

Dagny and Lulu

JAN KOTT

In the 1905 Vienna premiere of Wedekind's *Pandora's Box*, the second of his Lulu plays, a young woman named Tilly Newes played Lulu. On the second day after the premiere, Wedekind wrote to her rapturously, saying that she had portrayed Lulu "like a Madonna." My colleague, Leo Treitler, a musicologist writing on Berg's *Lulu*, has amplified this to say, "like Munch's Madonna."¹ He was referring to one of Munch's best-known pictures, which exists in at least five versions—in oil and in lithograph. Munch depicts a young woman at the peak of sexual ecstasy, naked to the loins, a red halo around her head, blank eyes looking without seeing. In one version, a shrunken embryo is seen in the left corner, and around the rim of the painting drift spermatozoans. "Woman, who gives herself up whole and discovers in this surrender the painful beauty of the Madonna," Munch wrote of this picture. Sigbjorn Obstfelder, a poet and friend of Munch and Strindberg, wrote in 1896: "For me, [Munch's] Madonna shows the essence of his art. She is the Earth Mother."²

But that is only part of the story. The youthful Tilly Newes played Lulu, the earth demon (*Erdegeist*), as if she were Dagny Juel. Early in the spring of 1893, in a Berlin tavern called the Little Black Pig, Munch introduced this young woman to August Strindberg and to Stanislaw Przybyszewski, whom Dagny would marry the following

September. The German art historian Julius Meier-Graefe writes in his memoirs:

In a first-floor room on Louisenstrasse in North Berlin, the red light from an alcohol lamp would burn the entire night. . . . It was here that the Przybyszewskis lived. . . . He, a pure-blooded Pole who wrote avant-garde novels in German and suffered from hallucinations. . . . She, a Norwegian, very thin, with the slender face of a fourteenth-century Madonna and a smile that drove men mad. She was called "The Spirit." She was able to drink a litre of absinthe and not get drunk. . . . An upright piano stood in the exact center of this shabby room. While one of the men danced with The Spirit, the other two sat at the table and eyed her intently. The first was Munch, the second, as often as not, was Strindberg. All of them, each in his own fashion, were in love with this woman, but they never openly showed it.

The "earth demon" was twenty-six years old, the "brilliant Pole" a year younger. It was at this time that Przybyszewski coined the phrase "In the beginning there was lust."

It may be well to review briefly the German and Polish chapters of Dagny Juel's life, before her tragic end in Tiflis.³ Strindberg had a stormy three-week affair with Dagny in the spring of 1893, when his fiancée and future wife, Frida Uhl, was away in Munich. Strindberg later came to hate Dagny, slandering her in letters, often calling her "a common slut." In his attacks of dementia during his Inferno period, he dreamed that she and Przybyszewski poisoned him. Even in letters to distant acquaintances, Strindberg was merciless about Dagny, describing their relationship in detail as if they were still intimate. Nor did Frida have any warm feeling for Dagny. In *Marriage to a Genius*, which she wrote near the end of her life, she described a possibly fictional account of Strindberg's first night with Dagny, who had led him drunk to her hotel room. Since everyone lived in similar shabby rooms, Strindberg woke at daybreak and thought he was at home. He drove the naked Dagny out of bed and into the hallway.

Frida's marriage to Strindberg did not last long. After a little over a year she left him, taking up almost immediately with Wedekind, who had created a sensation with his *Spring's Awakening*. Frida became pregnant by Wedekind before his divorce (in all these fin de

siècle romances the women immediately became pregnant!), but they never married. Wedekind did not need to ask Frida about Dagny. In 1893–94 in the tavern that Strindberg himself named the Little Black Pig (Zum Schwarzen Ferkel), on a side street off Unter den Linden, the most celebrated German and Scandinavian bohemians gathered, and for them “Fru Dagny” was the leading demon, at once Aspasia and Madonna. Religious connotations were absent from this Madonna, at once the title of Wedekind’s portrait and the title given to Dagny. Rather, the name was conceived as *ma donna* or “my lady,” as in Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night*, when the Clown addresses Olivia: “Good madonna, give me leave to prove you a fool” (1.5.55).

