

Yuri Felsen was the pseudonym of Nikolai Freudenstein. Born in St Petersburg in 1894, he emigrated in the wake of the Russian Revolution, first to Riga and then to Berlin, before finally settling in Paris in 1923. In France, he became one of the leading writers of his generation, alongside the likes of Vladimir Nabokov; influenced by the great modernists such as Marcel Proust, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, his writing stood at the forefront of aesthetic and philosophical currents in European literature. Following the German occupation of France at the height of his career, Felsen tried to escape to Switzerland; however, he was caught, arrested and interned in Drancy concentration camp. He was deported in 1943 and killed in the gas chambers at Auschwitz. After his death he fell into obscurity and his work is only now being translated into English.

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Deceit
Yuri Felsen

*Translated from the Russian
by Bryan Karetnyk*

with a Foreword by Peter Pomerantsev
& an Afterword by Bryan Karetnyk

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Everything I have is superficial—appointments, acquaintances, time-keeping—dull and dry, and it hopelessly anaesthetises what little in me remains alive, my final frail impulses: I cannot achieve even a melancholy clarity with regard to myself, a sense of remorse, however inert, or the simple warmth of human kindness. Only more persistently than before, more shamefully, do I sense that I am the same as others, that, like everybody, I swill down idle days in trivial anguish, and that one day I must, as must everyone else, rightly disappear. Throughout my years of loving tenderness and incessant jealousy—covetous, hasty, though never apt to bear a grudge and quick to forgive—I had, in a sense, greater magnanimity, would blithely turn my back on those sinister and terrible comparisons (with ‘everybody else’), on the absurd inevitability of the end, and considered my own sublime sense of nervous tension unique. Now, however, when all this comes back to me every so often—limp, numb and impoverished—and afterwards follows a period of deep, somnolent repose, I succumb to an error one so often describes in people—that the present will never change—and so I conclude: my sense of romantic exaltation has ended once and for all, as have all my private thoughts and feelings, but in such moments, so reflective of the past, one need only seek to discern something, to uncover it and communicate it—for the remnants of those emotions, of that exaltation, are preserved, that old anxious haste no longer interferes with them, and perhaps their bothersome recollection, which painstakingly reconstructs what was once achieved but has now been left behind, constitutes the entire sense, the whole

bizarre purpose of these lonely and wasted years. But then, no sooner does a sliver of blissful, inane hope appear—from a touching similarity, a smile, attention paid to my words—than in an instant I alter, no longer do I see my present humdrum rut, and I forget that all these private thoughts and feelings are over, and only my obstinately suspicious nature—that vestige of experience, failure and the eternal attribution of value to everything—unexpectedly and opportunely sobers me: but then suddenly comes despair or treachery all over again. Or else in the wake of sobriety I experience that belated, blistering, vainly defiant sense of regret, which sometimes brings women (seemingly without provocation) to tears—because of the opportunity to have something rare and dangerous, something that was meant to be, and because now that opportunity has been lost irrevocably.

I suddenly felt this opportunity for something blessed, dangerous and new as I was reading a letter from a Berlin acquaintance of mine, Yekaterina Viktorovna N., who has written to inform me that her niece, Lyolya Heard, is coming to Paris—‘Remember our conversations about her? Help her, look out for her—you surely won’t regret it.’ Katerina Viktorovna, a colonel’s widow, a faded army woman cut from a hulking, much too masculine cloth, and possessed of a coarse, grey face and a booming wooden voice that manneredly gave commands, would for days on end, in the Berlin *pension* in which we had found ourselves cast together, regale me with stories of her beloved niece, ‘a rare, exotic creature, quite unlike any of these local girls’, whereupon she would smile boastfully and suggestively, with just a touch of sympathy, as it were: ‘That’s her, my darling—what a great pity you haven’t met her.’ These were

still desperate times—the last of money, candour and hope—and that ageing, destitute woman, herself bereft of hope and prospects, compensated herself with this fantasy of a romance between her beloved pet and me—in some measure I conformed to her naïve and sentimental martial notions of chivalry. Not only did she try to allay her insatiable womanly kindness by offering up in her own stead the equally attentive, lovely and clever Lyolya Heard, but she even tried to reconstitute a scattered, vanished social circle, the little bit of influence she was used to wielding, the conditions in which Lyolya and I could meet, in which Katerina Viktorovna could aid and abet us. At first, I did not credit her bombastic raptures, but there were photographs, letters, casually uttered words—each of them drew me in more than the ingenuous praise of the old colonel’s widow. In turn, I, too, constructed an image of Lyolya Heard—a dazzling, delicate blonde with an inquisitive and cultivated mind, vulnerable and at the same time courageous, able to tackle any setback head-on. I recall in particular her hands in one of the photographs—elegant, capricious, clasped awkwardly, as though in despair, but unyielding all the same. Lyolya Heard, in leaving her husband, had found herself alone in Belgrade, unable to move to Berlin, and when at long last she did move, I was already in Paris.

