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Paul Bourget

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LETTERS FROM PAUL BOURGET TO VERNON LEE

Translated and edited by GORDON W. SMITH

AMONG the Vernon Lee correspondence files now in the Colby College Library are three letters which Violet Paget received from the French essayist and novelist Paul Bourget. These letters were written during the period immediately following the first meeting between the two authors, which took place in London in July, 1884, when John Sargent, the painter, brought Bourget to call on Miss Paget. During the previous year Bourget had published his *Essais de psychologie contemporaine*, which were to be followed in 1885 by the *Nouveaux Essais de psychologie contemporaine*. These two volumes, which constitute a single work, contain penetrating studies of the ten authors of the Second Empire whose works Bourget believed had most directly influenced contemporary writers.

The meeting between Miss Paget and Bourget took place on Sunday, July 20, 1884. Two days later, they met again at John Sargent's studio. The next day, Violet Paget described the French author in a letter to her mother thus: "He is a flabby blond, sickly looking young man, like certain types of fat scrofulous Italians, with a glass in one eye; very slow and rather shy in manner. I suppose he will put us all into a story." This meeting in London was followed by an exchange of letters, articles, and books. The letters written by Bourget reveal his deep interest in a psychological analysis of social and moral problems, prompt-

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ed by a desire to discover their causes, and by the hope of offering possible remedies.

None of the three letters, which are in French and have been translated for this article, is dated. The first one was undoubtedly written late in September, after Miss Paget had left London to return to her home in Florence, Italy.

CHALET CAHEN

GERARDMER (VOSGES)

Dear Miss Paget, Friday [? 26 September 1884]

I should like to answer your gracious letter by sending you my *Essais*. Unfortunately I am far from Paris, and I am not returning there until November. But will you tell Mr. Nincioni, thanking him for me, that I am sure there are copies at the shop of my publisher, M. Alphonse Lemerre, passage Choiseul, Paris. By writing to him from Florence, one can obtain the book at once.

Yes, Pre-Raphaelitism and Ruskin would demand an extended piece of work, and not three newspaper columns. And so the pages which you have read are, as I see them, only the sketch of a longer work, just something in which I have pinned down a few ideas. I shall call upon you for help when I undertake that work, asking you to set me straight on many points. More and more I have the conviction that insight into the art of a race is not easily gained by those who are not of that race. But one can always offer one's suggestions in default of definitive truths, and do you not think that the truly great criticism is that which *suggests*?

I have not yet received your *Euphorion*.¹ As soon as I have it,—Miss Mary² informs me that it will soon be here,

¹ The title-page of this work describes it as "Studies of the Antique and the Mediaeval in the Renaissance." It was published in two volumes by T. Fisher Unwin, London, 1884 (second and revised edition, 1885).

² Agnes Mary Frances Robinson. Miss Paget often stayed at the home of Miss Robinson's parents at 20 Earl's Terrace, Kensington, and the two young women traveled extensively together. Miss Robinson was later married twice, first to the orientalist James Darmesteter, and later to Emile Duclaux, an as-

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—I shall begin to read it, and I hope to be able to write something about it in the *Journal des débats*. I am familiar only with the preface and the very fine page on the *Strange Faustus*. It is our dear friend Henry James who showed it to me at Dover.³ As for the novel,⁴ I shall be very happy to read it, and to see the psychology of a Pre-Raphaelite soul painted from nature. I myself am publishing in the *Nouvelle Revue* (the issues of October 1 and 15, and November 1 [1884]) a little novel which I wrote this summer, and which is entitled *Cruelle Enigme*. I am much more satisfied with it than with *L'Irréparable*,⁵ and I should be much interested in having your opinion of it.

Good-bye, dear Miss Paget. You must have learned of the sad death of the sister-in-law of the friend with whom I am staying, and who was the sister of Madame Stilmann [?]. There is no good way to die, but it seems even sadder to die thus, so young, in a hotel.

Please be assured of my kindest regards.

PAUL BOURGET

To acknowledge receipt of Vernon Lee's *Euphonia* and *Miss Brown*, both published in 1884, Paul Bourget wrote the following letter:

7, rue Monsieur, F[aubourg] St. Germain Paris
Wednesday [? 21 January 1885]

I am very late in answering you, dear Miss Paget. The fault lies in a life overloaded with occupations and cares, —a veritable slave's life that has been mine these last three

sociate of Pasteur and director of the Pasteur Institute. She was the author of a number of books, among them monographs on Emily Brontë (1883) and Marguerite of Angoulême (1886), and some volumes of verse.

³ James's copy of the book is now in the Colby College Library.

