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## Hélène Allatini, “Il et Elle” (“He and She”), from *Mosaïques* (1939)\*

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### Introduction<sup>1</sup>



**Figure 1.** Lili, Paris, 1926. *Man into Woman* (1933), facing p. 40.

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\*Translated from the French by Anne M. Callahan. Introduced by Pamela L. Caughie.

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In March 1930 Danish artist Einar Wegener traveled from his home in Paris to the famous Institute for Sexual Science (*Institut für Sexualwissenschaft*) in Berlin, founded by the renowned sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld in 1919. There Einar was interviewed and photographed, standard practices at the Institute, before undergoing a series of operations that would enable him to begin a new life as Lili Elbe. In her life narrative, Lili dates her birth from the series of surgeries performed first in Berlin, then in Dresden that ended the existence of Andreas Sparre, the character based on Einar Wegener. Lili Iles Elvenes, Lili Elbe's official name, died after fourteen months following a fourth and fatal operation. How Lili came to be, emerging from the chrysalis of Andreas' body, is the story told in *Man into Woman: An Authentic Record of a Sex Change* (1933). That story, however, is anything but an "authentic record." Existing in four variant editions in three languages, published between December 1931 and September 1933, *Man into Woman* is a fictionalized account compiled from multiple sources by editor Niels Hoyer (Ernst Harthern). To know Lili's life, one must navigate an array of witnesses, overlaying various accounts to sort, as best we can, fact from fiction. This version from Hélène Allatini's 1939 memoir, *Mosaïques*, is one such account of the stages of Lili's transition by someone who knew Lili for fifteen years, since first meeting Einar and his wife Gerda in Paris in 1916.

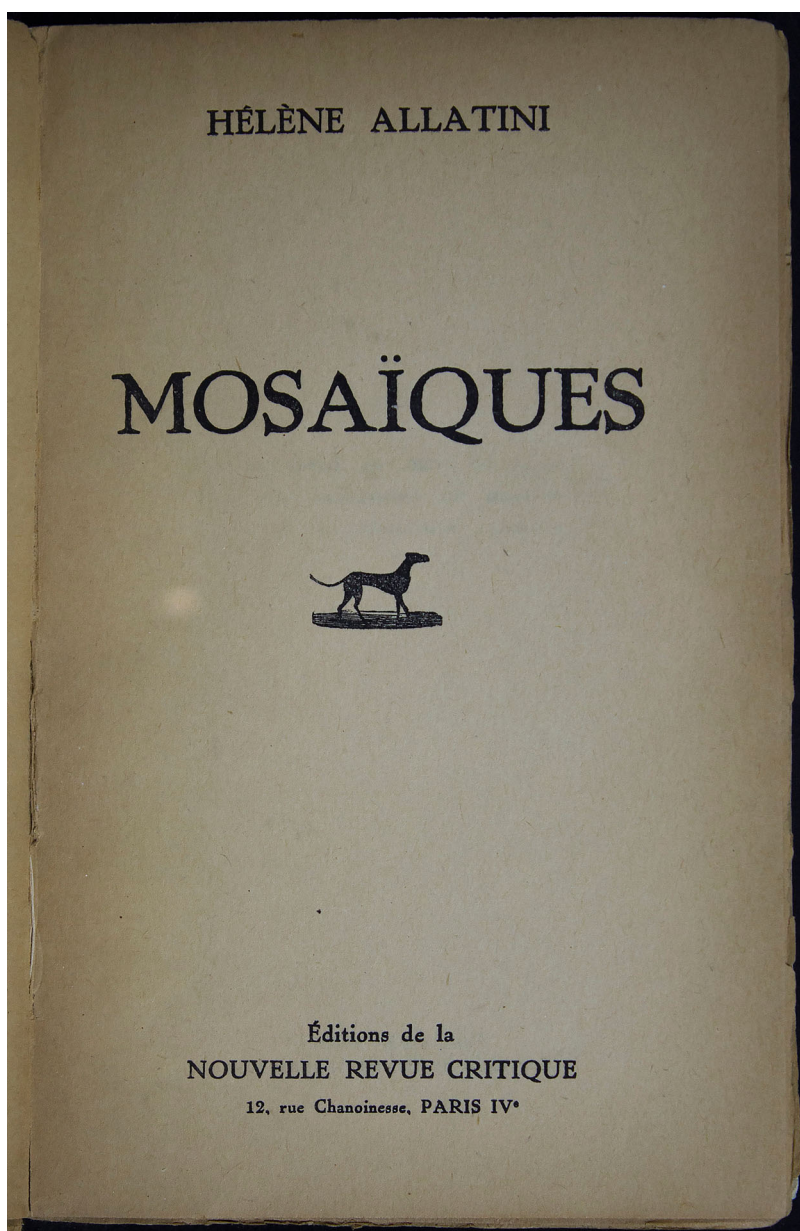
The Wegeners grew up in Jutland, the provincial peninsular region of Denmark. They met at The Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts (*Det Kongelige Danske Kunstakademi*) in Copenhagen where they were both studying art. Married in 1904, the couple emerged on the Copenhagen art scene together, yet they had strikingly different artistic styles. It was the Danish terrain, the fjords, coasts, and hills of rural Jutland, that caught Einar's eye. While Einar had great success with his dark, brooding landscape paintings, Gerda's more modernist approach was initially spurned by the Copenhagen art scene. Yet in 1908 she won a competition for the best drawing of "the Copenhagen woman" sponsored by *Politiken*, a prominent Danish newspaper. The modern woman would become the primary subject of her portraits and drawings for the rest of her career. And her favorite model for what became known as her "Lili paintings" was her husband, whose body—legs, back, shoulders—was decidedly feminine.

The couple left the Danish capital for Paris, the cultural capital of Europe, in 1912 amid rumors that a cross-dressing Einar was Gerda's model for the "modern girl." In Paris in the 1910s and 20s, the Wegeners moved in bohemian artistic circles, settling first in the Latin Quarter, later moving to the 7th arrondissement region and spending summers in Versailles. Among those they socialized with were Hélène and Eric Allatini (Elena and Ernesto Rossini in the narrative). At the time Eric was in the Italian military, soon to be stationed in Versailles, and Hélène (b. Kann) was living in Paris. The Allatinis had met the Wegeners shortly before they married when they sought out Gerda, a prominent illustrator for books and fashion magazines, to provide drawings for the collection of fairytales Eric was then composing for his children, a collaboration that would eventually produce *Contes de Mon Père le Jars* (1919). Hélène hosted a salon that attracted many French and Italian artists and intellectuals, including Anatole France, Pirandello, and René Blum,<sup>2</sup> a friend of Marcel Proust who founded the Ballet de l'Opéra at Monte Carlo in the 1920s and later formed the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo following the death of Sergei Diaghilev in 1929. Hélène published short portraits of many in her circle, including the Wegeners, in her 1939 memoir, *Mosaïques*.

