

Colby



Colby Quarterly

Volume 10
Issue 7 *September*

Article 7

September 1974

A Slight Case of Plagiarism, Part II: Rainfall on the Perimeter

Richard Cary

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

Recommended Citation

Colby Library Quarterly, series 10, no.7, September 1974, p.442-461

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

442 Colby Library Quarterly

A SLIGHT CASE OF PLAGIARY, PART II:
RAINFALL ON THE PERIMETER

By RICHARD CARY

Bernard Berenson's charge of plagiarism imprudently thrust at Violet Paget and Clementina Anstruther-Thomson in the wake of their collaborative essay on the dynamism of aesthetics — "Beauty and Ugliness," *Contemporary Review*, LXXII (October, November 1897) — loosed a carboic overflow of rebuttal from which Berenson hastily detached himself, leaving the brunt of reprisal to his future wife Mary Costelloe.¹ All four were appendages of the precious international set of fine-arts appreciators whose ambit embraced London, Florence, Paris, Rome. A fluid, fluent group, they were for the most part tendentious dilettantes, with the exception of Berenson, a consummate scholar, at this time emerging as *arbiter elegantiarum* of Renaissance art to the whole Western world. This baroque conjunction of place, personalities, and position left him susceptible to both the peacockery of the amateurs and the hauteur of the sole professional.

For at least four years before this altercation Berenson had meandered through numerous galleries with Anstruther-Thomson, letting fall here an opinion, there an hypothesis, upon which she commented (from his view) with appalling miscomprehension. His judgment, expelled in a letter to Mary: "Thomson is stupid." Occasionally in attendance, but regularly informed of Berenson's dispersions² was Clementina's housemate Violet, already a proven novelist, critic, and polemicist under the pen name Vernon Lee. Berenson made sardonic fun of her clothes, her predilections, her breakneck garrulity, though he did allow that "She somehow makes you feel that she is intelligent." And indeed this higher respect for Paget looms in

1 See Richard Cary, "A Slight Case of Plagiarism, Part I: Berenson, Paget, and Anstruther-Thomson," *Colby Library Quarterly*, X (March 1974), 303-324.

2 "Vernon Lee's friend, Kit Anstruther-Thomson, often sat at the feet of Berenson, drinking in his new theories of tactile values in paintings and drawings of the Italian Renaissance. The talk she carried back to the Villa Palmerino [Vernon's home]. The story goes that the two once rushed down to one of the Florentine Galleries to pose in front of a Renaissance picture in the same attitudes as the figures in the picture, hoping in this way to achieve a new interpretation of 'tactile values.'" (Sylvia Sprigge, *Berenson: A Biography* [Boston, 1960], 170.)

Colby Library Quarterly 443

his provocative opening shot (August 24, 1897) and in all the subsequent letters written at his impulsion by Mrs. Costelloe. Anstruther-Thomson is pre-eminently the butt of his reproaches.

After waiting several days to conquer her "disgust & indignation," Paget composed a crackling retort in which she upbraided Berenson for "superficial reading," "confused memory," and "rash & violent expression."³ For all her "aversion to such correspondence as your letter and my answer," Paget betrayed a curious ambivalence. She made great point of the facts that she had said nothing to Anstruther-Thomson of his aspersions and that she would "mention this matter to none of our common friends." "So the matter rests between you & me," she deponed, yet in the next breath lay open the prospect of full exposure: "Only should you feel inclined to repeat any of these accusations *viva voce* to our common friends, I shall trust to the consciousness & conscience on wh. you pride yourself, to accompany such accusations by a sight (to others) of this present letter, and to myself by a specified account of at least some of the alleged plagiarisms." Consistent in her inconsistency, she closed off her letter with: "Whatever the attitude you assume, I trust we may neither of us bore or amuse our acquaintances with any unusual behaviour."

This seeming hesitation to involve others of their circle in a strictly personal brawl was a posture Paget swiftly relinquished following Mary Costelloe's statement that Berenson had disclosed his complaints to Countess Pasolini and Carlo Placci in St. Moritz, "and no doubt you will hear of it through them." That was all Paget, never a reluctant jousting partner, needed to hear. She immediately seized upon Mary's acceptance of the role of Berenson's representative to propose an "excellent system of arbitration," i.e., "to place the matter in the hand of two competent persons, known equally to both parties, & chosen one apiece." This, expressly, to insure "the satisfaction of *every impartial looker on*" (italics mine). Paget sensed that she had Berenson in a corner, and what she wished to unleash was nothing less than a carnival of abashment and apology. It would

³ Berenson's letter and Paget's reply of September 2 are reproduced in full in A.K. McComb, editor, *The Selected Letters of Bernard Berenson* (Boston, 1964), 55-60.

444 Colby Library Quarterly

provide a measure of titillation for the bored élite and it would still any conceivable flickers of guilt that might assail her. Throughout the incident, as Berenson sulked intransigently in his tent, Paget tried unsuccessfully to smoke him out with repeated exhortations that he submit to her "scheme of arbitration."