⁴ *Miss Brown* (Edinburgh and London: W. Blackwood & Sons, 1884; 3 vols.) was dedicated "To Henry James." This work has been described as a violent attack upon "the fleshly school" of aesthetes, and James was startled to discover that in it Miss Paget had heartlessly caricatured many a person in London society. See "Henry James and his Tiger-Cat," *PMLA* (68: 672-695), September 1953.

⁵ This is a collection of short stories which Bourget had already published in 1884.

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months. In quick succession I found myself with so many tasks to complete—my novel to finish, a long essay on Leconte de Lisle for the *Nouvelle Revue*, an essay on the literary year in France for a Danish Review, a Christmas story, etc.—that I have left all my correspondence in abeyance.

I have not yet carried out my plan [to write about your book] for the *Débats*. I have now received *Euphorien* and your novel. It seems to me that I shall be more qualified to speak about the latter, because all the historical portion of the other book is rather uncertain ground for me. *Miss Brown*, on the contrary, of which I have read the beginning with great pleasure, can lead to a study of manners, which is more in my line. I hope, however, that *Euphorien* will be the object of an analysis by a more competent writer. I enclose with my letter a note from M. Emile Hennequin, to whom I lent your book. M. Hennequin is a young man who, in my opinion, has before him the finest of futures as a critic, and who has made a translation of the *Marginalia* of Edgar Poe.⁶ He is to write about the book in a *Revue* which he and his friends are founding, and which will be widely read by young people.

It is possible, dear Miss Paget, that I might go to Florence in March. Miss Robinson will doubtless be there with her sister. It would give me very great pleasure to resume the conversations, all too short, which we had at Earl's Terrace [in London]. But I do not know if my health will permit me to carry out this charming plan. I should also like to take along good old Sargent; his portraits are keeping him very busy. We lunched together yesterday, and as you can well imagine, spoke of our English friends. That is to say that your name was often mentioned. He

⁶ Bourget's hopes were not to be realized. Emile Hennequin's career as a critic was cut short by his untimely death in 1888. In addition to *Marginalia*, he had translated Poe's *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*. He was also the author of a volume of essays entitled *Critique scientifique* (1888), in which he attacked the critical theories of Taine, and advocated a method of sociological analysis by which an author is to be judged objectively, through the works themselves and their effect on the public.

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thinks very highly of the first volume of *Miss Brown*.

As for our French literature, it is, as they say, stagnating. Except for a volume by Taine, a continuation of its predecessors, there is no work worthy of mention. Edmond About, who has just died, quit letters for politics fifteen years ago.⁷ That is symbolic of our unhappy country, which tends more and more to become a vast *meeting* without any Ideal.

Accept, dear Miss Paget, the kindest regards of your most devoted

PAUL BOURGET

The third letter was probably written in 1886, the year of the publication of *Crime d'amour*, which Bourget talks of sending—or not sending—to Miss Paget. In this letter Bourget expresses his firm belief in the importance of the study of social and moral problems, his faith in the possibility of progress, and his conviction that he can best work toward this goal indirectly, through his writing. He also reveals his conservative tendencies, as well as his admiration for the analytical methods of Taine, whose six volumes of *Les Origines de la France contemporaine* appeared between 1876 and 1893.

Paris

Tuesday [1886]

Dear Miss Paget,

Miss Mary must have told you that I have been quite poorly, and it is for that reason that I have delayed so long in acknowledging receipt of your article in the Chronicle. I have found in it your ideas with which I am familiar, and which often are similar to mine, although they appear to be quite different. Essentially do we not believe the same thing, namely that one must love the human soul with all one's heart and serve it as one believes oneself best able to do so? The difference lies in the fact that you feel much more courageous than I am, and that direct ac-

⁷ Edmond About, French author and journalist, died on January 16, 1885.

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tion does not frighten you, whereas I believe that my own action is restricted to the study of the inner psychological life. Note well that I have on many occasions written in my *Essais* that pessimism is not a doctrine, but a state of soul. I believe that I have studied this moral malady quite sincerely, and, I hope, profitably. It is my conviction that if progress is possible, it is accomplished through truth, and that consequently it is urgent and necessary that each individual say what he sees, as he sees it. In medicine things take this course: a good monograph, a good diagnosis must precede any theory of therapeutics. If in the eighteenth century there had existed any men capable, like Taine, Ribot,⁸ and [John Stuart] Mill, of making a sound analysis of the human ego, one would not have enacted those optimistic pieces of folly which destroyed the old France. One would have seen in man a creature of habit who must at the same time be freed when he deserves to be, and restrained while he is still immature. I should like to have you see in my analyses not their immediate conclusion, but their place in the vast inquiry into modern sensibility which we are all making, including yourself, for is *Miss Brown* anything else?

