When Lou Andreas Salomé and Sigmund Freud met in the 1910s, they had a common interest: narcissism. They gave two different interpretations of the myth and demonstrated two different understandings of narcissism. If for Freud (primary) narcissism creates conditions for self-identification and differentiation of psychic structures, for Salomé narcissism is based on the re-appropriation of the object up to self-annihilating expansion. In terms of narcissistic aggressivity, she is closer to Lacanian ideas than to Freudian ones. Her concept of narcissism is not only connected with adventures with her brothers and her perception of the mirror in childhood, but also with her own future image of femme-fatale.

I cannot go into the details of Lou Andreas-Salomé’s incredible life journey, which began on Palace Square 140 years ago. This paper deals with the relationship of Lou Andreas-Salomé to psychoanalysis, her role in psychoanalytical theory, narcissism and her reputation as a femme fatale.

1. The narcissism of Lou Andreas-Salomé and Sigmund Freud

By 1895, when Studies on Hysteria (Freud 1895) was published, Salomé was most probably already familiar with some of Freud’s ideas. Some suppose that they may have met for the first time in Vienna as early as the spring of 1895, but that they met in September 1911 at the 3rd Congress of Psychoanalysis in Weimar is absolutely certain.

Roughly a year later, on 25 October 1912, Lou Andreas-Salomé arrived in Vienna to study psychoanalysis (1). For half a year she attended Freud’s Saturday Lectures at a clinic, and meetings at his home on Wednesdays. In spite of the fact that they met as contemporaries (Salomé was five years younger than Freud) and as people with an affinity of spirit, their views were so different that it could be said that it was a meeting between the optimist of the 19th century and the pessimist of the 20th century (2). Their friendship lasted over 25 years. The evidence of this is their extensive correspondence (over 200 letters), Lou Andreas-Salomé’s diaries (3), and numerous references to one another in various texts. The final third of her life was given to psychoanalysis. Returning to Göttingen from Vienna, she started her own practice, but she herself was never analyzed. Psychoanalysis became “Lou’s baby” (Appignanesi & Forrester 1992, pp. 257)(4).

Lou Andreas-Salomé was ready to acquire the psychoanalytical gift even before meeting Freud. Abraham emphasized this point in one of his letters to Freud. On 29 April 1912, several months before Salomé’s arrival in Vienna, he wrote: “Never have I met a person with such a profound and subtle understanding of psychoanalysis”. Her ability to understand, and also her age (she was the same age as Martha Freud), allowed Appignanesi and Forrester to call her “the mother of psychoanalysis”, “the good mother, whose life-loving optimism imbues all her writings, which appropriately focus on female sexuality, on love and on questions surrounding narcissism and sexual difference” (Appignanesi & Forrester 1992, p. 241).

Lou Andreas-Salomé was familiar with psychoanalysis not only through correspondence, but psychoanalytical circles also knew of her existence. This was not only due to her friendship with European celebrities and her research work on Ibsen and Nietzsche, they also knew her as a writer who had created
images of the “new woman”. Salomé’s new women rejected carnal pleasure for the sake of the spiritual world; they believed in liberating sexuality from matrimonial chains.

In the 1910s, Freud and Salomé were linked by a common interest: narcissism. They approached this subject from opposite directions. Freud was led to narcissism by the following sources: clinical observation of paraphrenics and homosexuals, anthropological research of the totemic soul and the peculiarities of infantile omnipotence of thought. Salomé had long been studying narcissism, since she had always been interested in the theme of love, including self-love. It is possible to say that Freud directed his research toward others, Salomé toward herself. Freud studied the question from outside; Salomé from within.

They also took different approaches to the myth of Narcissus itself. If for Freud the economic-dynamic aspect of the libidinous charge of one’s own image and the directing of sexual energy toward oneself were important, according to Salomé Narcissus did not simply see his own image, but the unity of this image within his natural surroundings: one could in fact say that he saw the absence of his own image. She emphasized that Narcissus did not simply look at himself in the mirror, but in the “mirror of Nature”, and therefore saw not only his reflection, but saw “himself as all”. Lou Salomé posed the question, which in essence served as an argument to the advantage, so to speak, of a syncretic Narcissus: Had he only seen his own image, would he not then have fled, rather than remaining paralyzed before it? “And does not melancholy dwell next to enchantment upon his face?” (Andreas-Salomé, 1962, p. 8), she asked herself in her work “The Dual Orientation of Narcissism” (1921). Thus her separate image was for her an object from which she must flee, an object giving rise to melancholy.