In other respects, however, Paget was as indisputably clever as Berenson at the ramification ploy. She enlisted support and sympathy from as many of their mutual friends as she could reach. In time the intrigue radiated far outward from the original boundary of "you & me" to rattle the transient passions of a goodly swath of their itinerant galaxy.⁴ Countess Pasolini,⁵ she informed Costelloe, had sent her a long letter (unfortunately not preserved in the Colby College collection), and they had "had a long conversation about 'Beauty & Ugliness' including reference to Mr Berenson & his theory of tactile sensations." She absolved Pasolini of tattling on Berenson, adding piously, "perhaps because she shares my principle neither to repeat strictures heard in conversation, nor (if possible) to have them repeated to one." In the same letter she admitted discussing Berenson's "character & capacities" with three other (unnamed) persons, though forbearing any mention of his "attack." In the same vein of saintliness she vowed her remarks to them were "accompanied by expressions of admiration for his talents & learning." The exodus was now well afoot.

When Costelloe naively referred to her as "Anstruther-Thomson's representative" Paget alertly sidestepped this containment of the controversy. Unless Berenson would furnish "in writing for Miss A.T. & me & for each of the persons to whom he has

⁴ A sampling of the extent of these tendrils can be taken from Mrs. Costelloe's October 31 letter to Paget. She says in one place: "and it was some such report coming to him from the outside that made him stop going to see things with Miss Anstruther-Thomson"; and further on: "if you will recall what you said of him to Mrs. Gardner in Venice (which was repeated to him the next day, & which tallies so completely with what has been reported to him from other sources . . .)." Clementina, willy or nilly, contributed to the grapevine. She "told a certain number of my views" to a friend who told Placci who presumably told Berenson, so Clementina told her brother but "*no one else*"! The italics and exclamation point are mine. ⁵ Paget had a standing invitation to the homes of Eva Maria Pasolini, wife of a Roman aristocrat, which she often accepted. Paget's *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895) is dedicated "To My Dear Friends Maria and Pier Desiderio Pasolini," and "Donna Maria" is one of the discussants in two chapters of *Althea* (1894). Paget told her mother that Maria was "far the most charming Italian I know, indeed one of the most charming creatures imaginable."

Colby Library Quarterly 445

accused us, an unambiguous statement that he recants completely and unreservedly all the accusations & suspicions he has entertained against us," she would simply be forced to introduce an umpire for her side. The man she had in fact already designated was Alfred William Benn,⁶ British classicist, philosopher, and historian, long a neighbor and correspondent (as early as 1881), for whom Paget in gratitude had inscribed a manuscript volume of her brother's poems in March 1893: "To Alfred Benn, one of the kindest (& most faithfully kind) friends of the author of these verses & of their copyist." He would appear to have been the ideal advocate of her purpose, for in 1884 it was "the talk of Benn" that spurred her to "show fight" against Henry James's gentlemanly dissent over the merits of her novel *Miss Brown*. On November 6, 1897 Benn wrote Paget in part:

Yesterday evening I received yours of the 5th with the accompanying correspondence. Owing to various interruptions we [Mrs. Benn] have as yet only read documents I. & II. I think however that I understand enough of the question to accept the proposal which you do me the great honour of making to me — that I should act as arbiter on your side, in case arbitration should be resorted to at all. I quite agree with you that it is in the circumstance the best method that could be chosen of settling the dispute. For myself if I have no other qualifications for the office, at least I have those of disinterestedness & goodwill to both sides.

Just after the arrival of your letter Mr Berenson called on me, & we had a long talk; but no reference was made on either side to this controversy. Next week I shall be seeing him & Mrs Costelloe. If on that occasion they introduce the subject it will I think be necessary for me to explain my position in order to prevent the discussion from going further.⁷

Disregarding Berenson's pained concession — through Costelloe of course — that he could not substantiate his "grounds of resentment . . . before a third person" since they were not responsive to "legal proof," Paget plunged on undeterred. From an exchange of some dozen multipage letters between herself, Anstruther-Thomson, and Costelloe it became obvious to Paget

6 Benn (1843-1916) published several sound volumes on Greek philosophy, English rationalism, and evaluations of modern British society. He was devoted to Paget's half-brother Eugene Lee-Hamilton, for whom he indited an acrostic sonnet, more distinguished for ingenuity than poetry.

7 Letters quoted in this article are now in Colby College Library, unless otherwise specified.

446 Colby Library Quarterly

by November 15 that she could not possibly prevail over Berenson's opacity. Mary now confessed that she was impotent in the case. Berenson, "after drawing me into it," had decided "to take other advice than mine." Notwithstanding the steel wall he had erected around himself, Paget persevered. She would grind out an absolute apology, or she would compel him to arbitrate, or she would broadcast his pusillanimity. She wrote again to Benn.

We are now sending you & Mrs. Benn the sequel of our correspondence with Mrs Costelloe, bringing it up to today, & closing her share in it.

You will see that Mr Berenson has sent apologies through Mrs Costelloe. But he has, tacitly, refused to examine the main body of our evidence, he has made no allusion to the arbitration; he has added *but*s & *nevertheless* to his earlier apology to me, & has actually told Miss A.T. that if she isn't satisfied with his apology to her he will withdraw it & do nothing at all. This kind of apology seems to us utterly unsatisfactory, as it is not *unambiguous* or without *reservations* as I had asked to have it. We are therefore very anxious that, in order to clear the matter up thoroughly & to have no possible vestige of the accusation, there should be an arbitration on the subject, & an examination of the papers & an account of my part of which I sent you. You will see from Mrs Costelloe's last letter, that she also, is in favour of such a course. Of course these apologies of Mr Berenson's, such as they are, entirely release you from your kind promise to act as Miss A.T. or my arbitrator. But we hope very much that, seeing how unsatisfactory these apologies really are, & how far the matter is from a businesslike solution, you will renew the favour you have done us by resuming the position of arbitrator once more.

