

Carol Diethe. *Nietzsche's Sister and the Will to Power: A Biography of Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche.* Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2003. xiii + 214 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-02826-7.



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Elisabeth Förster's name will forever be linked to the publication of the posthumous forgery *Will to Power* in 1900. But there are many more reasons that make a detailed study of Elisabeth Förster's life and actions indispensable. If, as Steven Aschheim has noted, there is no definite "truth" about Nietzsche's work from the historian's point of view, his sister played a decisive role in administering his fame.[1] Weaving her own life into his, the three volumes of her influential biography of Nietzsche, published between 1895 and 1904, were read alongside other publications about her brother by generations of German readers and even resulted in a nomination for the Nobel Prize. By restricting access to the archives, she successfully influenced the reception of her brother's work worldwide. Surprisingly, Aschheim's book, which is brimming with methodological questions, is not mentioned in the extensive bibliography, and one wonders if it was simply overlooked.

Carol Diethe's approach is completely different: she tries to show that Elisabeth's conduct while she administered Nietzsche's fame arose

from stifled feminine ambition and disappointed love. The publication of *Will to Power* is, therefore, presented as a gesture that deserves understanding as well as criticism: "After so many disappointments, she finally has the opportunity to parade herself as a philosopher in her own right and to present the world with a masterpiece ostensibly by her brother which is really her work. She has not just compiled it: She is the will to power. At the symbolic level, the book permits her—at last—to seal her partnership with her brother" (p. 96).

Just like previous biographers of Elisabeth Förster, Carol Diethe adopts a chronological approach, which is broken only once to discuss the truly noteworthy matter of "Elisabeth and the woman question." [2] The first half of the book deals with their childhood and schooldays in Naumburg, the prolonged adolescence as Nietzsche's housekeeper in Basel, and her marriage to Bernhard Förster, whose antisemitism led to a serious crisis with her brother. Drawing on psychoanalytical theories, Diethe explains that Elisabeth and Friedrich developed a strong relation-

ship in opposing their weak mother Franziska, with Friedrich acting as a substitute for the father who had died early. She also tries to demonstrate that Elisabeth was the victim of injustice. Like many girls growing up in Wilhelmine Germany, her intellectual gifts were squandered due to "faulty education both at school and at Franziska's hands" (p. xiii). She accounts this failure to be the source of her future "reckless disregard for scholarly accuracy, which was in many ways a result of her faulty education" (p. xiii). However, it seems fair to add that not only external reasons made her education a "flop" (p. 20): the samples of her drawing can hardly be regarded as promising (p. 28), and the same seems to have been true of her language skills (p. 20).

Putting a definite end to Friedrich's relationship with Lou Salome in 1882 proved not to present too much of a challenge for Elisabeth, but after the subsequent dispute, their relation never was the same. During this dramatic moment, she apparently wrote *Coffee Party Gossiping about Nora*, an unpublished short novel set in the provincial atmosphere of Weissenburg (=Naumburg) and which transposes the dilemma of the trio between a bright university professor, who is about to give up his tenure in philology in order to devote himself exclusively to philosophy (=Friedrich), a perverse Slavic woman (=Lou) and an honest German girl in her mid-thirties (=Elisabeth). In the end, Friedrich marries Nora, and they both happily live in the countryside. This piece, which is included in its complete form as an English translation in the appendix, would certainly have ruined any of Elisabeth's hopes for the Nobel Prize; it is, however, an interesting testimony of her unconscious desire to "marry" her brother. At the same time, it also shows her lack of an independent personality. For those familiar with the epoch, the harmonizing plot betrays a strong similarity with contemporary reviews like *Gartenlaube* or the sentimental novels of Hedwig Kuhrt-Mahler. There is only a small step from this small novel to the three-volume biography of

her brother, published between 1895 and 1906, tearing the philosopher down to his "Human, All too human" life.

The second half of the book deals with Elisabeth's role in establishing and governing the Weimar Nietzsche Archives (1893-1935). Justly entitling the first part "Nemesis in Naumburg," Diethe sets out to describe the ruthlessness with which Elisabeth bullied her mother, Franziska, into giving her the intellectual rights to Nietzsche's works. Only after Franziska's death in 1897 was Elisabeth able to establish herself with her brother in Weimar, where Meta von Salis, a Swiss friend of Friedrich's, had bought a villa to house both the patient and the archive.