In relation to narcissism, Freud and Salomé took opposing positions. If for Freud, narcissism, as a formation of one’s own self-image, created the conditions for self-identification, for the birth of the subject, then for Salomé, narcissism presupposed not collecting oneself but rather dissolving oneself into the surroundings, self-dissemination close to de-personalization, denial of the boundaries of one’s image. Narcissism broke out from the framework of the “I” and, furthermore, went beyond the boundaries of “love for oneself”: the psychotic, as Salomé wrote, “has something to say regarding this, since he has lost the boundaries of his own I”. (Andreas-Salomé 1962, p. 8).

Narcissism for her was, as it were, a maniacal condition of love towards oneself and towards the surrounding world. Salomé in general identified the concepts of narcissism and libido, whence also the correspondence of the two directions of narcissism with the two attractions in Freud’s first theory—sexual drive and the drive of self-preservation. It is interesting that this theory of drives was destroyed because of the concept of narcissism Freud introduced. Despite the fact that his work about narcissism was published in 1914, and at least from this point both drives coincide in their direction, the new dualistic model appeared only in 1920 with Beyond the Pleasure Principle (Freud 1920). If Freud combined the two tendencies into one—life drive—then in 1921 Salomé combined them by the concept of narcissism, bipolar narcissism, one could say. To love towards oneself, she set up an opposing “persistent feeling of identification with totality” in connection with three phenomena: “object cathexis, value judgements, and the narcissistic transformations into artistic creativity” (Andreas-Salomé 1962, p. 4). The objective libido, because of its very origins, she stressed, was narcissistic. The libido’s treatment of the object always turned out to be connected with transference, and the object itself was always already a surrogate object. This ongoing process she called “the individualization of objects” (Andreas-Salomé 1962, p. 9).

Such an approach by Salomé can be interpreted both from the economic point of view (the charging of the object by the always already narcissistic libido) and the anthropometrical one (we represent the object precisely as we present it in connection with our peculiarities of perception, desires, and anticipations—in connection with the anthropic principle)

One peculiarity of her childhood perception is important: Lou could not believe that the mirror reflected her appearance correctly. The mirror highlighted her separateness from her surroundings. When she saw herself in the mirror, it struck her that she saw only her own reflection, saw only what she saw—only herself.

Wenn ich da hineinzuschauen hatte, dann verdutzte mich gewissermassen, so deutlich zu erschauen, dass ich nur das war, was ich sah: so einfach aufzuhoeren

[When I looked at it, then it baffled me in a way, to see so clearly that I was only that which I saw: so limited, so hemmed in: so forced, for the rest, even the closest, simply to stop] (Andreas-Salomé 1951, p.12).
Outside the mirror she refused to see the limitation of herself, her separateness from her surroundings. The mirror did not so much form the narcissistic image as deform it. This narcissistic indissolubility of the figure and the background, the image-and-environment, primarily described for her the conditions of women’s existence. For Salomé the purpose of female love was in self-diffusion, expanding the border of the proper self. That is, love presupposed not, as in Freud, the libido’s turning to the object, but the capture of the object by the narcissistic libido. In Salomé’s opinion, the object appeared in order to “unburden an excess of love—love belonging to ourselves, and unable to find an outlet” (Andreas-Salomé 1962, p. 8), that is, something that unburdened the psyche. The boundaries of the “I” were not in a position to keep the flow of the libido in check. Female expansion of the narcissistic libido was thus opposed to male teleology of the objective libido. If Freud’s (secondary) narcissism assumed the removal of the charge from the object, a capitulation and regression to the primary narcissism, then for Salomé narcissism was connected to external objects, their capture, their use as extra-territorial markers of infinity, of the maniacal status of the narcissistic condition.

This appropriation of the object reminded her of the phagocytosis in amoebas. She wrote that love was not dissolution in another, but one’s own strengthening all the way to a fruitful over-abundance:

keine Aufloesung im Andern, sondern im Gegenteil durch seine Beruehrung ein fruchtbar-Werden, eine Erstarkung bis zu fruchtbarem Ueberschuss. Denn unser Fruchtbar-Werden selbst ist nicht mehr, wie bei der Amoeba, ein Selbstzerfall in Teilstueke, sondern ebenfalls schon eine partielle Funktion, – ein Hoehenzustand der Absonderung, ein Ueberschuss-Zustand
[not being dissolved in another, but the opposite, through contact with this other, becoming fruitful, a strengthening to fruitful surplus. For our becoming fruitful itself was no longer, as with the ameba, a self-decomposition into parts, but likewise already a partial function—a higher state of segregation, a condition of surplus] (Andreas-Salomé 1900, p. 76).

For Salomé, a woman was a narcissist by her very nature, and this is where her perfection and her full immense value lay. She established a new view of woman, as an independent and self-sufficient being. In the article “Two orientations of narcissism” (1921), she wrote that women developed a special self-sufficiency, which allowed them to compensate for the social restrictions in the choice of an object. Thus, the function of narcissism was protective. It can be said that on this point Freud was in agreement with Salomé: a woman preserved her narcissism, whereas a man lost it and always felt nostalgia for it. Salomé emphasized that a woman needed more strongly to be loved than to love. Such an approach was understood in the narcissism that diffused itself, which was reflected in others but, however, was opposed to self-sufficiency.