If you are willing to do this, we shall write to Mr Berenson himself (Mrs. Costelloe having withdrawn from the matter) and tell him that, unless within a stated term of days he furnish us in his own hand, a more satisfactory confirmation of his apologies thro' Mrs Costelloe, we shall expect him to send an arbitrator, chosen by himself, to confer with you on the subject & look into the evidence.

Moreover, I must release you & Mrs Benn from your promise not to mention this matter; as, having found that other people were acquainted with the charge (besides Csa Pasolini & Mr Placci). I have been obliged to tell the story to my brother & others, and there seems no further reason for screening Mr Berenson's proceedings.

Her mulishness did not budge Berenson one tittle. After another (brief) letter to Costelloe and three tepid responses, Paget's direct offensive collapsed. This is not to say that the rainfall on the perimeter ceased. It recurred with varying in-

Colby Library Quarterly 447

tensity, preceding and following Berenson's defamation, for more than twenty years.

Along the outer reaches of the affair walked Thomas Sergeant Perry (1845-1928), American linguist, literary critic, classicist, and college professor, who lived off and on in England and the Continent. He and his wife Lilla were "old friends and protectors" of Berenson in his Harvard days, and the connection thrived until Perry died. In 1884 Henry James, a comrade since boyhood, had inducted Perry into the commotion over Paget's *Miss Brown*, saying in September, "She has a monstrous cerebation," and pleading in December, "Don't betray this very private opinion of mine." Thus Perry was not unaware of her appetite for a good tussle. Though he seems to have shunned writing to either of the principals, he did unroll his thoughts on the subject in a marathon letter during the first week of April 1897 to a crony in Massachusetts, the Reverend Hercules Warren Fay.

[April 3] I read last even'g V. Lee's later Renaissance studies (*Ren Studies & Fancies*) — I forget the exact title — & with considerable pleasure. Talk as she may, she seems to me to get nearer what I take to be the truth of things than do a good many people who write on similar or the same subjects. In the preface she acknowledges her indebtedness to B.B. & to his friend Mrs Mary Logan (the Costello), for the latest news abt. who painted different pictures, but I believe that since then — in two short years — they have fallen sadly apart & that she no longer adores B.B. but rather quite the contrary. Living here one understands the Guelfs & Ghibellines in their relations to each other. . . . I am not oblivious to its faults . . . & its sloppy, over profuse style is often wearisome, but I really do think the woman has great insight. She is a dreadful sponge & soaks up other people's ideas & gives them out as her own. Symonds condemned her severely for this, & I have heard of the well-founded complaints of others.

[April 4] B.B. and I talked. I asked him abt. V. Lee, & he says that except in her first essay — wh. is easily the best — she is foolishly wrong. After all, the first essay, if the facts are accurately cited, is most interesting, as above. He says she doesn't know Ital. art, literature or life & that she is merely a gifted flinger of words & a dishonest one. She cribbed his Lotto bk. to make two articles with its theories etc, & then when the bk. came out, denounced it as too scientific, unsympathetic, etc. There is no love lost between them.

Considering his durable attachment to Berenson, Perry here adopted a notably fair-minded attitude. This can scarcely be

448 Colby Library Quarterly

claimed for Maud Cruttwell, who added her mite at the opposite edge of time. Author of monographs on Mantegna, Pollaiuolo, Donatello, Verocchio *et alii*, of one novel, and a painter of sorts, Cruttwell met Paget in 1893. Violet first adjudged her a "clever, rather decadent aesthete," and within a month as "really very nice; despite appearance." Marking her as a prospective secretary to brother Lee-Hamilton, Paget introduced Maud into her home. She never served in that capacity, but the two women became friends for life. Cruttwell's avidity for the art of that region (she published *A Guide to the Paintings in the Florentine Galleries* in 1908) brought her into contact with Berenson, who from the start derived near-sadistic pleasure from her obtuseness, affectations, and discomfitures.⁸ They had long rows and generally disliked each other. Years after the dust had settled (December 1924) she once more dragged out for Paget the skeleton of his finicking *manière de vivre*.

What a pity one cant live only with people who bring light & beauty into one's life. That hideous Berenson element, pretentious, & false even to the art they pretend to care for, spoil my memories of Florence & I regret all the time I wasted over Morellian rubbish & poring over folds of drapery & who first discovered this & thieved the idea from that, which has made me detest all those studies.