In the chapter “Il et Elle” (“He and She”), published here in, to our knowledge, the first English translation, Hélène’s remembrance of the Wegeners and the stages of Lili’s birth gives new insight into Gerda and Einar, Andreas and Grete Sparre in *Man into Woman*, fleshing out the contours of their characters as presented in the narrative. The dinner scene in which a brash friend identifies Einar, known to his friends as Bé, as a homosexual, for example, presents us with a more witty and sexually outré Einar than we get from Andreas. His retort to his dinner guest, “No, madame, you’re wrong. I am lesbian,” could never be voiced by the more conventional and circumspect character of the narrative. Corroborating some details in Lili’s life narrative (it was Hélène who induced Einar to see Professor Kurt Warnekros [Professor Kreutz in the narrative] in Paris, who performed all but the first surgery on Lili) and countering others (Andreas is never explicitly diagnosed as an androgyne), Hélène’s memoir reads as a fascinating version in and of itself, one that is contextualized by her other portraits of the Parisian avant-garde. We must keep in mind, however, that it was published years after Lili’s life story first appeared in Danish (*Fra Mand til Kvinde*) in 1931, and in French in the magazine *Voilà* in 1934 (“Vice-Versa: Un Homme Change de Sexe”), and thus Helene’s memory may well be colored by the published narrative itself.

*This chapter from Mosaïques (indeed, the entire memoir) will be available in the Lili Elbe Digital Archive to be launched in July 2019, on the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of Hirschfeld’s Institute for Sexual Science. The digital archive will also host all four primary editions of Lili Elbe’s narrative along with the German typescript, and as many contextualizing artifacts as we have been able to locate, including letters by Lili, articles from Danish newspapers, early reviews of the narrative, and a chapter from Magnus Hirschfeld’s 1935 book Le Sexe Inconnu, “La Manie Androgyne” (“Androgyne Mania”), that discusses “Lily Elbe.” That chapter will also be available in an English-language translation, as will the Danish first edition.*

*The digital archive, with Nicholas Wasmoe (University of Buffalo) as Digital Editor, is a companion to a comparative scholarly edition of *Man into Woman* co-edited by Pamela L. Caughie (Loyola University Chicago) and Sabine Meyer (Humboldt University of Berlin), to be published this fall by Bloomsbury Academic Publishers.*



**Figure 2.** Title page from *Mosaïques* (1939).

Hélène Allatini, “Il et Elle” (“He and She”), from *Mosaïques* (1939)  
Translated from the French by Anne M. Callahan

It was near the end of the year 1916 that I met them. My fiancé was then fighting in the Italian army, on the Dolomites front. During his rest periods he was writing fairy tales for our future children. Since he appreciated the talent of the Danish artist, Gerda Wegener, whose drawings appeared in *La Vie Parisienne*, that I sent to him regularly, he asked me to



approach her about doing the illustrations of his tales. I knew that she had done a very pretty cover for a book by Maurice Magre, and so I asked my old friend to put me in touch. That is how, several days later, we came to ring at the door of a studio on the rue de Lille.

We entered a large tastefully arranged room: antique furniture, Spanish shawls, vases of flowers and tiles from a Scandinavian household. Since her husband was also a painter, an accomplished landscape artist, he excelled in perspective. Gerda and Einar Wegener offered us chairs and they sat down across from us on a large black sofa, decorated with variously colored cushions. Thus, side by side, they reminded me of characters in Anderson's tales, especially the ones in *The Snow Queen*: Gerda Wegener, so blonde, so fair, personified for me the other Gerda, the one who went off, risking her life, in search of her beloved Kaj in the enchanted palace, while Einar was an exact replica of Kaj, with a mischievous smile that played on his well-drawn lips. The young artist wore her hair drawn back in a chignon on her neck, and two rolls, similar to eighteenth century hammers, adorned her temples; a black velvet ribbon further brought out the whiteness of her neck. In a nearby cage, two inseparable love birds—the one acid green and the other green ash—playfully hit each other. They seemed to be a living symbol of their owners, who one felt were tenderly united, inseparable as well. A similar clarity lit the golden pupils of Einar's eyes and Gerda's cerulean blue gaze. One had the feeling that their clarity was the very reflection of their pure soul, and I was drawn to them with a fondness that would soon transform into an abiding friendship.

We talked about our reason for being there, and Gerda seemed willing to do the work. After admiring the works of the two artists, it was agreed that she would write that very evening to my fiancé, to come to an agreement with him, and they decided to meet the day of our marriage. During the reception that followed the marriage ceremony, I presented the young couple to my husband; as with me, they also became friends. We saw each other again in two days for a long time while having tea at the Boulangerie Viennoise; it was there that all the details of the volume were decided.

We left that same evening for our honeymoon in Rome. Upon my return, five months later, we took up again our friendly relations that became more and more cordial and affectionate. I had just lost my mother and was expecting my first child. My Scandinavian friends embraced me and I found great comfort in their affection on days when, without news of my husband, they increased their attention and tried to distract me as best they could, to turn my thoughts away from my anxiety.

In May, 1918, the Supreme War Council of the Allied Armies was formed at Versailles. General Nicholis de Robilant, my husband's commander and old friend of the family, was appointed to represent Italy. Upon his arrival, he came to see me, accompanied by his aide-de-camp Count Mario di Carrobbio, as handsome as a young god, cloaked in the superb blue cape worn by cavalry officers. Hardly into our conversation the adorable general asked me with a mischievous air: "What would you say if Eric were named to Versailles? Would you be annoyed?"

I almost threw my arms around his neck.

Several days later my husband arrived in Paris to take up his new post and shortly thereafter I got settled in Versailles with my baby girl. We led a delightful life getting together with other young couples from all over the world with many of whom we formed lasting friendships.

The Wegeners came to visit us often in the charming villa that we had rented and decided to spend the end of summer and a part of autumn in Versailles. They took a small apartment on the rue des Réservoirs and we saw each other every day. I recall, not without emotion, the exquisite mornings in the park of the château in the company of Einar (his friends called him Bé), while he introduced me, all the while painting, to the hidden beauties of the gardens. It was he who showed me that each pond was of a different color, something that I had never noticed. He had a childlike soul, pure, open to Nature and all of her marvels. We got along very well; for that matter, who would not have gotten along with that charming boy, full of sweetness and tenderness. He adored his wife and endeavored to spare her the least burdens of daily life; it was he who ordered from suppliers such as color merchants, wrote to editors, bought supplies, so that she could devote herself entirely to her art. For her part, she showed towards him an almost maternal affection. Everyone in the quarter loved Bé, so polite, so full of tact and kindness. The shopkeepers got him coal and the sweet necessities, even in periods of rationing when it was difficult to obtain them. The two spouses never left each other, sharing each joy, each emotion, sleeping side by side with their little fox terrier, "Vâpe."