Perhaps I express badly what I feel very clearly. Must I add that I sometimes find you a bit unjust toward my tendencies?⁹ You pay too much homage to talent, which counts for much less than you say, and perhaps not enough to the act of faith which is at the bottom of my doubt. Have I not quoted to you this phrase of Pascal: "Thou wouldst not be seeking me," said Christ to his faithful fol-

⁸ Théodule A. Ribot, the French psychologist to whom William James wrote the letters which President J. Seelye Bixler copied and edited for publication in the COLBY LIBRARY QUARTERLY (I: 153-161), March 1945.

⁹ This mildly expressed charge had been anticipated by Henry James. In commenting on *Miss Brown* he declared: "The imperfection of the book seems to me to reside (apart from, occasionally, a kind of intellectualized rowdiness of style) in a certain ferocity. . . . You take the aesthetic business too seriously. . . . You are really too savage with your painters and poets and dilettanti; *Life* is less criminal, less obnoxious, . . . than the unholy circle with which you have surrounded your heroine."—Henry James to Violet Paget, in a letter dated May 10, 1885, quoted in *PMLA* (68: 690-691), September 1953.

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lower, "if thou hadst not found me. . . ." To seek anxiously for the Ideal, is that not paying deep homage to it? Perhaps tormented doubt is, for God, the most pure of all prayers.

This is a lot of philosophy, dear Miss Paget, for a letter of thanks. I hope that you will be indulgent toward this philosophy as well as toward my delay. Miss Mary wrote me that you had seen Premoli:¹⁰ he is a charming and agreeable person, whom you must have found refreshing after Boborykine¹¹ and Feragu[?].¹²

Remember me to your parents, to your brother,¹³ and to Miss Mary, whose little volume¹⁴ is a masterpiece of noble and tender feeling. I beg of you to believe in the high esteem of which I have assured you, and I await your dialogues¹⁵ with impatience. Just imagine that I do not dare to send you my *Crime d'amour*. I noticed that Miss Robinson was so distressed by it that I fear your impression!

Your most respectful

PAUL BOURGET

If we are to judge by the absence of further letters in the Vernon Lee correspondence files now at Colby, this letter ended her correspondence with Paul Bourget. The publication of his novel *Le Disciple* in 1889 marked a change in his thinking. In it he attacked as dangerous the scientific pretensions of naturalism when applied to morals, and from then on his work was strongly conservative in tone, advocating a return to monarchism and to tradi-

10 Palmiro Premoli (1856-1917) was an Italian lexicographer.

11 Piotr Dmitrievitch Boborykine (1836-1921) was a Russian novelist and dramatist who lived in France as a newspaper correspondent from 1865 to 1870.

12 I have been unable to decipher this name. It may possibly be that of the French painter, Auguste Feragu (1816-1892).

13 Really her half-brother, Eugene Lee-Hamilton, to whom Henry James was indebted for the anecdote out of which he made *The Aspern Papers*.

14 Probably *An Italian Garden*, a volume of verse by A. Mary F. Robinson, published in 1886.

15 Vernon Lee's *Baldwin: Dialogues on Views and Aspirations*, also published in 1886.

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tional Catholic doctrines. Perhaps this ended Miss Paget's interest in him. We can conjecture some of her response to him from Henry James's letter to her: "Yes, Bourget is very interesting and very exasperating. I am sorry for him. . . ." (*PMLA*, September 1953, p. 693.)



THOMAS BAILEY ALDRICH WRITES TO AN ENGLISH ECCENTRIC

By RICHARD CARY

THOMAS BAILEY ALDRICH (1836-1907) was born and spent his boyhood in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. He loved the New England scene ardently and turned it to account with charm and whimsy in his most popular works. He recreated his maternal home as the Nutter House in *The Story of a Bad Boy*; situated "Marjorie Daw" at The Pines, near Rye, New Hampshire; and based *Ponkapog Papers* on his pleasurable years in Ponkapog, then a tiny village on the slope of Blue Hill, Massachusetts.

Best remembered as the distinguished editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* from 1881 to 1890, Aldrich was at an earlier time (1866-1874) editor of *Every Saturday*, an eclectic weekly with the formidable subtitle *A Journal of Choice Reading Selected from Foreign Current Literature*. Absence of an international copyright law made possible the existence of *Every Saturday*, which subsisted almost entirely upon serialized novels, short stories, articles, and poems culled from French, German, and British periodicals. With the exception of occasional poems by Paul Hamilton Hayne and William Dean Howells, several Pike County Ballads by John Hay, and one of Bret Harte's "condensed novels," original *belles lettres* were strangers to the columns of *Every Saturday*. Aldrich relied principally upon materi-