The Paget fellowship most severely ruptured by Berenson's charges — second only to Anstruther-Thomson's to be sure — was that with Carlo Placci (1861-1941), who signed himself her "*sincerissimo* friend." To him Paget dedicated her two-volume *Juvenilia* (1887), rounded off by a twenty-page Introduction and an eleven-page Epilogue addressing him in epistolary style. Placci was a spangle of the Italian cosmopolitan set. He traveled extensively, mingling with the highest social levels during the in-seasons at the accepted capitals. A kind of catalyst between the aristocracy (including royalty) and the intelligentsia (he knew Rilke, Duse, Pareto, von Bülow, Bourget, Browning), he charmed both with his facile, voluble brightness. In religion, philosophy, politics, art, and gossip, he declaimed whatever was "up-to-datest." He possessed in large portion the "innocent vanity of a rich and idle man,"

⁸ See his letters to Mary Costelloe in McComb, *Letters*, 31ff.

Colby Library Quarterly 449

Berenson says in *Rumor and Reflection*, one of his greatest joys being to drop the names of his influential friends to other influential friends. In conversation he was a notorious banterer who could on the instant turn vehement. In the credit column, Placci was by all accounts a stimulating, sought-after companion, an epicure of music, a capable pianist, author of many essays (some of them early Anglophiliac reviews of Tennyson, Browning, Rossetti, and Morris), of a novel *Un Furto*, in which he spoke "*con ammirazione delle belle frasi di Vernon Lee*," of a collection of short stories and one of travel sketches.

Placci met Paget at the onset of the 1880s. They corresponded sporadically and vivaciously. He wrote creditable notices on *Euphorion* and *Miss Brown* in 1884, and in 1932 rhapsodized upon "*la giovinezza della sua eloquenza*" in *Music and Its Lovers*. Conversely, "Signor Charley" was made to flinch under the lash of her exacting critiques on his writings. In 1893 he protested more or less good-naturedly: "you consider me an amiable amateur . . . am I not considered intellectually, as a sort of servant who has become over-familiar with the Madame?" It was a footing Paget seldom discouraged in her acquaintances.

Placci and Berenson met for the first time in Paget's home, circa 1891. Discounting a typical eruption by the temperamental Latin, they settled into cozier rapport with each other than either with Paget. The two men took numerous trips together, pursued likings and loathings, discoursed endlessly. Berenson admired Placci as an instinctual, sensitive, keen-minded man but he could not abide his propensity to quarrel. Their friendship foundered on Placci's corrosive chauvinism. During World War I Berenson tried to palliate Placci's headstrong antagonism, and evidently succeeded. "I understand fr. Mary that you have declared war ag. me for speaking ag. Italy. . . . As for you, my dear Carlo, we have been friends for half a lifetime, and quarrelled often, but there is in my heart . . . a profound affection for you" (McComb, pp. 84, 85). The advent of Mussolini and the outbreak of World War II, however, caused a breach that separated them for good. Berenson published a surprisingly tart profile of his old cohort in *Horizon* (June 1946), which was reprinted in *Rumor*

450 Colby Library Quarterly

and *Reflection* (New York, 1952).

So it was that prior to the date of Berenson's allegations against Paget and Anstruther-Thomson, Placci was privy to the gradual ripening of the disputed theories in both camps. A master at the ancient art of Florentine footwork, Placci skipped nimbly out of range, declining to commit himself on either's behalf. During the interval of hottest postal exchange among the nuclear trio (Paget, Anstruther-Thomson, Costelloe), the concentric trio of Paget, Berenson, and Placci seems discreetly to have depended upon oral communication; there are no known letters that may have passed from one to the other between August and December 1897. Available letters of later vintage leave no doubt that a degree of estrangement ensued between Placci and the contending parties.

Almost a decade after the brabble over plagiarism, Paget made what may be interpreted as an overt advance toward reconciliation with Placci. It is also probable that she intended merely to reassert her superiority over Placci in his own speciality. Whatever her motive, he responded affably on January 28, 1906 when Elena French Cini gave him Paget's "kind letter" and her "interesting article,"⁹ which he extolled by strategy of self-dispraise. Then he attempted to broaden her approach. "Though you wish that my answer should be limited to criticizing your paper, you must allow me to say one only word: and this is how much the intonation of your letter has touched me, recollecting days that I will never forget, when I used to receive from your inspiring conversations, so many suggestions . . . of which I am still deeply grateful." It does not seem to have softened Paget.

Not until the death of Paget's half-brother Eugene Lee-Hamilton in September 1907 does the correspondence renew. On the 21st Placci informed her that he had just read "the sad news," and reminisced at length about the fertile talks he had had at Eugene's bedside in the early years. On November 10 Placci published in *Il Marzocco* a gracious eulogy on "*L'ultimo dei poeti anglo-italiani*." There is no telling whether these gestures toward restoring the old alliance affected Placci's disposition in respect to Berenson. Near the end of November Berenson received a disconcerting letter which impelled him to

9 "Riddle of Music," *Quarterly Review*, CCIV (January 1906), 207-227.

Colby Library Quarterly 451

an extraordinarily fervent answer. Pleading ignorance of any conscious offense, he declared: "You have in the course of the last 13 or 14 years meant more to me than any person in the world except my wife. I have loved you, and still love you, and *quand même* shall love you. . . . If you go back on me I shall receive a loss that nothing can repair. . . . I protest that I am not worse but better, not less but more affectionate. . . . I beg of you not to bring to an end, or let die down a friendship so rare as ours" (McComb, pp. 72, 73).