Men loved such women, who required love from them. The narcissism of another person, she wrote, was found to be very attractive for those who renounced part of their own narcissism and were in search of an object of love. In a similar way the charm of a child lay in narcissism, self-sufficiency and inaccessibility, just like the charm of various animals, such as cats and large beasts of prey, which seem completely unaffected by our concern for them. Salomé wrote about women who had no need of expecting a child in order to move away from narcissism and towards objective love. Until puberty they felt masculinity and developed along male lines of identification; at the end of this stage, on reaching female maturity, they retained the passion for the male ideal as before, an ideal essentially constituting a remnant of the boyish nature which they had themselves possessed at one time.

We will note two factors here: first, the path of development that she described must be ascribed specifically to her own psycho-sexual development. Second, her idea that femininity “as such” can be acquired only after puberty coincided with Freud’s ideas.

However, let us return to cats.

2. CAT AND NARCISSISM

On 2 February 1913, in Lou Andreas-Salomé’s diary, a story appeared. It was called “A Visit to Freud: The Narcissistic Cat—Psychoanalysis as a Gift”.

This notation in the diary can be divided into three sections: an introduction consisting of two sentences; the
“case of the cat” proper; a conversation about exactly the kind of gift that psychoanalysis was for Lou Salomé. And so, in the “introduction” she wrote that she had had an especially frank conversation with Freud, who told her about his own life, and was so candid that he told her a touching story about a “narcissistic cat”: die reizende Erzählung von der “ narzisstischen Katze” [the charming tale of the “narcissistic cat”]. It is strange that Freud’s most intimate [allerpersönenlichsten, the most personal] (Andreas-Salomé 1983, p. 88) relations, in Lou Salomé’s estimation, were those with the cat. Why?

The actual tale of “Freud and the Cat” is a story of seduction and can be divided into three episodes. At the start, Freud—who, as Lou Salomé noted, generally had little interest in animals—saw a cat come through the window into his study, then jump from the couch and stroll among the very important objects of his collection of antiquities. Freud was seized by mixed feelings: he feared that the cat might brush against the most valuable statuettes. However, the graceful animal did not touch a thing. A reward then followed—Freud gave the cat a saucer of milk.

A repetition of this story then followed. As a result of the repeated action—gracefully respectful inspection on the part of the cat, milk on Freud’s part—the man started to feel excitement and admiration. The animal repaid him with indifference, which truly incensed the man. The cat did not need the man. The man needed the cat.

The third part: the cat caught a cold. The man nursed her and restored her to health. The final words of the story presented a picture of all the peaceful and playful gracefulness of authentic feline egoism (Andreas-Salomé 1983, p. 89).

After describing this story, after the words about “true egoism”, Salomé wrote that Freud tried to ascertain exactly what had attracted her to psychoanalysis. He asked her to begin to reflect upon her similarity to the cat! Did he want to understand what she wanted from him in her narcissistic, feline self-sufficiency?! Was psychoanalysis for her like the saucer of milk for the cat, a present, allowing her to immerse herself in the depths of the unconscious?

In her account (and after all it is specifically her account) Salomé identified herself with the cat. That was what made this story so intimate, for her. The story was not only, and not even so much, about Freud and the cat, as about how the cat Salomé smoothly entered the realm of psychoanalysis.(6)

What was it that gave Lou Salomé psychoanalysis? What led her to accept and acquire the psychoanalytical gift? Here are just a few of the paths that led Lou Andreas-Salomé to psychoanalysis:

1.) One of the reasons for her conversion to psychoanalysis was concern for Rilke, who was dependent on her in his neuroticism. Rilke wrote that only Salomé knew who he was; that is, without her he lost his identity. He suffered from fits of terror and uncontrolable states of depression, existential fear of the separation of the soul and the body. In turn, for Salomé, Rilke was “something real”, that is to say, a person in whom the spirit was incarnated. Thus we see here a complete disagreement between Rilke’s idea about himself and Salomé’s idea of him. In any event, Rilke allowed her to return to her youth, as it were. With him she found a second youth: at the age of thirty-five she felt like an eighteen-year-old, and she felt that she was an entire being. And not only did Rilke help her to find herself, but also to turn to the study of her own Russian culture.