They left their studio on the rue de Lille in Paris and moved to the Champs de Mars area, into one larger and nicer than the former. We were then living near the Place de l'Alma, which allowed us to see them often, even in that city where, because of distances, it is difficult to see friends as often as one would like.

I remember a somewhat curious little event that happened to me at the Wegeners. They had invited us to dinner to introduce us to one of their best and oldest friends, the Danish diplomat T.B., a highly cultured man.

—You will see how irresistible and captivating he is, Gerda told me, "his conversation is dazzling and he knows the eighteenth century better than anyone, but he has one big flaw: he cannot see a pretty woman without trying to seduce her, and I must warn you that he is very persistent, especially with blondes."

That night at dinner she introduced me to this Nordic Don Juan, who had arrived that morning from Copenhagen and who had to leave a few days later for his new post in Madrid. I was seated next to him at dinner, and I don't know if the trip had tired him to the point of being a dolt, but he said nothing at all to me and dropped the conversation each time I made an effort to engage him. After what Gerda had told me, I must admit I was a bit piqued. During the salad course my neighbor placed his foot on mine, like a heavy caress. "This is too much," I said to myself, "he acts exhausted, ignores me completely, and then he thinks he can play footsy with me ... and in socks yet!" Since for the occasion the culprit had removed his shoe, I tried to withdraw my foot without drawing the attention of the other guests, a difficult task, my aggressor's being tenacious and heavy. I had hardly broken loose when he began again. I felt myself turning red: to my horror, the keen foot was slowly climbing and was now above my ankle while its owner kept his impassive and hypocritically serene look. Such slyness made me lose it: "You'll see," I said to myself, and gathering all my forces I gave him a mighty kick. A dog's cry rang out: the real culprit was the fox terrier who got punished. This proved, once again, that one should be wary of one's imagination.

I recall another little event that took place at the Wegeners. I was supposed to have dinner at my friend Baby de Friedlander-Fuld's place—now the baroness Goldschmidt-Rothschild<sup>3</sup>—who was stopping in Paris. Then we planned to go together to Einar and

Gerda's who were having a small party. When I arrived at Baby's I noticed that she seemed disappointed. "I'm furious," she said, "I wanted so much to wear my new bronze tulle dress tonight and I can't!"

-What happened? Didn't they deliver it?

-No, it's over there, behind you, on the chair

-Doesn't it fit? Is it too tight, too big? We can maybe fix that.

-No, none of that, on the contrary, it fits marvelously well, but that animal Hellstern didn't deliver my brown satin shoes.

-Don't you have an old pair of brown ones that you could wear?

-No, the only pair I have is in a dreadful state; the tips are so worn that they're white and one can see the lining.

I had a brilliant idea: "We just have to rub them with a bar of chocolate and no one will notice." We ran to the kitchen and, several minutes later, my friend came to table in a ravishing dress with impeccable brown shoes.

When we arrived at the Wegeners, she received compliments from everyone. We sat down and they began to play a little music. The little dog Vâpe, who, as you know, has a particular fondness for feet, came to lie down at my friend Baby's feet. As soon as she picked up the scent of chocolate, she leaped on the tips of the shoes and began to lick them voraciously. We tried to stop her, but she began to growl in a menacing way. There was a general burst of laughter and we had to explain the origin of this feast, which was a huge success.

But let's get back to our business, that is, the painters. When one day I was admiring the ravishing back of a nude painted by Gerda, she confided to me: "You will never guess who posed for that back ... it's Bé in person. For some time now he has been serving as my model which helps me a lot since I would have a hard time finding another back like it." The painting represented a sort of blonde bacchante with short hair crowned with vines, nonchalantly reclining on a day bed, her head slightly tilted and turned toward the viewer. The legs were also Bé's. One would have sworn they were a woman's legs, as they were so long and tapered. I couldn't get over it! Gerda had taken a photo of Einar during one of the sessions, and I begged her to bring it to the restaurant where we planned to dine with our husbands and mutual friends. We passed around the photo that amazed everyone. Our friend, the Marquise de S.G., whose husband was late, cried out: "Let's play a joke on Emilio, he'll be here any second." Gerda would show him the photo of one of her friends and see if he recognized Einar. Like a good Neapolitan, a skirt chaser, the Marquis completely lost his head over this ravishing nude: "Oh, Gerda, who is this? You say that it's a friend who posed to please you ... but I must meet her right away. Swear that you'll introduce me to her." Hardly able to control her desire to laugh, Gerda promised him, but added that the person in question was rather shy and away from Paris at the moment. The more she presented difficulties, the more upset the Marquis became. He even enlisted Bé to be a witness to his wife's promise. We were all laughing so much we were crying. Emilio refused to give back the photo. He kept it in his wallet and afterwards not a day passed that he didn't ask about the blond bacchante's return. It got to the point where once, leaving a soirée, he handed the famous photo instead of his number to the woman tending the cloakroom. "You old bastard! Who do you take me for?," screamed the aging virgin, throwing it in his face.



Faced with the tragic turn the events were taking, we decided to reveal the truth to the red-faced Marquis. He took it badly, tore up the photo in a bout of black rage, and for weeks spoke not a word to any of us.

I can't help to digress once more from my topic to recount an anecdote that dates from about fifty years ago, the hero of which is the Archbishop of Naples, the Marquis' uncle. This prelate, known for his greed, had for years one valet who served as a factotum, and to whom he gave, however, only eight liras a month in salary. This servant came one day to ask for a raise.

—Monsignor knows how attached I am to him and that I would be heartbroken to have to leave his service, but I cannot go on like this. The cost of living is rising every day and I cannot even buy the necessities with my eight liras. I come then to pray Monsignor to give me at least two more liras per month.

—What you say is true, replied his Excellency, but with much regret, it is impossible for me to give you more. However, since I understand very well that your current salary is insufficient and since I am very satisfied with your services, I want to do something for you. I will accord you, from today on, two hours of freedom every afternoon, from one to three o'clock, at the time when traffic is the most dense on the Château de l'Oeuf bridge, so that you can go there to beg. Thus, everything will work out for the best.

And so, every day one would see, at the entrance to the bridge, the Archbishop's valet with his hand out. And that shocked no one ... Oh, sweet Naples.

I return to the Wegeners, not to leave them again. I asked Gerda when she recognized Bé's feminine contours for the first time.