Stirred by Placci's tribute to Eugene, Paget wrote him upon her return from Greece: "It is *very* nice, and would have given the poor fellow much pleasure. This is another of the great debts I owe to your kindness and friendship. . . . I wish I could bring home to you what you have, in those distant years, added directly and indirectly to my life."¹⁰ She sent him a reprint of her first book, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*, "which may remind you of the days of dear Nencioni."¹¹ Placci instantly grasped at the implication. On the "Last day of 1907" (miswritten "1908") he dispatched this effusively lyrical rejoinder.

You cannot think how very deeply I have been touched — more than I can write, or even express — by your beautiful gift, your delicate attention, your letter so full of heart and kindness. I am embarrassed. I do not know what to say or to do. It is *my* gratitude for all you have been in the past to me which is far greater than anything I can have done to you. It is rather sad to think that through a misunderstanding so much of the past, that we both equally remember with pleasure, should be a dead thing, tho' you help so kindly to make it alive again for me. An alive past: yet a non-existent present, or rather a sleeping present. Wouldn't it be difficult or dangerous to awake it? In all sincerity, I cannot say. When I receive from you such tokens as these, which I feel so strongly, it seems to me horrid & hard & stony not to run to you & thank you with all my heart. And still, on the

10 This letter, dated December 29, 1907, is one of nine written by Paget to Placci, presented by Sybille Pantazzi with her essay "Carlo Placci and Vernon Lee," *English Miscellany*, XII (1961), [97]-122.

11 Enrico Nencioni (1837-1896), Italian poet and literary critic, published books on Manzoni and Tasso; on the baroque, the modern, the mystic, and the scientific tempers in literature; wrote a preface to Carlyle's *On Heroes*; introduced Browning and other English authors to Italy. He reviewed five of Paget's books by 1887; she dedicated the 1907 edition of *Studies* "Alla Cara Memoria di Enrico Nencioni Dedicato, Dopo Venticinque Anni Questa Nuova Edizione Del Libro Che Fu Principio Della Nostra Amicizia. Autunno, 1881. Autunno, 1907." He was the model for "the professor" in her book of dialogues, *Althea*. Placci dedicated his volume of short stories, *Mondo Mondano*, to Nencioni, and contributed a tender memoir of their friendship to the commemorative issue of *Il Marzocco*, May 1900.

452 Colby Library Quarterly

other hand, I feel afraid, hesitating: for what would be the outcome? . . . Do we still speak the same language? After so long a time, have we not drifted far from each other in respect of thought & habits & appreciations? . . .

In return courtesy he sent her a copy of his "very external, very modern, very unimportant" volume of travel essays, *In Automobile*.

His overtures, though cunningly tentative, gave Paget precisely the opportunity she wanted to snatch back her carrot, apply the stick, then majestically proffer another carrot. These extracts from the thirteen-page draft of her "New Year 1908" letter contain the essence of her long-savored revenge. She went at him with a will.

I have let a few days pass before answering your letter, because I wanted to make sure of my feelings and ideas.

On first reading your letter my impulse was to answer at once "Come"; . . . but on rereading your letter I understood all that your hesitation implies; and thinking it over has added a graver hesitation on my own side.

It is not because of the doubt, which you express, of our *no longer speaking the same language* . . . [Everybody goes through vital changes, constantly, she goes on as though a mentor to a child.]

What makes me hesitate is none of all this. It is the fear of misleading you. I appear to have done so already, for in writing to thank you for your article on Eugene I thought only of my pleasure in old memories . . . [She feels a "scruple" for arousing desires for renewal of old friendship.] But I must not allow you to be misled into supposing that because I remember gratefully and *like to remember* the years of our friendship, I have in the least forgotten the inexplicable or at least unexplained manner in which you not only broke it off on a mere childish excuse, but held doggedly aloof even after the death of Nencioni which ought to have reunited us; and later during an absurd but odious attack which you, with whom I had for years discussed the very ideas I was accused of stealing, had it in your power to silence with one word.

All this has remained most woefully unexplained. Perhaps it is not inexplicable; perhaps so far from perceiving yourself to have been fickle and disloyal, you had been led on the contrary to believe that it was I who had in some manner grown unworthy of your friendship. . . . Be that as it may I feel bound to tell you that this unexplained and horribly painful piece of our common past has remained in my memory alongside the delightful days of affection and trustfulness.

Could all this horrid recollection be, as I keep on hoping, explained away by you, or failing an explanation, buried for good beneath the sincere past and a sincere present? I for my part should be willing and happy to try my best. . . .

Colby Library Quarterly 453

I have put the truth pretty crudely before you, my dear Carlo. In the knowledge thereof it is for you to decide whether to pick up the threads now. . . There need be no spoken or written explanations; perhaps better none. If within the next fortnight you telephone to propose coming to lunch or tea I shall understand that in one way or another that bad past is to be effaced. (Pantazzi, pp. 119-120, quotes briefly from the letter itself, which Paget dated January 4, 1908.)

Placci was amenable to her final flourish but with the true caution of his Machiavellian heritage. Wrapping around himself the protective layers of two mutually respected friends, Elena French Cini and Angelica Rasponi, he held out this proposition for a reunion.

