Overbeck consulted another friend, Peter Gast, who had also received letters. Gast came quickly to see him. There was hope. This might be a passing phase only. It was not until 1892, a misty September, that Overbeck wrote to Gast the following: *It is almost as if he were feigning his own madness. He seems glad that it has at last overtaken him. It is all up with our old friend Nietzsche.* To this letter there is no recorded reply.

Dr Binswanger's asylum was on the outskirts of Jena. It was a mellow-looking building, made of stone with white windows. You had to pass through seven locked doors to get to where Nietzsche was incarcerated. He was in a little white room which had red curtains. It was not a long window but the curtains, apparently, reached down to the floor. Herr Nietzsche was not to be denied the dignity of curtains. Herr Nietzsche was mad but he was after all (or had been) a gentleman.

And so one night (Nietzsche had been there about a week) he decided (if the mad can be said to make decisions) to kill himself. It is not possible, at this long distance, to conjecture why he made the decision. Perhaps he felt his Ariadne had betrayed him. He said to

Binswanger: It was my wife, Cosima Wagner, who brought me here.

The only tools he had to hand were the curtains. They were luckily not of the heavy velvet variety you would expect in a house, they were of lighter material which you could tear with your teeth at the edge, and then rip down the weft with your bare hands if they were strong enough. Nietzsche had very strong hands. Lou Salomé comments on them in her diary on October 20th 1882. She and Nietzsche and Rée were all together at that time, in Leipzig.

'Nietzsche came to see me in my room,' she writes. 'He came unexpectedly. It was a night of thick fog, you could not see one lamp-post from the distance of another. You could see your hand in front of your face (barely). And Paul Rée, coming in to see me at approximately 9 p.m., told me the performance at the opera house had had to be suspended because the fog became so thick in the auditorium you could no longer (especially from the boxes) see the stage. After Rée had left, and I had finished the long letter to my mother which had occupied my evening, there was a creak on the stair and a rap on the door that I knew was Nietzsche's. "What is the matter?" I asked him. It was late. He looked troubled. He mumbled something incoherent about having to see me. Then he paced around the room as though it were a cage (although it is not a large room it is well proportioned and gives, always, a sense of ease and elegance. But with Nietzsche pacing it seemed more like the *domus* of a wild animal, such as you may see pacing in the zoological gardens). He held his hands in front of him, clasped together, almost as though he were steering by their own precipitate and unseen pull of direction. I saw how extremely firm looking his knuckles were, with the skin pulled white across them by the strength of his grip. I thought in that instant I would not like those hands ever to take hold of me (and yet, he has a perfectly balanced and unpressured grip). And then he turned and unclasped his hands all of a sudden and said, "Do you see, do you see the world as we know it is ending?" I touched his arm and reassured

him, and he seemed to quieten, and quite soon after he said good night abruptly and I looked out through the window and saw the vague shape of him leaving the door of our lodging and disappearing into the mist.'

Nietzsche drew a picture, in Binswanger's asylum in Jena, of a couple embracing. When asked who the couple were he pointed to the male figure and said, This is Dionysus. And this? Dr Binswanger asked, pointing to the female. There was a long silence during which Nietzsche regarded the outline. That, he said at last, is Lou Salomé.

Nietzsche reached up and took down the curtains. He had told them he did not want the curtains drawn, he had never slept with drawn curtains, he wanted always to be able to see the sky. Although this was very odd behaviour they humoured him. After all, what harm could come from an undrawn curtain? And it is true, Nietzsche always *did* want to see the sky at night, even when he was sleeping. Nietzsche said the stars in his head from beyond the glass operated like pinpricks. I want my brain, he said, to be constantly open to all the world offers. Am I not Dionysus? Am I not the Crucified? So they let him sleep with his curtains open, and the cold sky of Jena presented itself to him through the misty glass.

When they looked through the little slat in the door, which they did every hour, it was impossible for them to see that the curtains had come down. He could hear the footsteps coming along the corridor and lay still and quiet while the eye looked in on him. When he heard the footsteps going off again into the distance he sat up and continued the makeshift construction. He gnawed and ripped the curtains into strips and tied them firmly together in a kind of double knot sailors use. He had been much impressed as a child when, on a trip to Bremen (the trip went largely unrecorded but there is an extant diary entry by his mother which attests to the visit), he saw the fishermen whipping and coiling their ropes, and saw how the great knots took the strain of the moored-up vessels shifting on the water.

His problem was how to secure his makeshift rope and raise himself up enough to allow for some kind of suitable drop so asphyxiation could be effected. He could tie one end of his rope to the latch of the window, it was sturdy and would surely hold his moderate weight. And up in the ceiling was a suitable hook, set like an inverted question mark. But down from the hook three gas lamps hung with bulbous globes of frosted glass and little crenellated edges tooled with complex indentations.

He could not move the lamps, they were far too heavy, his arms by this time certainly lacked the strength. His hands, though, still very strong, tested the knots. He was satisfied and nodded his head in the darkness. From where he was sitting, on the edge of his bed, he could see two stars in the bottom corner of his window. On any other night he would have worked out which constellation they belonged to. They were very bright, he noted. His breath was misting the window. When he had strung up his rope and fed it carefully through the eye of the hook and down between the frosted glass globes he pulled out the chair from the table in the corner (his sister had demanded that he have a chair and a table, Herr Nietzsche must have a chair and table at his disposal, in case) and, climbing up on it unsteadily (he had suffered from dizzy spells ever since his madness first manifested itself in the street in Turin), he stood on tiptoe and tied the end of the rope round his neck.

It is much more difficult than you think to kick the supporting chair out from under you. Nor could Nietzsche, in this case, with any degree of ease, step off the chair and into the void around it. For any such sideways movement would run the danger of knocking the gas lamps and perhaps (though they seemed quite firm) dislodging them. Nietzsche stood irresolute on the chair with his carefully constructed rope disposed round his neck somewhere between casual scarf and halter. He looked in that moment remarkably young and insouciant. He heard, or thought he did, in the distance, the steps returning. *God is dead*. Like a bather executing a clumsy dive Nietzsche sprang from the chair, which fell to the floor

with a clatter. No one heard. The steps which may or may not have been approaching did not falter. The rope began its seemly process of strangulation. Nietzsche's hands clasped and unclasped and the veins stood out like worms at his knuckles.

But the workmanship was what failed him. Not his own, but the artisan's work, who had stood with his laths and his trowel and put up the ceiling in an age before Nietzsche was born. Perhaps he had wanted to go home by the time he reached the middle of the ceiling. Perhaps he had heard that the child his wife was expecting was already on the way. Whatever the cause, the mix of his plaster, the lime and the mortar that held up the lath and the horsehair, that held in its turn the hook for the rope, at that instant of Nietzsche's great need all gave way and fell down with a crash that everyone heard from one end of that madhouse to the other.

Some said ah, it is the Second Coming. Some said, it is War. Some said it is a storm and the heavens have opened. But those were probably right who said the gods were watching. No, no, Herr Nietzsche, one or other of the gods decided, watching that little man with his tongue expanding, watching how his hands opened and closed. No, no, Herr Nietzsche; we have more to do with you. And so, dispatched from that god's fingertips, the loosening came that dropped the hook, the light, the rope and Nietzsche in a heap upon the floor.

The orderlies came running, pad pad pad their feet along the corridor, clack clack clack the running of their heels. And Nietzsche had no curtains after that, a metal plate was fixed across his window every night at 7 p.m. come rain or shine and he could never afterwards look at the stars.