—It goes back a long time, she answered, even before the war. We were still in Copenhagen and I was doing the portrait of a well-known actress.<sup>4</sup> One day she telephoned at the last moment to cancel. I was furious, and disappointed, having set aside my afternoon for her. Seeing me frustrated by not being able to continue my work, Einar offered to replace the model, at least for the dress, if he was able to fit into it. I was stunned to see that, not only did it fit him beautifully, but also that he had a woman's shoulders, magnificent. I amused myself by completing the illusion by putting a blond wig that I had gotten at the carnival on his head and making him up as best I could. I began then to paint and was surprised, in the middle of work, by the real model who came to excuse herself for having broken her word. Seeing her dress on another person, she was a bit surprised, but did not recognize Einar. For a minute I let her think that a friend had replaced her to do me a favor and allow me to make progress on the portrait. The timbre of Bé's voice ended up betraying him and the young woman, laughing wholeheartedly, couldn't get over her shock. She invited herself to dinner, had some champagne brought up "to drink to the good health of her new friend, Lily." During the meal we baptized Bé with champagne, and from then on, he posed often for me, dressing as a woman any chance he got. Bé loved this sort of work and liked to mystify people, who invariably took him for a daughter of Eve. He was a sensation at various masked balls and he impersonated Lily more and more. One evening when I had a cold and couldn't go out, he put on my prettiest low cut dress and I carefully did his hair and made him up. He went with one of our young friends to a dinner, followed by dancing, hosted every two weeks at a club for artists and other cosmopolitan individuals to which we belonged. Except for these young friends and a woman we knew, no one else was in on the secret. They introduced the newcomer as Einar Wegener's sister and my sister-in-law, adding that we

were at home with the grippe. The beautiful Lily was a big hit and stole the heart of a cavalry officer, the Count of T., who was about fifty-five or sixty years old. He spent the entire evening lavishing her with compliments. She had to promise to allow him to see her again. He insisted on escorting her home and left her regretfully. Two days later, as I worked alone in my studio, someone knocked on the door. Imagine my surprise when the mature and mannerly gentleman whom Lily had described to me as her beau stood on the threshold, a bit shy, his arms filled with flowers. I almost dropped mine.

–Is this the home of Mademoiselle Lily Wegener, mumbled the poor man. Would you do me the courtesy of telling her that Colonel de T. would like to see her.

I invited him to come in and sit down explaining that my sister-in-law was out and would be back late. He seemed shattered and stayed for a good half hour talking to me about Lily's physical and mental charms. While I agreed with him, it was all I could do to keep a straight face. I took the initiative to tell him that this young person would soon be leaving to deal with family matters in Denmark.

The Count de T. finally left, assuring me that he would be back soon. He kept his word. In the meantime our friend, Madame de B. who was at the famous dinner and witnessed the soldier's coup de foudre, came to tell us that the poor colonel, more and more irrational, thought of nothing but Lily and even spoke of divorcing his wife to marry her. And so when he came to see her, I told him that she had left suddenly the day before for Copenhagen. The wretch was in despair. He confided in Bé and told him he was surprised to find how little he resembled his delightful sister. "Perhaps in the expression of the eyes, but that's all." It took a heroic effort not to betray ourselves and maintain demeanor that fit the situation.

Afterwards, we had cards of Copenhagen sent to Madame de B. signed "Lily" on which the young person confirmed the lengthiness of her stay, leaving him with vague plans for marriage, all of which to calm the unhappy victim.

Happily, time did its work and we no longer saw the Count de T..

Gerda knew Bé as an adolescent taking drawing and painting classes at the Copenhagen Fine Arts Academy. The young artist had a deep affection for the student and he became her best friend. Gerda was very flattered and Einar, madly in love, pined away, realizing that he would never be anything more to her than a dear friend and confidant. When she was seventeen, Gerda had a romantic disappointment following which she became sad and indifferent to other men who flirted with her. At this time she discovered that poor Einar was dying of love for her. He had a heart attack and doctors said that this nervous state would be fatal. Already wounded, the young girl could not stand the idea of losing the person dearest to her, after her mother. She ran to Bé's bedside and told him that she had reconsidered and consented to become his wife. The effect was magical and the young man, suddenly better, was soon able to walk the blond daughter of pastor Gotlieb<sup>5</sup> to the altar. These two children, barely seventeen and twenty years old, shared a childlike innocence and young Einar, a virgin like his wife, had never asked himself if he was up to the duties that his new situation demanded. Naïve and knowing only imperfectly what marriage had in store for girls, Gerda was only half surprised at how sweet and superficial the caresses of her husband were. They were perfectly satisfied with each other and when on some spring evenings the young woman experienced longings that she could not define, their life together was so harmonious, so smooth and tender, that she attached only a vague importance to them. After long

months, they noted that sexual joys were denied to their union, which did not prevent them in any way from continuing to live in perfect harmony. They had the same tastes in art, the same concept of life and, finally, they could not even for an instant do without one another. They loved each other and fought like two children. I can still hear Madame Gottlieb, during a visit to Paris, cry, "When will you cease being children?" And Gerda answered: "But, maman, never I hope!"

For some time, I had been noticing with anguish, (or perhaps someone had brought it to my attention) that Bé's figure, already effeminate, was becoming more and more ambiguous: his jackets seemed more pinched at the waist, his chest bulged, and his swaying gait recalled that of an odalisque; even his voice was taking on feminine inflections. My husband had noticed as well and "one," that is to say my family, my friends and acquaintances, finally all the well-meaning tribe of those who please themselves by making you discover, with touching solicitude, disagreeable things that you might have missed. "One" was stunned, "one" disapproved of our relations and friendship with a being so clearly ambiguous. I spoke to Gerda about what I had observed; she answered that she herself noticed it a long time ago, even though she lived with him, and it was torturing her terribly. "But the most lamentable thing, she added, is that Bé also realized it and suffered more than you can imagine. He notices that one turns around in the street, that one laughs when he gets on a bus, and he hears outrageous things being shouted at him. Everyone takes him for a homosexual, and you know as well as I do that he is as indifferent to men as to an old shoe. Do you know what happened the other evening at a dinner at Karen Bramson's? There were a dozen of us and since some were French, the conversation was in that language. Abruptly, in the middle of the meal, Karen Bramson,<sup>6</sup> who as you know doesn't manage very well what passes through her head, cries across the table to Bé: "You, Wegener, naturally you like men?" And Einar, witty as usual, answered her smiling, "No, madame, you're wrong, I am lesbian."

I even sent him to consult two physicians but one took him for a crazy person, the other for a pervert, such that he came back more depressed than ever. He even began to experience a kind of *malaise* every month and, what is even more curious, is that his personality and mentality became feminized more than his physique. He is only happy as Lily and, spends entire afternoons dressed as her, reading poetry, embroidering, baking or playing with the little dog. He says that like this he forgets everything and feels in his element. You and I alone can understand this situation, and I haven't spoken to anyone else about it; that would be to expose us, Bé and me, to those who would ridicule us, or, like the physicians, take us for vile or crazy. You must understand my desperation, seeing him suffer so and to be unable to do anything..."