2.) This turn to Russian culture paradoxically reinforced her interest in psychoanalysis. First, this interest was related to the Russian language. She wrote that Russians combined “simplicity of structure and a capacity in certain situations to describe even the most complicated things using the whole astonishing wealth of the language, able to find a name for the most complicated psychological states”. Secondly, she considered that Russians yielded more easily to “analysis” [leichter “analysierbar”, more easily “analysable”], and explained this by a less intensive repression than that undergone by those belonging to older cultures [die Verdrängungsschichten bleiben dünner, lockerer, die sich bei älteren Kulturvolkern; the repressed strata are thinner, looser than among people of older cultures]” (Andreas-Salomé 1951, p. 151).

3.) Her interest in psychology and philosophy. In particular her investigations in the area of female narcissism and sexuality were already intertwined with psychoanalytical research in this area.
4.) The aspiration towards self-knowledge in the “natural” way brought Salomé to psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis, with its enthusiasm for the emancipation of the subject, its liberation from illusion, its bringing together of cognition and sexuality, could not but attract her steady attention.

5.) Finally, the role of Freud himself in this acquisition of the psychoanalytical gift, and in the acceptance of the gift from Freud, is essential. In this figure two images, which previously existed separately, finally came together—father and teacher.

The very concept of the present in the tradition of Freud resembled the following line of displacement/substitution: gift-excrement—penis—child. In the new Lectures on the Introduction to Psychoanalysis Freud wrote: “The wish to eventually get the longed-for penis in spite of everything may contribute to the motives that drive a mature woman to analysis and to what she may reasonably expect from analysis—a capacity, for instance, to pursue an intellectual profession—and may often be recognized as a sublimated modification of this repressed wish” (Freud 1933, p. 159).

The anal-erotic connected to the gift was emphasized by Salomé herself in the book An Acknowledgement of Freud, in which she pointed out the significance of the concepts of “give” and “take” in psychoanalysis. In no other relationships did these notions occur so uniformly as in a psychoanalytic session. The aim of this mental journey was to give the unknown (the analyst) the valuable gift as yet unknown to oneself, which in the process of transference suddenly becomes something intimate for both.

With this exchange, in which the gift is not given in vain, we encounter these relationships between “give” and “take”, both connected to narcissism—present, gift and gratitude—and to ideas of the femme fatale.

3. THE FEMME FATALE

When Lou came to Freud, fame as the most famous femme fatale in Central Europe followed her. On what was this reputation founded?

3.1 Intellectual Brotherhood

Lou Salomé was not attracted by the usual relationships between the sexes. Her interest lay, at least at first sight, in the sphere of intellectual relationships. As soon as she was offered a love affair or marriage she immediately vanished. Thus, in her relationships with men, she disappointed both bourgeois and bohemian expectations.

For many years she dreamt of living a life in an intellectually fraternal commune. In fact, Lou was the younger sister of five brothers, and she would see a brother hidden in every man she met [immer schien mir ein Bruder in jedem verborgen; it always seemed to me that there was a brother hidden in everyone] (Andreas-Salomé 1951, p. 43). During her childhood she was literally surrounded by them. It was no surprise that she subsequently perceived all the world as a race inhabited by brothers. All her life she resisted monogamy and marriage, the position of housewife and mother. One after the other men who proposed the bonds of marriage would be rejected. All her life she would flee from family. In her writings she stressed the ambivalence at the basis of her psychology, an ambivalence that explained her simultaneous movement towards and away.

Lou Salomé’s relationship with men was also characterized by the metaphor of ambivalence: “fire and ice”. She was described as a woman who instantaneously caught fire with passion and then cooled down. The Swedish psychoanalyst Poul Bjerre, a friend of hers, described this character trait using an oxymoron, “cold passion”. She burst into a flame that was immediately extinguished. One of the explanations for such a bipolar manifestation of feelings could be that coldness serves as a defense against the attraction felt. But such ambivalence might also be the result of a conflict between two desires: sexual desire and the desire for intellectual recognition. It is interesting that this oxymoron appeared in one of Lou Salomé’s texts. She wrote: “The more fiery the fanaticism of love, the colder the effect of its distortion—right up to fire and cold coming together as one.” (Andreas-Salomé 1962, p. 12).

Intellectual friendship should be the idea that holds a commune together, according to her conception of it.
The source of this friendship was sublimated narcissism:

having broken away from the aims of sexual domination, the libido is capable of anything that can just be imagined, and with the sublimation of the most archaic auto-eroticism it simultaneously comes to the merger of oneself and the world which it experiences. (Andreas-Salomé 1962, p. 12).

Love had to bind its relations with her “brothers”, since for Salomé this was precisely the basis of knowledge (9). Her sexuality was not aimed at husbands but at intellectual brothers. She needed a constant shifting in the circle of a distinctive, serial polyandry. Narcissistic expansion apparently had to reestablish again and again the integral image of the body, which was projected outside. The integrity of the body was shown in its dependence not on one object-shield, but on the integrity of the shielding fraternal environment. Loyalty to one man was for her disloyalty to herself, (10) spiritual slavery. Attachment to an object engendered anxiety. Only the environment created a sense of integrity.