Your letter gave me much pleasure, especially for its sincerity. I know *explanations* are dangerous, but less so perhaps *a voce* than written. Mrs French thinks I might come to you & tell you frankly that certain expressions you use about me are not quite justified. What do you think? You must let me know by telephone what afternoon you can see me, if you cared to do so; or write to me exactly what you prefer — meeting *without* explanation on my part (which is either by Angelica's theory) or *with* an explanation, very short & very calm (which is Mrs French's opinion). I am ready for either. (January 8, 1908)

It is not recorded whether or how they resolved the niceties of protocol, or if they did get together at all on this occasion. It can be stated with certainty, however, that these maneuvers drew down a sprinkle of rancor along another segment of the perimeter. On December 28, 1907 Paget had delivered a softly worded but inflexible refusal to collaborate with Anstruther-Thomson on a book about Florentine art, citing the "short stays as you have been giving me of late years," encroaching age and infirmities, development of individualized "lines and modes of work," and (the rebuff supreme from a once inseparable soul-mate) "*you must learn to work alone, or at least without me.*" To compound her agony of ostracism Clementina learned about the détente between Paget and Placci. On January 31, from her retreat with friends in London, she wrote to "dearest little Vernon" with an almost audible sniff:

I am very glad you have Mr. Placci sufficiently a friend again to be an interest to you, & I hope it will go on quite safely & smoothly. Of course one knows the ice must be thin, without that remarkable phrase of his about 'the present being asleep & dangerous to wakers' to make

454 Colby Library Quarterly

it plain, but one may have a very pleasant time skating even on thin ice if it bears sufficiently for one to remain on the top. I think you are right not to have explanations about his attitude in the affaire of Mr & Mrs Berenson because I can not conceive any explanation being possible except his being out of his mind, which one wd hardly expect him to endorse, but I have often regretted that you shd lose the interest of his keen appreciation & criticism about things, qualities which are so contagious & valuable are not they.

With a fine show of nonchalance, she continued for some six additional pages prattling about a possible production by Granville Barker of Paget's play *Ariadne in Mantua*, about "our friend Sir George M!", bad modern art, and the Labour Party, for all the world as though her opening paragraph was incidental.

And there matters lay, it appears from the correspondence, for five untormented years. Then (May 1913), in brash *volte-face*, Paget impinged upon Anstruther-Thomson for assistance in yet another decision regarding Placci. It was now Clementina's inning to be masterful.

Since you have written yr question I answer in a note. Please don't send off yr letter, it is too complicated whereas the matter itself is very simple.

Years ago Mr. Placci allowed Mr Berenson's poisonous accusations to be made against me without contradicting them, when he was the one person who knew they were not true — as Laura Gropallo had (very discreetly) told him years before of my researches in aesthetics — but he not only took no steps to contradict these accusations, but, if I am not mistaken, he repeated them himself. Well, when a decent person does this amount of mischief they at least express regret, they at least make an apology when they wake up to the fact that they were wrong. But this Mr Placci has never done so I have never had any wish to see him or speak to him.

I admit that I was wrong in expecting the apology of a gentleman from a man like Berenson but I don't think that Mr Placci could possibly write to claim a like exemption. So you see the whole matter is very simple & Mr Placci knows it. I know that he knows it because last year he told Mrs. Watts that I wouldn't speak to him because he had considered me a plagiarist, or words to that effect & she spoke of it because she wanted me to patch the matter up. But verily the patching would have to come from the other side. This is the whole matter & here it stands.

In a postscript she circumspectly mollified her tone: "Of course I am genuinely glad that *you* made it up with Mr Placci & I

Colby Library Quarterly 455

should be perfectly willing to see you make it up with the Berensons if you wish to do so at any time." While her contempt and hatred, respectively, for Placci and Berenson were overriding, she steadfastly prized Violet as a nonpareil.

Pretending to reluctance, Paget kept the stone rolling with several hefty swipes by way of momentum. The ignominy of the original slur, sixteen years ago, still rankled. She had saliently failed in her campaign to make Berenson grovel for his error of judgment; she could at least try to retrieve partial gratification out of Placci. She had clung to Mary Costelloe as a secondary scapegoat in the earlier wrangle; now she clung to Placci. On May 25 she reviewed the historic lines of contention and brought them to neat convergence for him with a gratuitous prod.

Although (as I vainly endeavoured to suggest to you yesterday) I am scarcely the right person to carry such a message, I have sent your question to Miss Anstruther-Thomson. Miss A T's attitude (which from something you said to Mrs Watts) she thought you already knew, by no means, as you supposed a taking up of my quarrels, although it refers to a matter in which both she & I were concerned by Berenson's foolish plagiarism charge.

Miss A.T. thinks that as you were the one person in Florence to whom we had talked about the ideas afterwards published in "Beauty & Ugliness" you might have been expected to come forward & state that they had existed independent of Berenson; instead of which she believes that you went out of your way to say that she was a plagiarist. Such is her view of the matter. However out of friendship to me she is willing to be in future perfectly civil to you when she meets you; but if it is a question of returning to her former good opinion of you it wd be necessary that you write her either an explanation or an apology.