Towards Spring Bé's condition had grown noticeably worse. Gerda decided to spend a few months in Rome, hoping that the change of climate and of surroundings would do him good. They left, took a small apartment with studio in the Eternal City. We didn't see them again for a long time and the news I received not at all reassuring: Einar experienced more and more vertigo, headaches and depression; Gerda envisioned a prompt return to Paris if this state of affairs continued. It wasn't until the end of autumn that we saw our friends again. They invited us to dinner in a little Italian restaurant near them.

That morning I got a phone call from my friend, Professor W.<sup>7</sup>, –the celebrated German gynecologist—who was passing through Paris. He was only free that very evening and wanted very much to see us. I cancelled the date with the Wegeners,

explaining the situation. At about four o'clock there was another call from the physician, held up due to a car problem, on the outskirts of Paris. He was very sorry but wouldn't be back until very late after an appointment, and our evening was ruined.

–Let's reset our dinner date with the Einars, I said to my husband.

–No, we'll see them another day. They'll think we're crazy to change our minds at every moment.

At that moment I had a strange intuition that we should, at all costs, see our friends that evening. It was like a command that I had received from a superior will. I explained to my husband that the closeness of our relationship with the Wegeners was such that they would not stand on ceremony. I let them know that we would come by to pick them up at about eight o'clock.

Although we expected to find Bé changed, we had a horrible shock when we saw him.<sup>8</sup> Our poor friend was a shadow of his former self, gaunt, pasty complexion, sunken eyes surrounded by large dark circles, with a hopeless expression that I'll never forget. He made a heroic effort to appear lighthearted during the meal, but in his eyes there persisted the look of a tortured beast that I could not stand. Not being able to contain myself, I took Gerda aside and told her about my painful impression.

–I was going to speak to you myself about it, she answered. I'm sick about it! Battered by atrocious constant suffering, the poor soul isn't able to sleep. He feels his forces diminishing every day and if no one can do anything to help him, I fear the worst. He can't go on like this! His male organs are atrophying little by little, his breasts are developing, he endures tortures every month and I don't dare consult physicians here because of our first experience.

At that moment, I had a distinct vision of the tall figure of my friend, Professor W.. His passage through Paris seemed to be not a coincidence, but the hand of destiny. Seized by an unc customary eloquence, I laid out my plan to Gerda: call a big specialist the next morning, explain the case in a few words and get an appointment. Comforted and full of hope, Gerda promised to do her best to send her husband to me the next morning. She had, however, a hard time convincing him; at the last minute he wanted to back out, having abandoned all hope.

The few details that I gave Professor W. on the phone were enough to raise his interest; he immediately set a time. Einar arrived at my place early; he was very agitated and I had a hard time calming him, to convince him that everything would work out once he was in the hands of the admirable specialist.

–I didn't want to tell you in front of Gerda, he told me, but I have decided to kill myself if I can't become who I really am, a woman. Think of it, Hélène, I am no longer anything but a human wreck, a useless waste. Physically and mentally ill – I can no longer even hold a brush, nor do anything to help Gerda – I refuse to be a burden to her. She has been admirable with me; no one would be able to understand to what extent ... except you perhaps? ... I promised both of you to consult this great physician. This will be my final attempt; if he can do nothing, I am determined to die ... it will be a relief to me ... and also to my dear Gerda ... when the first sadness goes away. I will no longer hamper her life as I have been doing for a long time. In my case, it would be cowardly to go on living. Look at what I've become!

Saying this, he opened his shirt and bared the most beautiful woman's breasts that I had ever seen. I was overwhelmed and truly "realized" at that moment everything that he had been telling me.

When we got to my friend, Professor W.'s, I acted as interpreter. I had to explain to him, in German, the progress of Einar's metamorphosis from the beginning. I waited in an adjoining room while he examined him. He came back a quarter of an hour later, seized by an agitation that stunned me in a man whom I had never seen as anything but impassive.

—Do you know, dear friend, that you have brought me a case that is unique in the history of medical science, a case waited for during an entire existence, without ever having been encountered: your friend is the only *true* hermaphrodite who exists or has existed, for he had truly been a man, an undersized, inadequate, atrophied man, but a man nonetheless in every accepted meaning of the term. In general, the other beings to whom one applies this name are not real hermaphrodites but only men afflicted with an inguinal hernia that keeps their organs inside the body, thus one is able to take them for women. Following a physical shock, an accident or some phenomenon like that, the suspended organ descends abruptly and takes its normal place: the so-called woman then becomes a man, but, in reality, she has always been one without suspecting it. While Wegener was first a man and has actually evolved towards the feminine sex, which is totally different from ordinary cases of hermaphroditism. He thus represents the first perfect example of the androgyne. Actually, there exist in him both sexes and it is the struggle between them that is torturing this poor being. If there is no intervention, he will succumb in a short time whether because of the struggle between them or by his own hand since he is unable to endure this horrible suffering much longer. I see only one way out: rid him of what remains of his first sex and graft onto the ovaries — for he certainly has ovaries — new ovaries, in good condition. Then later, when he can tolerate it, a third and final surgery to open a normal path to genital function. I easily imagine the masculine attentions with which your friend must have been harassed, for hermaphrodites exercise a powerful sexual seduction on men, unknown to them. All this will allow you to understand something that one is generally ignorant of and which causes so many injustices and calumnies in our pitiful society: many homosexuals are beings who possess a male organ in which there are ovaries instead of testicles. It's the same for a lot of lesbians who have testicles where the ovaries should be. These unhappy ones thus unjustly suffer public scorn and disgust when their proclivities are —on the whole—normal and not vile and perverse as one likes to make them feel.

I will prescribe first for your friend a treatment to prepare him to endure the trial that awaits him. Towards the beginning of March I will notify him and he will have to come to Berlin immediately where my colleague, Professor G.<sup>9</sup> will perform the first operation. As soon as he's recovered he will come —or rather *she* will come—to Dresden's Frauenklinik (Women's Clinic) where I will perform the second intervention, in which his true sex will be revealed. May he have *bon courage* while waiting which I'm certain that he will have, for one can only bow before his valor. Then, addressing Einar himself: "Good bye then, dear sir, while waiting to be able to say: Hello, dear miss."

It was a transformed Einar that I brought back to his wife! I have never seen such a change in so little time. My friend's face had gone from the most harrowing anguish to the most perfect serenity, like those skies that, darkened by a storm, suddenly brighten, lit by a radiant clarity. During the following two months, poor Bé, as if touched by a



magicians wand, regained physical and mental strength. Gerda told me often about his joy and relief.

