

Paula von Reznicek, *Resurrection of the Lady* (1928)

Abstract

Paula von Reznicek's 1928 book *Auferstehung der Dame* [Resurrection of the Lady] appeared in the same year as another of her books on changing gender ideals, *Der vollendete Adam* [The Perfected Adam], which she co-wrote with her husband (excerpts of which are also in this GHDI section). Both works circled with similarly breezy wit around the question of where Reznicek drew the line between fashionably encouraged changes in male and female behavior, on the one hand, and socially sanctionable transgressions, on the other. Reznicek drew a very fine line, indeed, and *Auferstehung der Dame* often balanced precariously between celebrating women's power and resisting demands for women's empowerment. The book advocated female self-determination, but preferably only when achieved through an adherence to a type of female self-control that sounded an awful lot like prewar feminine norms. At moments, too, the book advocated nothing at all, functioning less as a how-to guide for becoming a lady and more as an appreciation of the type of lady whose reemergence Reznicek applauded and, in many ways, felt herself to embody.

In these excerpts, Reznicek paid particular attention to a woman's ability to read a situation, and she praised the interior voice that said "do that, leave this be, exit now, you have to go there, end this conversation..." Given Reznicek's own successfully navigated entrée into the upper social circles of Weimar Berlin, that sensitivity to surroundings had clearly served her well. Born Paula Heimann in 1895 to a Breslau banking family with Jewish ancestry, she grew up and went to school in the Catholic faith, played a mean game of tennis, and quickly outgrew the opportunities that the Silesian city had to offer. After serving as a nurse during the First World War, Paula Heimann – now in her 20s – moved to Berlin and married Burghard von Reznicek, a man with dandyish tastes and an aristocratic pedigree. Now Paula von Reznicek, she won national and international tennis titles, wrote for *Tempo* and other Ullstein periodicals, pioneered the field of sports journalism for women, and published books—such as this one—that established her as an arbiter of good taste. Reznicek exemplified, in many ways, the process by which the "outsiders" of prewar German society became the "insiders" of the postwar one, to paraphrase the historian Peter Gay's famous characterization of Weimar culture, in which Jews, women, socialists, and sexual minorities now took leading roles.

Reznicek came from wealth, though, and her cultural references make clear that she assumed an upper-middle- and upper-class readership, along with aspirants to that status. Her section that warned women against exhibiting snobbery dropped the names of the best automobile and the leading Paris designer with snobbish abandon. In the realm of taste, as well as decorum, Reznicek's admiration for individuality butted up against her sense of proper refinement. As she herself acknowledged, "Boundaries are everywhere."

Source

[...]

Is she changing?

A letter.

Immortal woman—the majority of those living have already set your gravestone. Your death has been pronounced prematurely—the claim can be heard everywhere: "The lady no longer exists." The tempo of our modern life brings about her abrupt end. The noble lady who was set in scene by the charm of a

century of chivalry, the grace of the Biedermeier era, the mystery of the Middle Ages, has been brought down by the lurid reality of days hurried to death. The agreeableness of majestic calm, feminine serenity, and flirtatious amusements has been lost...

Time for criticism! What about you? Your format was completed, is changing at the moment, should become more exquisite than ever. Do not surrender! The rule remains: adapt to the conditions. Connecting noble traditions with sophisticated attitudes will show the way.

Not every woman can achieve this aim. Those who have the right instinct do so easily.

Put your hand on your heart—do you want to try? Follow me! But don't be afraid, the resurrection of the lady reserved for our decade will be more fascinating than one can imagine!

“Nil mirari”

From the ancient Latin literally translated as: “to be surprised by nothing.” But it means more than this. Perhaps it sounds overly bourgeois to speak of self-discipline, and you prefer “taking yourself into your own hand.”

Self-control of the highest degree! A lady is armed for all life's events. Nervous conditions would be a waste on minor matters. For this reason, one forms a sort of insurance pact with one's daily obligations—cannot be overwhelmed by them, dazed, or knocked down, as long as it is a matter of gossip, lost purses, unreliable tailors, late drivers, or mistaken speculations in regard to physical, mental, or financial matters.

One remains above the practicalities of life, perhaps donning a slightly sardonic smile, gathering experiences, broadening one's horizons, but one never loses one's composure. That which is not today, is tomorrow—what one has missed cannot be altered, and the unanticipated often happens—nil mirari...