From then on, Elisabeth had the opportunity to fulfill her social ambitions. In pursuit of this goal, she tried to orient Nietzsche's fame in such a way as to collect the largest reward, both financial and symbolic: creating the image of Nietzsche as a "good Prussian" in her biography, but also developing his fame as a "good European" by keeping in touch with cosmopolitan elites. Count Harry Kessler, the well-known aesthete and Francophile art collector (strangely presented by Diethe as "expert in stage design" [p. 93]), proved, for a time, instrumental in organizing these rendezvous in Weimar. By helping to attract illustrious figures such as Hugo von Hofmannsthal, Andre Gide, and Edward Gordon Craig to the Nietzsche-Archiv, he allowed Elisabeth to hold court in Weimar--as Cosima Wagner did in Bayreuth. However, he was not the only mediator surrounding the archives. One finds a strange mixture of antisemites, such as the Hecker brothers, the former editors of Nietzsche's works, and Jews like the banker Robert von Mendelssohn or the Swedish millionaire Ernest Thiel, who decisively helped to secure their financial stability. Not surprisingly, Elisabeth's late husband and her years as leader of an Aryan colony in Paraguay became "taboo" (p. 108).

The question of her major forgery, the posthumous *Will to Power*, remains. Diethe wonders

why "it is still not possible to state the full extent of Elisabeth's manipulations" (p. 109), but her study does not give much information that goes beyond the findings of the Italian researchers Colli and Montinari, which were published in their edition of Nietzsche's complete works in the late 1960s.

Writing about the years leading up to Elisabeth's death, Diethe shows that she understood how much the times had changed. Adopting an exalted patriotic stance during WWI and becoming a member of the national conservative party during the Weimar Republic, she did not hesitate later to embrace the cause of Mussolini and Hitler, whom she received with great publicity in 1933. Financial reasons seem to have played a role, since the archives were virtually bankrupt following the great inflation. At her funeral in 1935, where Hitler himself was present, it seemed that Elisabeth Foerster-Nietzsche had definitively achieved her goal of staging a myth which associates her name with that of Nietzsche.

Deconstructing this myth must be the task of research today: proving that just as not only one "Nietzsche" exists, there might not be simply one "Elisabeth." Surrounding Nietzsche's legacy one finds a complex network of mediators, sometimes working together, mostly conspiring against each other, with Elisabeth as part arbiter, part player, and always trying--and succeeding--to be on the winning side. This publication only gives us a glimpse of the complex phenomenon, given the "truly vast amount of material on and by herself [that] still slumbers in the archive," as Carol Diethe frankly admits (p. 109). Especially her correspondence, which has yet to be researched extensively in Weimar, could demonstrate what an opportunistic person she was, always ready to fight the weak and, more than once, eagerly submitting to the strong. The same strategic impulse can be seen in her many publications, which allow to grasp the extent and complexity of her communication strategy. Her venues for publication includ-

ed literary journals like *Die Zukunft*, but even art reviews like the exclusive *PAN* (where she published an important article concerning the health of the Nietzsche family, together with the well-known portrait of her sick brother by Hans Olde in 1899) and even foreign journals. Many paths opened by Juergen Krause in his study about the artistic Nietzsche cult twenty years ago remain to be followed, which would allow a closer look at Elisabeth's public relations strategy with artists and the public.[3] How did she behave in front of the "mediators" that were to transport and to legitimate her personal interpretation of Nietzsche into the world? How did she select them? Or try to control them? Many of these questions are left unanswered. However, Carol Diethe's pleasantly written biography is a valuable contribution for all interested in Nietzsche studies. Her picture of the buoyant life of the philosopher's sister is an encouragement to delve further into the "small print" of the posthumous fortunes of her brother's writings.

Notes:

[1]. Steven Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890-1990* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

[2]. Heinz Frederick Peters, *Zarathustra's Sister: The Case of Elisabeth and Friedrich Nietzsche* (New York: Crown, 1977); and Diane Chauvelot, *Elisabeth Nietzsche de la sottise a la trahison* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1998).

[3]. Juergen Krause, *"Martyrer" und "Prophet." Studien zum Nietzsche-Kult in der bildenden Kunst der Jahrhundertwende* (Berlin and New York: W. de Gruyter, 1984).

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