As regards myself I would remind you that when, to my great pleasure you asked to see me again after my Brother's death, I thought it fair to warn you that your silence in that plagiarism business continued to stick in my throat as a very large & not at all pretty point of interrogation *unless* (as I wrote to you) unless you were not satisfied in your mind that the fact of our having told you our discoveries before Berenson's book appeared entirely removed all possible charge of plagiarisms. And you will remember that you & I then (in 1908) agreed we would not discuss your excuse (for you said *your case was not as bad as I thought*) until such discussion should arise naturally.

If you really *have* or *have had* at the time of the incident some such honest reason for not coming forward on our behalf against Berenson why then I think now would be the moment to state it. It is certainly what I should do in your place.

456 Colby Library Quarterly

Placci answered by return mail, and staunchly enough — even though he once more called up his two female buffers of yore.

I received this morning your kind, clear and frank letter which I hasten to answer, begging you to show this answer to Miss Anstruther-Thomson. I will take a point after the other. I cannot remember what I said to Mrs. Watts: but hope it was nothing disagreeable. You and Miss A.T. would be *quite right* to find it inexplicable and mean on my part had I not stated the truth about the Berenson affair. But please let me remind you how things went. Whilst you two were confiding to me your interesting aesthetic theories, the Berensons were telling me theirs — *and both were quite different*. But you must remember that at a given moment, whilst you wished to go on talking with me about these aesthetic principles, Miss A.T. begged you not to write me: so that I ignored all the intermediary steps which brought you both to conclusions very similar to those of the Berensons, and which I read only for the first time in the famous article. In this article that part of your thoughts, which I knew about, appeared only in a secondary form — and was not so prominent. How could I assert or deny anything, not having heard from you two any further investigations. I remember that after that time, our disagreement came (apart from the B. incident and long before): and that your article appeared several months after. In all sincerity I could not stick up for your theories, *which had not been told to me*. This is the real truth.

With more details, this is what I would have told you, had we had an explanation. Do you also remember that we decided to consult Sig. Elena & C^{sa} Angelica if we were not to have an explanation, when we made it up? The former, more British, was *pro*; the latter, more Italian, was *contra*. Tho' I personally would have had no objection to an explanation, I followed the latter's counsel. So I offer you at last, only now, the real and only explanation of my silence. You communicated to me only part of your discoveries, at the early stages: and nothing after. I could not, hence, honestly say that the two theories — yours & the Berensons' — coincided independently. (May 27, 1913)

On the same day, possibly to cover his flank, but indubitably to pacify, Placci wrote also to Anstruther-Thomson.

Will you kindly read my answer to Miss Paget's letter, as it contains a sincere explanation regarding the cause of the coldness which has arisen between us? I beg you to accept it in a friendly spirit. I also wish to add that I am very sorry if any word of mine, rightly or wrongly refuted, perhaps spoken in a moment of anger, should have hurt you. I would be very happy if a disagreeable incident of long ago, which has been forgotten by Miss Paget's kindness, might be equally blown off from your mind.

Colby Library Quarterly 457

Anstruther-Thomson did not deign to reply but Paget hustled on with customary incisiveness of phrase, demure self-acquittal, and a newfound lovingkindness.

Many thanks for your letter. It is what I wished: indeed it tallies quite oddly with what I had just put before Miss A.T. as your probable defence.

I have myself long since felt persuaded that just because Berenson was (*ouvrez moi le mot*) an illtempered and egotistic *ass* to mistake us for plagiarists, we, on the other hand, were not very intelligent in mistaking him for a slanderer and a villain. The whole incident was merely a comedy in which the usual (indeed perhaps more than usual!) human incapacity for understanding other people's ideas and the naive human demand that other people should *exactly* understand *one's* own, played the chief and rot at all amusing parts. . .

Before quitting the subject let me however say that I believe that my ill will, even when at its worst, never led me to think or speak ill of Berenson either as a man or a savant; indeed I once or twice took up the cudgels on his behalf against friends of ours who thought because I disliked him I should like to hear him abused . . . and as to the Berensons I have never heard that they spoke of me in a different spirit. So though there was foolishness *de part et d'autre* . . . I don't think any of us have made beasts of ourselves.

And now no more about this foolish matter, which has wasted opportunities of mutual interest and even perhaps of intellectual cooperation. . . . (Pantazzi, p. 120; reprinted McComb, p. 61)

Paget's reference to "what I had just put before Miss A.T. as your probable defence" is the most astounding prodigy in this entire bizarre affair: a composition of more than thirty pages in Paget's manuscript entitled "V.P.'s imaginary letter of C. Placci," dated "May 26." On the verso of page 31: "Letter written by Vernon in the person of (an imaginary) Placci to explain to C.A.T. what his point of view in the plagiarism business *might* have been. May 1913."

Through this spurious missive which she likened to "*My Ring and the Book*," Paget indulged in the sheerest fantasy of self-vindication, a metaphysical somersault which landed her face to face with a surrogate of herself. It was an incredible exercise — how often done mentally but how often committed to paper? — and the sweep of its rationalization brought her catharsis and the satisfactions of moral chastity. Addressing herself as "Dear Miss Paget," she commenced by thanking

458 Colby Library Quarterly

herself and "Miss A.T" for their "frank and fair answer" to Placci. The "imaginary" Placci is then made to say:

I would willingly make apologies, if in so doing I should be apologizing only for the faults which I may have committed, and not also, by implication for other faults which I have not. I shall therefore try & explain, premising that as reality's never as simple as it seems to our likings & dislikings, so also my explanation cannot be very simple either. For, if there is something in the world which is the reverse of simple, that something is the origin and authorship of ideas, and therefore the kind of question which, in the moment of indiscriminate feeling, both parties swim up under the crude vague term "plagiarism." But now to my own case, which, as you remember my telling you in 1908, *is not so bad as you thought*.

