

## *From the Heights*

**Zarathustra's Sister: The Case of Elisabeth and Friedrich Nietzsche**, by H.F. Peters, *New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1977. 243 pp. \$8.95.*

THIS IS THE SECOND biography H.F. Peters has written of a person important in Nietzsche's life. The first was of Lou Andreas-Salome, the remarkable woman who was for a short time loved by Nietzsche. Interest in Lou Salome, however, stems not just from her relationship with the German philosopher; her friendships spanned an amazing array of writers and scholars, including Rilke, Freud, and Buber, and she was a prolific essayist and novelist in her own right.

The same cannot be said for the subject of Peters' second biography, Nietzsche's sister, Elisabeth. Elisabeth was remarkable only for the banality of her intellect and character—an impression which Peters' book, building on the

brief accounts of Elisabeth's life so far available, strengthens. Whereas Lou, at the age of twenty-one, understood and appreciated Nietzsche's ideas to an extent he rarely encountered, Elisabeth, though she lived until she was almost ninety, understood few, if any, of them. As Rudolf Steiner remarked after fruitlessly attempting to tutor her in her brother's philosophy: ". . . her thinking is void of even the least logical consistency." Nor was Elisabeth possessed of a generous character that might have compensated for her intellectual deficiencies. Nietzsche nicknamed her "llama"—an animal which, when it does not want to go on, "turns its head round and discharges its saliva, which has an unpleasant odor, into the rider's face." There were many occasions throughout Elisabeth's life when she used her saliva—against her brother, her mother, close friends, and associates. After Nietzsche suffered a total and permanent breakdown in 1889 as a result of what was probably tertiary syphilis, Elisabeth gained control of his writings and not only became rich and famous from them (he had been unknown and impoverished throughout his career) but also falsified his manuscripts to make them conform to her own proto-Nazi beliefs. A friend of Hitler's when he came to power in the 'thirties, she was not even principled in her anti-Semitism, but took money, to the dismay of some of her friends, from Jews.

Yet, for all that, Elisabeth is a key figure—far more so than Lou Salome—in assessing Nietzsche's life and philosophy. Any discussion of Elisabeth raises the issue of the relationship between Nietzsche's ideas and the political uses to which they were put. *Zarathustra's Sister*, though not ignoring this issue, fails to deal adequately with it. This is unfortunate, for the work is on the whole immensely valuable; clearly and carefully written, it is the most complete and scholarly account of Elisabeth's life to date.

The problem with Peters' handling of Nietzsche's politics lies in his view that, although Elisabeth and the Nazis perverted Nietzsche's thought (nearly everyone nowadays is agreed on that much), Nietzsche was in some ways responsible for this perversion. This view

is, of course, not unreasonable but unfortunately the arguments Peters uses to support it are untenable. Thus, in the Preface, Peters comments: ". . . in Nietzsche's case, the relationship between the ideological content of his writings and their political impact is particularly striking, and not by accident—he willed it so . . . he demanded action, including political action that called for a new Caesar to transform the world."

Peters, like so many writers of the past, is not giving us the whole story here. As early as *Human-All-Too-Human*, Nietzsche denounced excessive state power in modern times as the heir of "Caesaristic despotism." The admiration Nietzsche felt for Caesar was for the "nobility" of his character, which could stand strong and independent at a time of degeneration and collapse, and not for any military or even specifically political achievement. In innumerable passages (for example, *The Gay Science*, 338 and 377; *Beyond Good and Evil*, 256; and *The Antichrist*, Preface), Nietzsche issues what is tantamount to a call *not* to engage in "political action" and even counsels willful ignorance of political events. As he said in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (II, 18): ". . . the greatest events—they are not our loudest but our stillest hours. Not around inventors of new noise, but around the inventors of new values does the world revolve; it revolves *inaudibly*."

Yet, for all that, it is true that Nietzsche "willed" that there be a relationship between his writings and their political impact, though some knowledge of Nietzsche's views is required to understand in just what way. For Nietzsche, healthy politics meant politics imbued with spiritual values, values which could only be maintained by strong individuals operating within a common social arena; his model for such politics was pre-Socratic Greece (a model to be studied, not imitated). It was precisely the crisis of modern civilization that it lacked such a common social arena. People's consciousness had expanded so far that politics was no longer "a public matter . . . a subject of common consciousness," as Tracy Strong says; faith in the Judaeo-Christian ethic, the morality which had for two-thousand years constituted the horizon of Western con-

sciousness, had faded from view, leaving only "atomistic chaos." The possible consequences of this state of affairs were terrible—the onset of nihilism, "upheavals . . . the like of which have never been dreamed of," the collapse of the structure of Western society.

What could be done? In at least one sense of the word, Nietzsche proposed no "solution." Rather, he felt that it was in the nature of the crisis that no solutions could be given; the structure on which such answers could arise has proved to be irremediably false. Toward political ideologies, whether socialist, fascist, or capitalist, Nietzsche expressed even-handed contempt, believing them to be both superficial and dangerous. They were superficial because they did not take into account the true nature of the crisis of modern civilization, which was moral, not economic. They were dangerous because they could possibly hasten the destruction of the old world moral order before materials could be gathered to build a new one. Unlike Marx, Nietzsche did not believe that a creative world-building process would follow a destructive one, and he was frightened by the prospect of nihilism. Nonetheless, he felt that such nihilism was inevitable in one form or another. What were needed to counter it were not doctrines or ideologies but spiritually strong individuals who could face the crisis in all its immensity and reach within themselves for new values to hold the world together. Toward such philosophers of the future—"truly political" men who could redraw the horizons of our consciousness—he directed both his hopes and writings.

Nietzsche's political perspective was thus mainly individualistic and only secondarily social; though deeply concerned with the future of Western society, he saw this future in terms of the individuals who would create it. It is probably this extreme individualism, more than any other aspect of Nietzsche's thought, that has caused his writings to be so widely misunderstood in our age.

Reviewed by HENRY McDONALD