8 December

She arrives in five days’ time. By then I shall have clarified a small matter that will allow me several months’ freedom from having to seek out new ventures, freedom from

worrying—with indignity and gall—about every little expense, freedom from putting off necessary purchases (collars, shirts, neckties). The crucial thing is that it will make life easier and more pleasant when I am with Lyolya, about whom I am beginning to think with rapture and hope: even now I want to show her around Paris, to take her out, to entertain her, not to begrudge her time, not to think that somewhere somebody is waiting for me and that I must brace myself for the negotiating table, not to let up and forever be reminded—money is vital, how good it is to have it.

Why does the knowledge that Lyolya Heard is coming here so captivate and uplift me? For so long I spared absolutely no thought for her whatsoever, but something strange and unhealthy began back then, that day in Berlin—because of her, because in her person, inadvertently, so to speak, two wills collided, two desires that were equally intense, alien to one another, having originated long ago and for reasons that are very likely unclear even to me. I shall attempt to master my mental inertia and put a name to these reasons, to combine them, to wrest them from their mute dormancy into which everything that befalls us plunges, unmarked at the time—I am sufficiently practised in such acts of remembering, and I have a presentiment (perhaps artificially fabricated) that something brand new is about to commence with Lyolya's arrival, which means that my old—especially those old—associations with her must be tidied up and put in order. I am glad even that between this mysterious last minute—here, in this room, in this solitude—a minute yet blind and merely conjuring Lyolya's arrival, that between this and her first friendly smile at the station in five days' time, all those

wearisome tasks will be carried out before the feast, whose purpose is to prepare me for some great happiness, to prepare me not morally, but mentally—rather a submission of accounts than some regenerative Hindu act of purification.

Those two wills—mine and Katerina Viktorovna's, sympathetic muses that befriended one another unexpectedly—were powerful, each in its own cause, for they transported us both to what was most immediate and vital: above all else Katerina Viktorovna feared being torn from the past, feared seeing herself as 'some old colonel's widow', grey and haggard; she wanted to appear girlish, younger, blonder, svelter, when really, since her youth, back home—there, where she had once been listened to—men had courted her, reckoned with her, and so it was not my presence or charm that imparted to her this illusion of youth, home and the continuation of her former life (although it was from her that I received the affectionate little nickname 'the romantic youth'), but rather the attention, genuine, avid and rapt, with which I listened to her when the talk was about Lyolya—obsessively I wanted one thing only: to find myself a 'Lyolya' just like this.

Like many people who have once upon a time found and then lost what they desired, I was far from any thought of embarking on some immature, ill-defined search and knew perfectly, *ad absurdum*, what it was that I wanted, what sort of woman, set-up and relationship I would pick. Very likely my first condition would be to exclude any docile, dewy-eyed, excessive youth, that there be no need to 'educate' her, to remake her in my own image, only then to look, as into a mirror, and with ennui recognise myself (if successful), while also risking the misfortune of some

rude and spiteful surprise. I have always wanted not only to offer support, but also to find a support—a friend, an opponent, an intellect, a force—and not on account of weakness, but rather because of some (granted, inconspicuous, not even wholly conscious) hubris, so that there come about a fascinating, daring contest, a comradely and romantic union, on equal terms, instead of a swift and foolish takeover, so that my partner already be on the same spiritual plain, rarely attained by women, when everything dignified and precious, everything characteristic of love—mutual reliance, ennoblement, support—becomes, for both parties, deserved and assured. Such emotional depth in women, one that rivals my own (or that which I ascribe myself), is the vestige of experience, struggle, happiness and failure, and is in no wise the result of a miracle: I have had girlfriends, spoken with people towards whom I knew unhesitatingly I might have been able to direct my longstanding readiness to love, so jealously guarded and unspent—but each time I would stop myself (this ploy will work at first) because of a lack of money, because of my habit of waiting for one last, irresistible ‘next adventure’, which would usually never come to pass. Yet Katerina Viktorovna somehow managed to inspire me with the notion that this unequivocally irresistible ‘next adventure’ was none other than Lyolya Heard: I succumbed to the infectious excitation of a lonely woman in revolt against fate and old age (though her excitement had more to do with herself than Lyolya), and insensibly credited her arguments in Lyolya’s favour—true, they were casually uttered and superficial, but they moved me by having some sort of correspondence with the very thing for which I had always been searching, and in which, without that