3.2. Integrity

For her, female sexuality was always more perfect, more integral, less liable to aggressive tendencies. Her drives were directed not to an alien external object, but to her own environment, to “her own external” boundaries, and ultimately to her-self. A woman, for her, “does not pursue the unattainable, the infinite. Why should she, being herself the goal, das Ewig-Weibliche?” (Leavy 1964, p. 23). Femininity, according to Salomé, is that condition which man had lost. The teleology, the teleologophallicism of a man, is what turned him inside out, doomed to the search for a lost object, always outside himself. A woman, on the other hand, preserved herself in her objectless narcissism. In Protagoras’ formulation, it is precisely the woman who occupied man’s place: woman is the measure of all things. A woman, according to Salomé, is integral, complete, she lives in a unity of soul, mind, body, and feeling. Man, differentiated to a greater extent, is never integral, never satisfied, he is always in movement, searching.

Ideas about the integrity of women was possibly the reason why Salomé did not begin her sexual life before the age of 30. Only in the relationship with Rilke was the idea of brotherhood united with sexuality. About these relationships she wrote that they were the kinship relations of brother and sister, but that they also went back to mythical times, when incest was not yet considered a sin. The long preservation of virginity was possibly linked not only to incestuous desires, which were evidently each time unconsciously mixed with her relationships with others (“brothers” and “fathers”), but also to an anxiety to preserve integrity. She remembered that while still at school she became fascinated by Joan of Arc, and believed in the great power of chastity. Subsequently she became certain that virginity allowed girls to be intellectually productive and even to display heroism. The idea of integrity was opposed to the idea of incompleteness, inadequacy, and castration. The anatomical and discursive deficiency led to compensatory representation of the narcissistic woman: it must be that extravagant physical beauty fills in for all the signs of castration, as revealed during the mirror stage.

Many of her works were based on debates about the preservation of integrity, harmony, unity. This emphasis reinforces the feeling that Lou Salomé had particular feelings about boundaries, if not to say infinity, one’s own self: her boundaries were always expanding beyond her boundaries (11). The narcissistic amoebae, as she described it, works as a defense mechanism, making it possible to displace these very boundaries, mobile like the amoebae’s pseudopodia. The narcissistic strategy was intended to defend Lou Salomé from traditional gender identification through inadequacy. Female narcissism directed her to the traditional image of “ideal femininity”. Within the framework of classical psychoanalysis, the woman’s narcissistic choice can include in its structure self-love at the same time as love towards another, the one who is able to love her. The female narcissistic self can thus be presented as the place of the image of others, a “receptacle” for the super-ego.

3.3 Understanding Man

Those around Salomé emphasized not simply her intellectual capacity, but the rare ability she possessed of understanding the other. They illustrated her cold, male, analytical mind and wrote that she used not female
but male means to subjugate the world. She was sensitive to men, and men understood themselves in her. She understood. The drive for mastery [Bemächtigungstrieb] established her limits, but in this process she perpetually resisted appropriation of herself. She obstinately declined to convert anyone’s dream into reality, to be what they wanted to see. She wanted to see herself/ her environment. She smoothly returned to men the contents of their fantasies and reveries. Poets, writers, philosophers who sang of her already faced her shield. They found themselves in the position of troubadours and Minnesaenger, whose singing was possible only on the condition that there was a “barrier, surrounding and isolating the Beautiful Lady.” (Lacan 1986, p. 178). She could be called a brilliant psychologist since, identifying herself with the interests of her environment, she instantly investigated questions that disturbed others. Nietzsche was struck by her ability to penetrate the essence of the most varied problems. Her mind and ability to understand at various times impressed Gerhard Hauptmann, Jakob Wassermann, Martin Buber, Frank Wedekind, Arthur Schnitzler, Rainer Rilke and many other intellectuals. In May 1916, Freud wrote to Lou Salomé that she was by nature a person of understanding. She possessed a staggering ability to listen. The talent for understanding the mental processes of another person, the skill she had for listening, were for Freud fundamentally important analytical traits (12). Silence, the ability to listen, the talent for understanding, functioned as a unique kind of empty object, an objectless receptacle ready to be filled like a mould, a matrix (13). Silence, listening attentively, worked here like the illusion of the satisfaction of desires, like silent agreement, like passivity revealing male desire, like a guarantee and a support of this desire. The woman’s activity manifested itself in identification with his desire, and it destroyed the logic of alienation, which governed patriarchal love relationships.