It was on a beautiful morning in March that the two of us accompanied him to the Gare du Nord. He got settled in his compartment and, gallant as usual, he offered his reserved corner seat to a young woman who thanked him with a charming smile. Her “Thank you, sir,” made us laugh. We knew that Bé was wearing a man’s suit for the last time, about which didn’t stop rejoicing about during the taxi ride. Gerda thought that she had the time to finish a very important commission and to rejoin her husband before the intervention but she had to leave precipitously that same week, notified by telegram that “everything went admirably well.” Hardly arrived in Berlin, Einar, examined by Marcus Hirschfeld and several other Berlin authorities, underwent, at the hand of Professor G., the excision that would make him, definitively, Lily.

Gerda brought women’s underwear, a pink bath robe and an entire arsenal of makeup and perfume to celebrate Lily and give her a truly feminine appearance.

Upon arriving at the clinic, the traveler was first of all struck by the change of the voice of her former husband. The operation was enough to transform the timbre of his voice and it was a pretty soprano who welcomed her. The patient rested, pale but radiant, on her pillows after having valiantly endured the suffering that had released her –finally! – from the chrysalis that had been so detested. She was pampered, spoiled, surrounded by flowers, solicitude. The few Scandinavian friends who were in Berlin visited her every day. She was the idol of the clinic, one spoke of nothing but her, of her courage, of her sweetness and of her extraordinary adventure.

Gerda quickly made up her dear girl, (for this was how she thought of her now), did her hair, put on her nightgown and the pink robe that I had long promised Bé for Lily and that she brought her on my behalf. One can imagine the great amazement of Professor G. upon entering the room, that very evening, when he saw, in place of his patient, a ravishing young lady all dolled up, perfumed and hair curled to receive him.

The weeks that followed were a dream come true for poor Lily: for her first outing, Gerda surprised her with a beautiful fur coat and then took her to the stores to choose everything that was still missing from her trousseau.

As planned, I had the honor to receive Lily’s first letter. The handwriting was so different that I could hardly believe, while tearing it open, that it was written in her hand: in place of Einar’s thick down strokes, elegant and light strokes flowed on the page, but what surprised me most was Lily’s style, virginal, sensitive, delicate, the handwriting of a young girl and a romantic one:

*“Berlin. March 10, 1930. Dear and great friend. I am so delighted by your letter and I kiss your dear name. I am so happy but so very tired that it is impossible for me to write. The operation lasted one hour and I screamed for hours afterwards (with a clear voice like Elisabeth Schumann’s, according to my superb surgeon<sup>10</sup>). Bé lived and Lily will soon be a girl with a proper passport. Spring sings in my heart and I cry from happiness and I am fearless faced with all the suffering that awaits me. I adore you. Lily*

*P.S. –Bé has celebrated the funeral of his life as a boy.”*

And again, March 15: *“Everyone here spoils me and calls me Lily. They compliment me a lot on my legs. That suits me very well. I will never be a strong-minded woman. Don’t you think, dear Hélène, that I should have pink, not red, nails for the big operation in Dresden? At the moment I no longer try to contain my joy when I feel so happy.*

*Bé is fading away more and more and Professor W. is going to give him the coup de grâce."*

Several weeks later, two elegant young women left for Dresden's Frauenklinik and introduced themselves to Professor W., who, having not yet met Gerda and having last seen a gaunt Bé in a man's jacket, couldn't identify the seductive creatures who stood before him, laughing.

The Frauenklinik is really a city having five hundred beds and all the modern amenities. Lily was settled into the most beautiful room, and there too she became the focus of general interest. The second operation was long and grave. She came out of it very weak, but very happy, for the heart and new soul of a young girl had given themselves to her savior, who had liberated her from a martyr's existence, in order to open for her the golden doors of life and hope.

Dresden, April 1930: *"My whole life would not suffice to thank you to have sent me to this extraordinary man, this benevolent genius who gave me a new life. I adore my dear Professor W ... I love him, but with a measure of respect, as if he were an all-powerful god. Dear Hélène, you will understand your little Lily when I tell you that I have never seen his eyes, because I have never dared look at him. Often I would like to tell him something, I don't get any further than smiling stupidly and saying: "Yes, maître". I wish he were a pasha or a sultan so that I could be his slave. Frauenklinik is an earthly paradise! I like my suffering better here. So that is where I am! I have a new pair of ovaries that behave like little fauns in my painful stomach. My room is the only one with a big mirror, when He gives me permission to get up, I will be able to stand in front of it. Gerda wants to do His portrait. What is this magic power that affects everyone who comes near him? There is a charming young girl who comes to clean my room, who said to me: "I clean to save my life, if He ever saw a speck of dust and scolded me, I would die!" Hélène, Hélène, how fantastic is it that from a life headed down and at an end, He created a new life overflowing with hope, love and spring. It's the work of a god! What heartbreak, the day when I will have to leave this clinic, in the forest of white birches. I have dreamed that He will continue to operate on me until there will be nothing left to Him but my heart trembling in his sweet, fine hands. Hélène, you have a heart of gold that you spend endlessly for the happiness of others. I hope you will never regret all that you have done for your little Lily. I, who am a little afraid of my first steps in life, I feel protected by your friendship."*

For his part, the celebrated surgeon seemed touched by the sweetness and courage of his little patient and showed almost paternal feelings for her, to which was now added a professional interest in this most fascinating of all cases. Professor W. had a lovely respect for Gerda whose admirable conduct in a unique situation he appreciated. He had given her the privilege of going up to his place to rest, or paint, in his comfortable living room. In gratitude for everything he had done, she undertook to do his portrait, in his white surgeon's coat. The nurses and the domestics took special care of the surgical patient, in order to please the *maître*, all of them showering him with fearful adoration, mixed with respect. He moved about on the waves of feminine admiration like a sultan in his harem; the devotion of the entire staff has become a sort of religious rapture.

One afternoon, while Lily took her siesta, stretched out on a chaise longue in the clinic's park, an old woman approached her and engaged her in conversation: "How are you now, little lady? You seem to have better color and you will soon be fully recovered from giving birth." My girl began to get up. "And your baby, is it a boy or girl?"

–“Neither,” replied Lily without blinking, “the Good Lord sent me twins.”

Lily left the clinic and her dear savior with regret and went to complete her recovery in the mountains of Saxony, in the company of Gerda.