decisive push from someone else, I feared to believe. These superficial arguments, which I understood perhaps arbitrarily and which I modified so that they would please and convince me, consisted in Lyolya’s shrewd maturity, in her pains to seek out worthy individuals, in her indifference, mercilessness even, towards those who proved unworthy, in her struggle with poverty, in the recent calm, uncomplaining help—considerable, stalwart, at times self-sacrificing—she gave her husband, without any of the usual people around to console her, people who turned out to be petty and malicious (as, incidentally, did those whom she consoled); all this, imaginary or real, overfilled me with the hope that Lyolya was in some way destined for me, that she, too, would be sure to choose me and place me among those few who shared in her human (if one can put it thus) significance, and I relished the anticipation of this, envisaging myself—reserved, not apt to ‘poke my nose in’—suddenly exposed by Lyolya’s perspicacity, and so not for the first time in recent years, with the impatience of a beggar awaiting a legacy, I took to counting down the empty days that passed by in idle expectation. Occasionally the insipidness of this hope would become too much (I recall many a time in Berlin when I would suddenly cool towards Katerina Viktorovna’s words and tales, once so arresting, and hear her out half-distractedly, with a strained civility, and in her frustration she would dub me not ‘a romantic youth’ but ‘a diplomat’), yet each time my rapid disillusionment would turn out to be nothing more than the statutory post-stimulation crash and my old trust, my old feverish hope, would return to me. Once again, I have been preparing for my anxious first encounter with Lyolya, and in her alone I continue to see a resolution, an end to

this dull, drawn-out tract, something inimitably luscious, overwhelming and impossible to defer, something I once possessed and which has for ever remained a beguiling, exhilarating reflection, an irrepressible 'belief in love'.

9 December

I am often put out of sorts by the fairly commonplace notion that every expectation will be frustrated, that the joy proclaimed to us will be robbed—and not only by absence of mind, unconsciousness or sleep, but also by the trivial, routine necessity of work, into which we must plunge ourselves without trace. Thus, I know even now that in advance of Lyolya's arrival much preposterous scurrying about lies before me, much loathsome, mercenary unrest and odious effort required to hear out rejections with composure, to persuade afresh and with skill, and I know that this will eclipse both the blessed joy of anticipation and that other task, about which I wrote yesterday—that of tidying up the past, outwardly pointless, but worthwhile even so.

Now I am faced with that devastating, depersonalising period, when with every ounce of quivering tension you are drawn to one thing only, to success (as you sometimes are at cards or the races), because you need it, because it is your salvation and because it is foreseeable to the point of clairvoyance; that is why every moment you rebuke yourself for inaction, you want to prod someone, to mend something, and almost superstitiously you fear rest or repose. I fancy that I find initiating business inherently more difficult—like any beginning it is hard, but the difficulty also comes

about because of the insulting uncertainty of my situation: I emerge from somewhere in the ether and must practically truss myself to both ends of the affair, neither of which has any need of me—and often, fearing ridicule, not wanting to become a petitioner, I delay for weeks on end the decisive first conversation, in suicidal quiescence, like those petrified during a terrible dream or before some deathly waking danger. But even if that first jolt into action comes uneasily to me, a time like the present, when the principal obstacles have been eliminated and all that is left to do is wait for the money, with impatient avarice, fearing that other obstacles may arise yet—such a time is somehow even more torturous: no longer must you, as at the very start, break and harness your will, but then nor is there that conventional posture of dignity and correctness (it would be too obvious a fall), and every failure, no matter how small, every new restraint, is grimly borne—to the point of exhaustion.

For all this neurasthenic fever of mine, so flagrantly base and self-interested, I find sundry justifications. I ascribe it to an aptitude for commerce and rejoice—it means I shall not perish. I ascribe it also to my lengthy penury, to the odious trivia that remind me of it (they are many: the morning selection of a shirt and the far-from-comic despair that they have all turned to parchment with age, the obligatory dash past the concierge, with the haunting suspicion that she can see me through the wall and rightly despises me, the over-cooked muck served up in the restaurant and the dismal beer in the café, the dread of running into those lovely people who had placed their confidence in me, or of engaging seductive and easily known women in conversation)—regarding each piece