Psychoanalysis as a gift is directly related to the ability to listen: the analyst as the Other guarantees a “presence”, positioning itself in a place of the object of desire, which hinders the formation of the symbolic. The answer from the side of the Other always turns out to be something unexpected. The Other never returns love. He serves as a shield, which absorbs and reflects love. Only in this situation of the destruction of words and associations, according to Lacan, does the “silent existence” of female subjectivity spring up, manifesting itself as love–as “genuine” femininity. We are reminded that for Lou Salomé, the process of cognition had been sexualized, (14) comprehension was founded on love.

Coldness and silence, combined with a warm interest in the other, was like a screen that returned and represented male desire. The man collided not with it, but with a reflection of his own desire, like a neurotic who consistently lived in terror of this encounter, a fatal meeting with his own desire. Uncanny [unheimliche] feelings can arise from an encounter with one’s own desire, from meeting with oneself. This is a meeting with the self, a meeting with one’s own fate, with that which is perceived as fate. The image of Lou Salomé, the femme fatale, was created by the men around her. With regard to her first novel, Nietzsche spoke a phrase which would accompany her reputation everywhere: “if it is not the eternal feminine that moves this girl, then it is certainly the eternal masculine”. Such a projection shows that in the male mirror (in this case in Nietzsche’s mirror) she was reflected as a femme fatale, as a woman who compelled man to suffer, or like a woman who could not be restrained or reduced to an object. As already said, she was always exceeding her limits, in other words she was an ecstatic being. This instantly brings to mind Bernini’s sculpture “The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa” in the church of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome, a sculpture which for Lacan represented mystical experience and the main proposition in the relationship with female sexuality–“I feel, but I don’t understand”. A woman could not know and could not understand what her subjectivity was; like Saint Theresa, she was only able to intensively experience her own sexuality (Lacan 1975, pp. 70-71). So Lou Salomé experienced her “fire”, and her coldness, the “ice”, was prescribed not by a rejection of passion, but by the orientation toward the lost object of love. With the formula–“I feel, but I don’t understand”–Lacan, following on Freud, (15) brought the feminine together with the animal, with the feline (16).

Lacan stressed that in his attempts to understand woman man comes only upon his own fantasies. She is unable to understand in general. He is unable to understand her. “There is no communication as such,” Lacan writes, and comes running to the favorite metaphor of both and Lou Salomé–the image of the amoeba with its shifting boundaries, with its “pseudopodia function” [fonction pseudopodique]: “in the unicellular organism this communication is schematically organized around the vacuole”, which occupies the position of the empty “center of the system of signifiers” which is a condition for the symbolization, the

In the VII Seminar, in the chapter “courtly love as anamorphosis”, Lacan showed how the object of desire might be attainable only partially, indirectly, as if from the side: if we look at the objective directly, we see nothing but a void. Anamorphosis fulfils two functions—the function of the mirror, onto which “the ideal of the subject is projected”, and the function of the “boundary” (Lacan 1986, p. 181). Lou Salomé’s environment performed these two functions on her.

Talking about a kind of chronological anamorphosis as a chronological rhythm in the perception of the object, the object is “attained” only in the act of variable positioning, exclusively as an absent point of time reference. Female subjectivity as the object of male desire is cyclically created through a series of roundabout maneuvers, approaches and loss. Pleasure is only possible as a fore-pleasure [Vorlust]. Love is possible only as love interrupted [amor interruptus]. Pleasure is only possible as the pleasure of desire [le plaisir de désirer] (Lacan 1986, p. 182). The paradox of “setting aside” also became for Lacan the desire for sexual relations with the Beautiful Lady, for male desire in fact, there is nothing more frightening than the intention on behalf of the Beautiful Lady to satisfy this desire. The knight of her heart awaits only one thing from her—a new command to “defer” the fatal verdict.

3.4. The femme fatale and the attraction of death

The figure of the Beautiful Lady simultaneously embodies delight and its loss. It is precisely from the image of the Beautiful Lady that the traumatic image of the Femme Fatale, as was popular in the era of modernism, arises. The structure of relations with the Femme Fatale is such that never, under any circumstances, can the man secure for himself the desired meeting with her: either she remains unattainable for ever while he suffers and ultimately dies, or he attains intimacy with her and then either both of them die or love dies. It seems that even her name evoked the fatal figure of Salomé, and prescribed for her the castrating fate of Salomé, the biblical dancer with the severed head of John the Baptist. On the title page of her first novel, The Struggle for God, her first name, Lou, supplanted the name of her father (Salomé), and the place of her name was occupied by the male name Henry. Thus we encounter here not simply male identification, but the mastery of the father’s position. Although we don’t know who took the initiative of this renaming, we do know that Lou’s relatives demanded that she not involve the family name in her dubious writing activities. However, it is also clear that the pseudonym itself—“Henry Lou”—was her own creation (18).