*“He has sent us for several days to Erzgebirge, between Saxony and Bohemia, but it is so cold here that we are going to leave this place where we are shivering in our little summer frocks.”*

They returned to take leave of the professor and left for Copenhagen, to get their marriage annulled and put Lily’s papers in order. She obtained from the King of Denmark a change of her family name to Elbe, after Dresden’s river, witness to her renaissance. Lily spent a long visit with her family, trembling when she went out, afraid of being recognized, dreading the moment when her metamorphosis was made known, making her the prey of journalists who would make her a national phenomenon. She didn’t want to touch a palette, nor anything that could remind her of Bé. She spent her days sewing, looking in the mirror, embroidering, doing her nails. She was modest to a fault, whereas Bé loved to recount salacious jokes, she blushed at the drop of a hat and in contrast to her first incarnation (Einar was a confirmed atheist), she became edifyingly pious, with an intense mysticism. Her second brother, Holger, and her sister-in-law, with whom Bé got along very well, were touchingly good to Lily and welcomed her wholeheartedly. Worn out from the mental tension of these last months and knowing that Lily was in good hands, Gerda gave in to her mother’s insistence that she wanted to take her to rest in Italy, and left with her for Rome. They stayed at a family-run *pension* owned by a Danish woman that they knew. It took Gerda all she had to distract herself and go out with Italian friends, for, since the annulment of her marriage, Madame Gottlieb, believing that she had reverted to a time when her daughter was an adolescent, gave her no freedom and watched over her like a dragon. The old woman, wanting to know Pompeii, decided to visit with her daughter for a week. Under the constant supervision of her mother, the young woman looked for a way to free herself, to be able, finally, to relax. The morning of the return, Gerda, disconcerted, walked around in the old part of Naples, when she noticed a small church that drew her to it mysteriously. She entered and approached the altar of the Virgin, she prayed her to come to her aid, to protect her and guide her life towards a loyal and good person who would love her sincerely and with whom she could share the rest of her existence. She left comforted, and that evening, in the train bringing them back to Rome, she resolved to let her mother return to Denmark alone and to prolong her stay in Italy. At the *pension*, a pile of mail waited for her. As she moved towards the hotel salon to go through it, a masculine figure got up to greet her. She recognized an aviation officer, who had been introduced to her before her trip to Naples. “Allow me to offer you my respects, madame, and tell you how happy I am about your return. I was afraid that you had left Rome definitively and this house had lost its charm during your absence.”

Gerda responded with a few words and accepted a cigarette. After this first conversation Captain Porta waited each evening for the young woman’s return, and their liking for each other grew more and more. The day of Madame Gottlieb’s departure, Gerda was surprised to find the officer waiting for her at the station exit. “I wanted to be sure that you would still be here for me”, he said with emotion. Won over by the passion of this handsome and likeable boy, she agreed to listen to him. They discovered that they got along famously, had the same tastes, and when Fernando Porta asked her to become his wife, she accepted with a full heart

after having told him of her past and of the adventure, so unbelievable, that had cast a shadow over her. "You are now doubly dear to me," he answered, "and admiration filled with respect is mingled with my tenderness; Lily will be our child. I understand that you do not wish to abandon her. She will always have a room in our home, a place in our household."

When Gerda told us of her engagement, I felt great joy. She was finally receiving the recompense she so deserved, the happiness that I had always wished for her. During a short trip to Rome, my husband had the opportunity to meet "Nando" and found him most charming. He belonged to one of the best Livornese families and had just been appointed vice-consul to Marrakech, where they would soon be married. The first few days of June Lily would leave for Paris; she would spend two weeks with us, before leaving for Morocco where the happy couple would be waiting for her. The time passed quickly and soon came the moment when a group of friends accompanied Gerda to the station. She was radiant in spite of a shadow of regret at the thought of leaving poor Lily behind her. But it was only a shadow, in effect, for wasn't she supposed to rejoin her, and don't two months pass quickly, especial when one is happy. The two women embraced one more time: "Until we meet again, little Lily, until we meet again, in Marrakech!" "See you soon, dear Gerda, as always!"

The whistle blows, the train moves off, handkerchiefs are waving; for a long time Gerda follows with her eyes the slender figure of her beloved girl and, at the very moment when the train makes a curve and disappears from sight, she experiences a sudden and harrowing dread, a tightening of her heart, as if she were seeing Lily for the last time! ...

April, May, June ... I began to prepare for the arrival of Lily. I broke the news of the death of her friend Bé to my daughter, who loved him so tenderly. I dried her tears and tried to calm her announcing that Einar's sister, Lily, was coming to visit us for several days and that she so resembled her poor brother that she would surely replace him in her affection. Then I wrote to Lily to be dressed in mourning upon her arrival.

Having thus definitively buried poor Bé, I prepared Lily's room. To flatter her vanity, I had embroidered sheets put on the bed, put a large mirror on the wall, and I spread small luxuries around: candies, collars, perfumes, ribbons, sure to please her.

The day before she was to arrive, we were totally stunned and disappointed to receive the following letter from our friend: *"My very dear Hélène, I left from Copenhagen for Paris Wednesday morning. That evening I telephoned my Idol in Dresden, from Berlin. Then I came Thursday evening to the Frauenklinik. An hour later he decided to operate on me again. I am so exhausted by the preparatory treatment that I am undergoing, that I can hardly write. Maybe surprise and a little fear have something to do with it –since I know that it is very serious this time. When I say that I'm afraid, it is rather for him, who is superbly courageous and will stop at nothing to make me happy! Please forgive me if I don't come to Paris right away, but when I'm in his presence I forget everything else. In Denmark I had become a less timid person and for a few instants I had been able to speak freely; but that was short-lived and all that's left of me is a humble little thing before this great adored maître. I have already gone to bed and although he hasn't told me, I know that the operation will be tomorrow morning and that it will be very complicated. Even death seems sweet to me here where my heart lives forever, but I understand that death would be a betrayal to him. Therefore, there is a legitimate little delay in my arrival in Paris, dear friend, but when I do come I will be marriageable and who knows if one fine day I won't also have children?"*

Gerda received a similar letter and not only did she feel a violent disappointment, but in reading it she also felt a justified furor. Hadn't she recommended to Lily, during her time in Copenhagen, to take at least a year's rest before having another surgery? She made her swear it, fearing the magnetic attraction that the Professor cast over his patient would persuade her to desire the surgery sooner, in order to be following once again in his adored wake. With that, it was impossible to do anything, even send a telegram, since according to the date, Lily should be on the operating table at the moment that Gerda was reading the letter. Taken by a veritable despair, by rage, confronted with a *fait accompli*, she opened the door to the room she had prepared for Lily with such tenderness. Upon going into it, in spite of the torrid heat that prevailed in Marrakesh in that season, a glacial chill penetrated her and it seemed that the room had been plunged into a greenish light; under the mosquito net, she felt the presence of a dead person. She recoiled, felt a shiver and a few moments later it was with difficulty that her husband was able to calm her fears.