Wedekind’s Lulu plays were completed in 1895, but the second part of his *Pandora’s Box* was too scandalous to be staged or published. In it Lulu is a common London streetwalker who ends up being murdered by Jack the Ripper. Similarly, Dagny perished in a shabby hotel in Tiflis, shot by the Polish Count Emeryk, a young companion in this desperate exile. It is possible that they were not lovers. He shot her and then himself, admitting that he was one of the sons of “sad Satan.” Dagny was a femme fatale who victimized herself rather than the men who were infatuated by her paradoxical blend of earthy otherworldliness and carnal spirituality, even though Przybyszewski called her “Spirit.”

More than the relevant anecdotes and even the factual drama itself, what is important to me is the conjectural history: Lulu more than Dagny. This Aspasia (as Dagny was called by Strindberg) who took off her green wool stockings under the intent gaze of the men at the Little Black Pig—it was this woman whom Wedekind had seen earlier in Munch’s paintings. He knew her from Munch’s Madonnas, which in subsequent versions of this sexual descent from heaven have pursed lips and drooping eyelids; he knew her also from compositions such as *Jealousy*, with the triangular head of Przybyszewski, and a slim, nude, long-haired woman under the biblical Tree of Knowledge, next to a man in a black suit who bears a striking resemblance to Strindberg. From this period also dates Munch’s *Three Stages of Woman*: a young woman in white with a wedding bouquet and flowing hair; an old woman dressed in black; between the two, a nude standing with her legs apart. In yet another painting, there is a half-nude woman in a dress that has fallen to her thighs, and hands reach out to her from all sides. And again there is the triangular face

of Przybyszewski with a short beard and a thin trimmed moustache, but this time surrounded by a woman's hair. Perhaps the most significant of all for Munch is *The Vampire*, an oil painting of 1893 (and a lithograph two years later), showing a woman with long red hair, her lips pressed against the neck of a man bent over her breast. Dagny had light hair, but with auburn highlights; in the sun it looked red.

Among the characters of the two parts of Wedekind's *Lulu* are probably many faces of the regular patrons of the Little Black Pig. One of them was surely Dr. Carl Ludwig Schleich, later to be famous for his work with local anesthetics. He was a friend of Strindberg and especially of Frida, whose dreams he pronounced to be sexual in nature. She at first denied this, but later admitted it, and Strindberg shouted: "Women play with truth as they do with dolls." The tone is that of Dr. Goll and Dr. Schoen in the first scene of Wedekind's *Lulu*, when Lulu poses for the painter. In the memoirs of Meier-Graefe Dr. Schleich is called "the fourth friend" of Dagny.⁴

The Przybyszewskis and Munch often went hungry, and were therefore invited by acquaintances to lavish meals. But more important than such anecdotes are the thematic shifts and stylistic transformations in the work of that period. In Wedekind's *Lulu*, "artists" and "philistines" for the first time mirror and need each other, not only because the artists are always impoverished and their "patrons" hold the purse strings. Wedekind, in his great perspicacity, noticed that the philistines had long ago stopped fearing the artists, just as the artists no longer spurned the philistines. Both the aristocracy, though of course only its "decadent" fringe, and the bourgeoisie, though of course only its "progressive" fringe, co-opted not only the sexual morals of the bohemians, but also their language and worldview. They all despised philistines. Jerzy Stempowski, in his vignette *The Chimera as a Beast of Burden*, relates how a famous tycoon, known for lucky but risky transactions, confided to him that the surrealists had inspired his financial imagination. In *Lulu* Wedekind showed that the editorial office, the stock exchange, and the painter's studio are inhabited by the same cast of characters. However, in contrast to Strindberg, there is no longer room for tragedy; even though people drop dead all around, they are only characters in a comedy. The Polish writer Witkacy would later call one of his plays (*The Water Hen*) "a spherical tragedy" and his theatrical style "formism."⁵

Wedekind entitled the first part of *Lulu Erdgeist*, which is sometimes translated as *The Earth Demon*. This "demon of the night," which sometimes appears in *Isaiah* as an owl screeching in the desert, is Lilith, the first wife—or rather the female counterpart—of Adam, formed out of sediment. Wedekind's play is venomous, stripped of metaphysics and symbols, ironic to an almost grotesque degree, bordering on cabaret, already pre-Brechtian. Why this mythic paradigm of Lulu/Lilith and Lulu/Madonna?