And so a man cannot obtain the desired meeting with the femme fatale, or does he not wish to meet with her. Or with his own phantasm? When Rilke bade Salomé farewell, he wrote down the following lines in her diary:

I must die, for I know her…
To die from the ineffable flowering of her smile,
To die from her light hands,
To die before the Woman.

The concept of fate prescribes (for the man) humility, obedience, passivity, even masochism. Being doomed simultaneously creates the conditions for challenging fate and the conditions for accepting one’s own desires, as well as responsibility for it. Being doomed, the impossibility of taking possession of the object, introduces a suicidal aspect into the relationship with the femme fatale. And this aspect takes us back to Narcissus.

The femme fatale encounters the masochistic desire, the desire to include death in the plan of relations with a woman. Here we are reminded of a renowned photograph, taken in Lucerne: the philosophers Nietzsche and Ree harnessed to a two-wheeled cart, Lou sitting in it holding a whip. In “The Experience of Friendship”, Salomé wrote that Nietzsche had had the idea of the composition and the choice of the photograph. But, after all, this choice was made specifically within the framework of the relationship between him, his friend, and Lou.

The experiences of love and pain seem indissoluble in masochism. Here we must remember one more
episode in the life of Lou Salomé: “I also found out that a dog turned savage by rabies attacks its beloved owners first. And I remember a terrifying belief within me: I will bite papa, that is the one I love most” (cit. Garmash 2000, p. 253).

Aggressiveness is an inalienable function of narcissism. The figure of Narcissus presents both erotic and self-destructive tendencies. The American psychoanalyst Harold Stern somewhat ironically remarked that Narcissus died because he was so carried away by his own image that he forgot all about self-preservation, about food. Lacan in turn talked about narcissistic, suicidal aggression. The aggressiveness of narcissism is related to the fact that the integrity of the visible image is established in spite of the uncoordinated, disconnected disintegration of the real body. Aggressive friction arises between the imagined body and the “real” body. This conflict of ideas is always a threat in the presence of the narcissistic regression of fragmentation, the disintegration of the image of the body. In the case of Lou Salomé the imagined body did not coincide with the narcissistic-mirrored body. Only the integrity of the environment of Lou Salomé could resist her disintegration.

It is as though man attracts the mortality of narcissism from this environment, and covers over the abyss that opens up between the symbolic aura of the femme fatale and her unattainable material reality.

A number of researchers connect these terrifying sensations with the child’s regression into masochism before the idealized image of the strict and dangerous pre-oedipal mother. The passions for the femme fatale are addressed to her prototype—to the image of a powerful and omnipotent pre-oedipal mother. She is found in a sequence of fatal images, a type of medusa, siren, phallic mother.

Here it is appropriate to talk about Lou Salomé’s view of the relationship between narcissism and the object. She emphasized that the object cannot threaten narcissism, while narcissism was fully capable of representing danger for the object. In the beginning, she wrote, the object was permitted only as a substituting object, and insofar as it was admired, the object disappeared from reality (Andreas-Salomé 1962, p. 11).

Possibly the most noticeable legacy of narcissism is the “I- ideal”. The femme fatale can also be considered a projection of this ideal image. Freud emphasized that in the love-life of men the narcissistic woman presented a case of returning to the lost narcissism, to restore a state of existence in an objectless world. It is not surprising that the male’s fantasy of the femme fatale contemplates the danger of self-destruction in love. This fantasy demonstrates a rejection of aggression directed toward the object of love, the object of submission. This fantasy transfers to a passive-feminine position, from which the man sacrifices himself, in order to satisfy the object and prevent its loss. Thus the femme fatale in phallocentric discourse functions as the essential element of internal transgression of the established order (Zizek 1999, p. 72), like the male masochistic-paranoiac fantasy about the sexually insatiable woman who provokes violence. The femme fatale is the projection of the internal mechanism of self-destruction.

3.5 The Femme Fatale Today

Is all that history? Or do we discover this modernistic ideology today in some form? The modernist femme fatale has replaced the medieval Beautiful Woman. Who will come to take her place today?

Slavoj Zizek traces the evolution of the image of the femme fatale from the classic noir genre of the 1940s up to the neo-noir of the 1990s. He notes that in contrast to the classical image of the femme fatale—elusive, ghostly, enigmatic—the new femme fatale displays an aggression not concealed by anything. She can lead her hero straight to physical death (Zizek 1999, pp. 70-1). Let us add that she can lead him to death, but she can also rescue and revive him. She is endowed with omnipotence. Today’s world is travelling on a virtual road of the externalization of psychic reality. In this psychedelic reality of postmodern society, the place of the femme fatale is occupied by a polymorphous, multifunctional being, ready for any exploit; she can change her identity, she is the phallic mother, son and brother in one person. She might be both Lou Salomé and her surroundings(19). And in this respect, the ideas of Lou Andreas-Salomé are important for an understanding of femininity and narcissism, for psychoanalysis, gender theory, and post-feminism.