The decisive instinct

You can take and give anything, and yet never—the instinct! A term which defies definition. There is a good deal of commonality with “tact,” and yet the relationship to this is like that of a “grande amoureuse” [passionate woman] to a little bohemian.

Tact is the cliff for the parvenu, instinct the pitfall for the woman. Those graced with good instincts can, despite a lack of upbringing, make their way in the world—anything is possible for them. The young woman, despite an impeccable upbringing, will reach nothing—if lacking instinct. One either has it—or one does not! There is hardly anything more to be said on the matter.

An inner voice, a strong will, a second ego is at the helm: “Do that, let that be, get out of here, you must go there, end the conversation, laugh quietly, no, you don't understand that, this needs your attention, you lack that quality completely, the others think the opposite—be still, you must improve in that respect, do not betray yourself, keep your feelings in check—lead with reason, no unnecessary hesitations—but always decorum, I'll keep guard for you—be careful!”

Instinct is not to be confused with the conscience; instinct is amoral. Instinct is our most sincere devotee, it determines our fate—not our actual friends!

The duty to individuality

There is fashion but no traditional garb. In finishing school, there are rules about one's garments, the whole world practices the art of dress. No single one is appropriate for all, but each has the possibility of specialization.

The very same can be said of the feminine personality. A lady impersonates no one. She delights in the originality of the exotic, the liveliness of the artist, the reserve of the noble, admires the irrepressible temperament of the southerner [i.e., woman from southern Europe] and the practical heartlessness of the sportswoman, but she does not imitate them!

She remains: herself. She cultivates her own tone, her strengths, her talents. She creates her own type, which must remain within the limits of the rules as written, may not run wild, may not attract attention. She does not overdo anything—she behaves herself! It is still better to say of her: “C’est un genre — mais c’est un mauvais genre” [“It’s a genre—but a bad genre.”]— than: “She is no genre at all.”

Personalities prevail. Imitators fade. The lady knows precisely: For the love of God, no stencils!

On character

Better a good one than a bad, better any—than none! Every woman wants to be pretty, she wishes to please. Careful!—The character is a mirror—and most everyone understands how to read it.

In fact: a woman’s viciousness plays around her mouth, brutal egoism shines from her eyes, her cheekbones sketch a merciless sternness, how many cruel little hands are shaken, coldness lies on some skin, and the feet and eyelashes betray a lack of restraint and [tendency to] hysteria.

Be on your guard—all is revealed in the [light of] day—or better said: in the [dark of] night.

Knowledge of oneself—often distasteful—is an excellent teacher. Using its admonitions, one gradually reshapes oneself.

Yes, the perfected lady is permeated with pleasant qualities, and she is too sensible to bluff, too natural to feign.

Even sleep, the most dangerous betrayer of character, sings her praises...

Are you snobby?

Snobbery rules the day. One speaks so often of it, that one promotes it against one’s will. And the peculiar thing is that a great number of those able to pass judgment deem it acceptable— while a considerable number of others regard it as a terrible quality.

Derived from “snob,” a word meant to satirize the English “dandy,” the expression “snobbery” is likely synonymous with: unnatural vanity, exaggeration, affectation—it culminates, like a caricature, in the exclamation of the Psalmist: *vanitas vanitatum* [vanity of vanities]!

Suppress the “snobbery” in yourself—gracious woman! It is not the names of your guests on their place cards that reveal the worth of your personality; the most expensive flowers are not always the most beautiful, nor the most precious porcelain the most magnificent. You need not be ashamed of a friend who does not drive a Hispano[-Suiza], and if, instead of a servant in English jacket and white apron, it is a maid dressed in black who serves Mrs. Dr. X her breakfast, she is, despite prejudices to the contrary, absolutely socially acceptable. Your evening attire, dear friend, need not necessarily cost 1500 Marks and be by Poiret; despite your scornful looks, your friend’s pink crepe confection that cost 200 Marks from the local tailor is just as impressive! Do not be such a snob, do not make life less pleasant and more difficult than it already is.

But, my dear, gracious woman, do be a bit snobby in your selection of flirts, the telling of gossipy stories, and in all intimate, personal matters, in short—on the topic of: discretion! Be a bit haughty, blasé, and reserved—it is for your own good—but feel free to leave any other kind of snobbery to the less clever

daughters of Eve...

...a refined woman...