Lulu destroys all men who find themselves in her embrace. She terrifies and fascinates. Like the Babylonian and Hebrew Lilith, she is the personification, or rather the embodiment, of lust. She *is* sex. For the Scandinavian misogynists Strindberg and Munch, sex was the *vulva dentata*, a devouring womb, both desirable and dangerous. The human female in these sexual obsessions is Virgin, Mother, or Whore. In Strindberg's plays, and even more in his prose writings and journals, a dance of life and death is obsessively repeated. This dance is repeated just as obsessively in Munch's canvasses and lithographs. Images of birth and death bound together often appear in Mediterranean carnival rites. In this tradition, which certainly derives from the saturnalias, wedding and funeral are of the same order; sex is delight, and death arouses no dread. In Strindberg and Munch, sex smells of cadavers. But perhaps this makes it all the more fascinating. The secret of life and death is contained in the vagina. It seems as if Wedekind took possession of both Strindberg's wife Frida and his demons.

In this tangle of the history of behavior, painting, and literature, Dagny's role remains astonishing. The daughter of a provincial Norwegian doctor, she danced barefoot at the Little Black Pig, and she fought for free love a bit prematurely—fragile and tender, naive and oversensitive, as one can deduce from her letters and novels. Dagny unexpectedly became the most prominent figure of "demonic modernism" in Berlin, Munich, Vienna, and Krakow. She had blond hair, but Munch set it ablaze. She was first transformed into a Madonna and later into Lulu, the Lilith of the end of the nineteenth century.

"Look, Spirit, come to me, give me your hands, give yourself fully," Stanislaw Przybyszewski wrote to Dagny Juel in his last letter before they were married; "I'm the only man in the European style and the only true 'blond beast,' born for one woman only—for You."⁶ "The blond beast" is from Nietzsche. Obviously, Przybyszewski was

not the only one to read him; there was also Witkacy. In 1919, in the manifesto *On New Forms in Painting*, Witkacy wrote: "It is necessary to unfetter the slumbering beast and to see what it will do." I don't know if anyone has written about the impact on Witkacy of Przybyszewski, the man and the legend. But it is enough to alter slightly and heighten the style of this passage from his letter to Dagny, to recognize the dialogue of Witkacy's plays and his novel *Insatiability*. This is because "insatiability," as it appears in Witkacy's painting and at the very core of his personality, is always portrayed in the guise of monsters. It was perhaps unfortunate that Witkacy called this insatiability "form," because it was also content, life, painting, women, and himself—or rather something that Witkacy had within himself.

This insatiability is derived from Przybyszewski. And if something remains of Przybyszewski and his followers, and perhaps of the entire modernist period, which can still grip us, it is precisely this "hunger" of these artists of the Young Poland, Young Scandinavia, and Young Germany movements. Witkacy's Satans and Titans are rather pitiful, even with his Hyrcanian worldview, and they are often comical, as when they foam at the mouth and he provides in a footnote the appropriate instructions for the desired effect. His "demon women," though sexually insatiable and well versed in perversions, are no longer "earth spirits."

For a long time the theater has recognized only what is absurd in Witkacy's plays. With their frantic theatricality, his works play best as comedies, and they often unexpectedly reveal a quite realistic and sometimes prophetic timeliness. On a considerably higher plane, it is more difficult to stage Witkacy's *Angst*. Perhaps only Tadeusz Kantor has seen the images of death in these "whimsical" plays. In my opinion, what is impressive and perhaps unique in this eternally serious Witkacy, his true and inimitable *teatrum absurdu*, is precisely this hunger of the modernist avant-garde. To understand this, it is perhaps necessary to return to these early modernists, to their symbols and paintings. I see Munch's *Madonna* under the gaslight as the Duchess of Nevermore in Witkacy's *Water Hen*. Perhaps a profound source of the theater of the absurd should be sought in the milieu that Munch and Wedekind shared with Strindberg, which revolved around the transformation of Dagny Juel into this icon of Lulu.

NOTES

Translated by Allen Kuharski.

1. Leo Treitler, "The Lulu Character and the Character of Lulu," in *Music and the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

2. Ibid.

3. In Poland the last to write on Dagny Juel were Maria Szczepanska Kuncewicz in *Fantasia alla polacca* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1979) and Krystyna Kolinska in *Przybyszewski: His Women, His Children* (1978). Ragna Stang writes a great deal about Juel's Berlin period in her superb study of Munch (1979), as does Reinhold Heller in *Munch: His Life and Works* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Michael Meyer and Olaf Lagerkrantz also write of Juel in their recent biographies of Strindberg.

4. Michael Meyer, *Strindberg* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1985), 268.

5. See *The Illustrated Encyclopaedia of World Theatre* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), p. 289.

6. See note 3, above.