Translated from the Russian by Stephen Carruthers
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Notes:

(1) Freud writes to Salomé in response to her request to attend the sessions on Wednesdays: “If you come to Vienna, we will do everything in our power to show you that little which can be shown in psychoanalysis (cited in Garmash 2000, p. 229).
(2) Wilmers 1987, p. xii.
(3) The relationship between Freud and Lou from October to April 1913 as described in her diary, was published under the title In Freud’s School (Andreas-Salomé 1964).
(4) Salomé had no children of her own. In her later years she adopted the illegitimate daughter of Andreas and their housekeeper. In 1901 she could have had child (of her doctor (!) Friedrich Pinels), but as the biographies write, she lost the fetus after falling from a ladder while picking apples.
(5) Lacan specifically stresses the speculative, viewer’s, aspect of narcissism, which brought about the imaginary recording of the existence of the I, the idea about oneself.
(6) Incidentally, Nietzsche also considered Lou’s character to be catlike. For him, Lou was a wild cat that had only been transformed into a house cat.
The relations between Lou Salomé and Sigmund Freud through domestic animals are not limited to this story. Here is another of several episodes: “The idea of keeping domestic animals first occurred to Freud a good ten years before the first dog appeared in his home at Bergasse 19. In a remark added to a letter to him on 10 January 1915, Lou Andreas-Salomé wrote: “Out of despair before warring humanity, I bought myself a dog (and you – a cat?)” Molnar (1998, p. 40).

Here the obvious question arises: why did she not become a revolutionary (with her interest in Joan of Arc and Vera Zasulich—a photograph of whom was hidden in her desk drawer- which “remained the only sign” of her “participation in politics”), or a feminist (with her friendship with Malwida von Meysenburg, a writer who advocated women’s liberation and “noble” relations between the sexes)? She never brought up the “woman question” in spite of her friendship with the feminist-oriented writer Frieda von Buelow and the radical feminist Helene Stoecker. She did not struggle for equal rights, legalization of abortion and contraceptives or fairer divorce laws. Philosophical and psychological issues evidently seemed more fundamental to her than any social issue. Her book Erotica aroused a storm of indignation in suffragist circles at the beginning of the century. This was entirely understandable since Lou Salomé’s ideas, in our view, were closer to post-feminism than feminism: “Up until now, until women stop representing themselves in terms of men… they will not know how extensively and powerfully they could convert their capacities into the structure of their own nature, how flexible the limits of their worlds are in reality” (cited in Gramash 2000, p. 218).

She defined femininity as freedom from intellectual property.

For Salomé the idea of one’s own nature was important. She once told Anna Freud that the only sin was to be dishonest with one’s own nature. Her ideal was self-realization as a means of solving internal conflicts.

In childhood she often easily identified herself with one of her brothers, Evgenii, with whom she had much in common, from their lung problems to their opposition to family support.

Stanley Leavy, the English translator of her diary, suggests that her silence can be explained by internal fear. This fear had no other external manifestations. Moreover she was extremely benevolent, receptive, attentive, and this turned out to be much more seductive than words.

See the works of Bracha Lichtenberg-Ettinger on the subject of the matrix and matrixial borderline.

For Freud that was one of the fates of the tendency to cognition: the intellect avoided forcing sexuality out of consciousness, and displaced sexual curiosity returns from the unconscious in the form of sexualized analytical thought; the character of delight and fear is imparted to intellectual operations. See “A childhood recollection of Leonardo da Vinci” (Freud 1910).

Here it is sensible to continue the story described in the 5th note: Freud answered Salomé’s question about acquiring house pets: “I didn’t acquire either a dog or a cat; I have enough of the female race at home” (Molnar 1998, p. 40).

“There remain only animals that apparently cannot manage without a man, homme (man), from which we derive the name dhomestic animals, and which therefore sense subterranean tremors of the unconsciousness – incidentally, of quite short duration” (Lacan 2000, p. 11).

Here a remark must be made. This center constantly shifts from it its central position, since it is occupied by various shifting signifiers. In this displacement the vacuole, “in the end”, exchanges with its metaphorical opposite – the phallus. The shifts and substitutions decentralize the center. The very word vacuole is derived from the Latin vacuus–emptiness; however, it constitutes a membrane sack filled with liquid, which performs different functions, both biochemical and physical.

She herself believed that the new name gave a new fate. She received her name from Guilleaux–Lou instead of Louisa (widespread) and Lelia (childish, impossible for a foreigner to pronounce). Many years later she renamed Rilke from René to Rainer.

The Trinity from the feature film Matrix may serve as an example.