In Dresden, the surgery, like almost all or almost all operations, was successful, but poor Lily suffered like a condemned person and was unable to get her strength back. Professor W. had to admit to himself that his patient's organism would not be able to fight against this last ordeal, and feeling himself impotent to save her, his visits became less and less frequent. Lily's passionate adoration for her surgeon had become her unique reason to live; and so, deprived of his presence, she no longer forced herself to react and stopped fighting to recover her health. She was tormented by the thought that she had been to him only something to experiment on. The time had come for vacations and the professor left the clinic to take the rest indispensable to his profession. It was also a relief to no longer feel his heart tighten when entering Lily's room; he realized that in spite of all that she had endured and that he himself had tried, the poor creature was doomed. His departure finally caused the unhappy girl to give into despair and to aggravate the bitterness that she had served as a guinea pig for this person whom she loved more than her life so much that she let herself die.

We learned all of this afterwards, for the little nurse who had taken care of Lily until the end, recounted her agony to Gerda when she went to Dresden a year later. In the midst of atrocious physical and mental suffering, the heroic girl thought of only one thing: that Gerda knew nothing of this and wasn't troubled in her happiness. As for herself, at the price of much effort, she hid her true condition from her, writing letters full of joy and hope for a rapid recovery. Doctor F., assistant to the *maitre*, a man full of heart and pity, had done all that he could to soften the last weeks of the poor little patient, coming to see her often, sending his wife, who brightened her room with flowers and brought their little monkey to distract her. In the last days of August, feeling that her agony was soon to end, Lily asked for a notary to do her will. She left the little that she had to Gerda. She asked the little nurse to fix her up after her death, coiffed and made up as Gerda liked to do, and to remember her thus.

*"When I die let one put,*

*Before nailing my coffin,*

*A bit of rouge on my cheek,*

*A bit of black around my eyes."*



From “*la Coquetterie Posthume*” (*Posthumous Vanity*) of Théophile Gautier

She even recommended that they put pink polish on her nails.

At the beginning of September she wrote with difficulty to Gerda that she was much better and would have the joy to be able, after a little while, to join Nando and her, in Marrakech. To me, she wrote:

*“I am beginning to get up and will soon be able to take a few steps in the garden. I think happily about the not so far off day when I will be able to leave for Paris and about the happy moments that I will spend with all of you so dear to me; to the moment when I can embrace you and express my gratitude for having known, thanks to your intervention, my true life, my life as a woman. May you be blessed for that, my dear Hélène.”*

In spite of having been formally forbidden to inform anyone whatsoever, the little nurse had secretly written the whole truth to Holger Wegener, the brother whom Lily loved so very much. The end was now too close to inform Gerda; the decline being so rapid. It had been a great and final joy for the dying one. She felt at peace surrounded by true affection and died gently, her hand in his, her thoughts far away across the sea towards that land of Africa that she would never know ...

Under a slab of white stone, inscribed

LILY ELBE

12 septembre 1931<sup>11</sup>

repose the remains of little Lily, but her soul, pure and beautiful, contemplates with bliss the happiness of she who was the most dear to her. That is her reward for having so suffered and so loved.

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If, as such a close witness to this story, I was determined to write an exact account, it is in order to annihilate all that has been published about this painful affair. With malicious intent, or as a farcical spectacle, one has tried to debase two of the best people, whose honorable souls and high-mindedness could serve as an example to a great many human beings, especially those who have so unjustly slandered them. I believe in so doing to make myself worthy of a memory that is so profoundly dear to me and of a friendship that I place among the most beautiful that I possess.

Translator’s note:

The general problem created for the translator of French into English by the fact that the gender of possessive pronouns in French (feminine *sa* and masculine *son*) do not represent the gender of the possessor but of the object possessed is further complicated when the gender of the possessor changes from one gender to the other almost in the middle of a sentence. I encountered this problem while translating the above paragraph beginning “Upon arriving at the clinic,” which occurs at the point in the narrative where Gerda visits Lily immediately following her first surgery. Here, we have pronouns used to refer to Gerda and the newly born Lily.

*En arrivant à la Clinique, la voyageuse fut tout d'abord frappée du changement de voix de son ex-mari. L'opération avait suffi pour en transformer le timbre et ce fut un joli soprano qui l'accueillit. L'opérée reposait pâle, mais radieuse, sur ses oreillers, après avoir supporté vaillamment les souffrances qui l'avaient délivrée—enfin !—de sa chrysalide tant détestée.*

In the original French “*en transformer*,” *en* is a pronoun that when placed before the verb means ‘of it’ or ‘of them.’ In the interest of clarity I initially repeated the possessive (“the timbre of his voice”) rather than using the pronoun. By so doing I mistakenly used the possessive adjective ‘his’ missing the fact that ‘*l’opérée*’ has the extra ‘e’ to denote that the patient is feminine, ‘its timbre’ is an accurate translation. This change led to the decision to change ‘his pillows’ to ‘her pillows’ and ‘released him’ to ‘released her.’

## Notes

1. Portions of this introduction are from the introduction to *Man into Woman: A Comparative Scholarly Edition*, by Pamela L. Caughie and Sabine Meyer (forthcoming).
2. Robert de Mackiels, “Éric et Hélène Allatini,” in *Anthologie des Écrivains Morts à la Guerre 1939–1945* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1960): 7–10.
3. Marie-Anne von Friedländer-Fuld (1892–1973) married Rudolf von Goldschmidt-Rothschild, her third husband, in 1923. During WWI she corresponded with Rainer Maria Rilke, publishing the correspondence pseudonymously in 1956. She traveled with Kurt Warnekros (mentioned below) and was rumored to be his lover.
4. Anna Larssen (1875–1955), a Danish actress at the Royal Theater (*Det Kongelige Teater*) in Copenhagen.
5. Gottlieb, misspelled here.
6. Karen Bramson (1875–1936) was a Danish author who published novels and plays in Danish and French. She lived in Paris from the time of the first world war.
7. Professor Kurt Warnekros (1882–1949) performed all but the first of four surgeries on Lili Elvenes. He was director of the Women’s Clinic in Dresden (*Staatliche Frauenklinik*) from 1925 to 1948.
8. *Man into Woman* opens with the couples’ reunion in a Paris café.
9. Dr. Erwin Gohrbandt (1890–1965), a Berlin surgeon who performed the first operation in 1930. He was one of the doctors to whom patients at Hirschfeld’s Institute were referred.
10. Elisabeth Schumann (1888–1952) was a German opera singer.
11. The inscription on the headstone in Trinitatis Cemetery (*Trinitatisfriedhof*) reads: “Lili Elbe/ Geboren in Danemark/Gestorben in Dresden” (Born in Denmark/Died in Dresden).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors .

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