The greatest compliment of our contemporaries: "A refined woman!" Although she wears short skirts, although she has dined alone with men, although she is sometimes quite boisterous, although she occasionally touches on risqué subjects, although she is game for any diversion, although she brings nothing to completion and leaves much half done, although she is just as well-known at the gala event in the embassy as at the hangover breakfast in the basement on the outskirts of town, although she goes to soccer matches and six-day races—although, although, although—she is a refined woman!

How does she do it? She does not do it at all—she is refined! She is polite, amiable, constant, compromising. She shows compassion, helps freely and often—but she forgives herself nothing. She knows very well that politeness is a means to a more pleasant life. Her good upbringing serves to multiply these pleasantries. She is "bon camarade" to the whole world—but not intimately so. She inspires respect, which can develop into admiration and esteem—and even eventually to love.

When the world says of you: "A refined woman"—then—you are indeed: the resurrected lady of our age!

Tears, smiles, lies

Three proven important props of our beauties! Often no longer effective, for applied too liberally. "Only in the limitations does it show—" the most, namely, the effect.

There are sweet little girls whose eyes are always moist, overflowing at every possible opportunity. Even more there are grown beauties who have developed such a habitual diva-like smile that they cannot shed it even during the most painful moments, and there are countless chic young ladies who lie compulsively from morning until evening! There may be reasons to love the truth only moderately; but to pay it no heed at all is a dangerous experiment, and if one then does one tell the truth, one is—in Oscar Wilde's words—"sure sooner or later to be found out."

Tears, smiles, and lies are the safest of reserves! Use them sparingly! A single tear in the right moment can achieve more than a monotonous daily sobbing that bores, and the charm of a seldom smile stuns and soothes.

It is more complicated with falsehoods. When used to avoid insults, be of use to others, and make one's own situation more comfortable, white lies of politeness (and we speak here only of such!) are to be excused, even more so when delivered in a charming, skilled, amusing, imperceptible manner. But it need not necessarily go to the lengths recorded in a recently overheard conversation:

Friend A: Why are you spending so much time with this blond doctor? I can't help but notice how forced you are, how you have to control yourself, how you positively feign feelings for him.

Friend B: You couldn't understand, better to convince oneself—still better than badly felt!

The school of society

A true master has routine. Talents and gifts can be developed—but to be perfected they need a mistress—and her name is "Routine."

There is a natural tendency to interpret the word wrongly and to scorn the idea of "routine" as "being in a rut." This is not fair. Routine—expressed in other words, means: experience put into practice.

When I experience something for the first time, my emotions, which might be very strong, are curbed by a

sort of awkwardness that I try to hide. When such a situation is repeated, I can concentrate more fully on the matter at hand without fear that I might behave wrongly or awkwardly, and thus gradually become a virtuoso of the most difficult and varied areas.

One should not confuse routine with arrogance! An arrogant woman is generally devoid of charm, a practiced woman, whose emotions should be every bit as strong and sincere as those of an eighteen-year-old, recognizes room for improvement, she adapts delicately to each individual moment as appropriate and—when it is called for—disappears completely.

Where routine and emotions go hand in hand, all advice is superfluous! But reading and listening, talking and thinking will hardly help one to advance—there is only one master teacher. She wields her authority with unparalleled harshness and little recognition, but she is the supreme and invincible teacher, and her name is: the school of society!

The limits...

A daring topic—difficult to describe, even harder to prescribe! How far does the twentieth-century lady go?

If we unite the characteristics that have been outlined above—the instinct, her refinement, the intriguing smile, the experience, and the attitude of "standing above it all"—in our lady, she can go quite far indeed, for she need not fear the limits and will certainly employ the right tactics as she approaches them.

There are limits everywhere, lurking at every step of the way, and often enough entirely unnoticed. And where there are none at this moment, they can appear with the wave of a hand. Hundreds of questions present themselves in an instant: May one visit a bachelor in his residence; may one stay alone in a hotel on ski and automobile tours with a companion; may one remain with one's companions at various types of lively venues late into the night; may one attend risqué plays, films, or even—the details do not really matter, in short: may one be seen here, there, and anywhere, alone, with a companion, or at all?

The inner assuredness decides! Whoever is initially indecisive: "If I do, but then, my heavens, what would so-and-so think...", then one is quickly leaving the realm within the limits, and one should flee, one should leave these dangers to the others, one should remain meekly within the bourgeois circles one has created for oneself!—A truly great lady needs the limits, does not hesitate to play with fire, and knows with certainty—without limit(ation)s!— that she is better than all that.

[...]

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