You were perfectly right in your guess that I did not come forward against B. because I thought he was in the right. I do not say I *now* think him in the right; *that* is another thing & will be dealt with later on. I only say that *then* I thought he was in the right, or rather I thought he was so much more in the right than in the wrong that I could not take part against him.

Paget marches forward — frequently in exquisite mimicry of his centipede style — across all the familiar arguments adduced and rehashed interminably in 1897, then concludes with the familiar psychosemantic evasions: "You probably profited unconsciously by B's ideas, if only in shaping your own into something different. . . . Also: the fact that neither B. nor I saw that your ideas were *not* the same as his is not a proof that B was a slanderer or I a coward. It means merely that 1^o these ideas are extremely difficult to seize, 2^{do} that authors & friends do not really understand any ideas except their own." Much ado, it may be lamented, about nothing. There is no evidence that Anstruther-Thomson¹² and Placci patched it up, nor that Paget and Placci measurably improved their tenuous new accord.

The death of people whose lives they had shared shook the roots of Paget's sentimentality and moved her to write Placci. As in regard to her half-brother and Nencioni, she again took pen in hand when Placci's eminent piano teacher, Giuseppe

12 The position she took was stiffer than Paget's and remained unbending to the end. Early in the squabble she had declared imperiously: "I do not intend to avail myself of the fact that Mr Berenson c'd not substantiate his charges before a third person." What she demanded was out-and-out, abject retractions from all offending parties and unconditional absolution of her motives as well as her practices. Legal proof or the lack of it was not germane to her oft alleged rectitude.

Colby Library Quarterly 459

Buonamici, died in March 1914. The intervention of World War I made any consociation between them out of the question, for Placci was a ranting jingo and Paget could accurately be described as a militant pacifist. The shooting ended and some of the horror forgotten, they reached out to each other for the last time, without acrimony, without optimism, just a twinge of auld lang syne. Paget closed the door gently on May 14, 1920.

Our (once more) common friend Mrs Berenson had mentioned your wish that we should meet again and now your letter has turned up. . . . I require no re-reading of old letters to realize how much happiness your friendship gave me when we were young . . . having what I want of you safe in the Past, I am reluctant to run risks with the present; we are neither of us the same and these war years have completed our transformation. The things you rave against are the only ones I have really at heart. And I have had so constantly to avoid discussions and altercations with all my best friends during these six years that I am utterly tired of skating on thin ice or steering conversation (as you and I did for years during which we talked of *Strauss!* because we were afraid of talking of other things). . . . It's just because I'm fond of you that I am afraid of picking up the threads. . . (Pantazzi, pp. 121-122)

For all he meant or could have meant to Paget, impetuous Carlo fell before her flinty solipsism. "I *cannot* like, or love," she once told a confidante, "at the expense of having my skin rubbed off. I can do without people."¹³ It would be amiss not to add here that the book she finished reading and annotating on the day she died (February 13, 1935) was earmarked for Placci.

The six ladies mentioned passingly in the spate of letters above constituted only a tot of the innumerable listening posts and relay units in the network strung along the length of the perimeter.¹⁴ Mostly affluent, titled, mobile *elegantes*, they liked nothing better than to umpire a falling-out among their crowd, to consider solemnly the etiquette of blame, the weight of reparations, to deliver verdicts, to talk talk talk over the intricacies of the case, and to straddle daintily the line of so-

¹³ Irene Cooper Willis, editor, *Vernon Lee's Letters* (London, 1937), x.

¹⁴ Despite repeated claims of tact and silence, word of the central split spread rapidly throughout the whole roster of the socio-artistic Paget-Berenson coterie. At one point Placci indicated that his mother was cognizant of its ramified and shifting inflections.

460 Colby Library Quarterly

cial discretion so not to alienate either of the contestants. It was a game they played at expertly. They could deliberate and reallocate the merits of Art and Truth and Right with Augustine overtones of jurisdiction and ministry. It gave substance and meaning to their effete round of patterned activity. This particular charade, after all, was not out of keeping with the concerns and machinations of other kindred groups in other kindred places.

Of the six specified females, Maude Crutwell and Countess Pasolini have been limned in this essay; Mrs. Watts eludes broader identification. Laura Gropallo became friend and adviser to Paget and Anstruther-Thomson when they met in Como around 1892. Violet and Clementina visited her at Nervi and afterward acknowledged her acumen in matters of physio-psychology which eventually led to their break with Berenson. Elena French Cini, Italian baroness with part-English ancestry, is the dedicatee of Paget's *Vanitas* and speaks as "Signora Elena" in *Althea*. Paget often sojourned in her villa at Pistoia per Ingo in the Apennines. Elena wrote Paget long consoling letters on the loss of Kit, the death of Eugene, then the death of Kit; in 1908 summoned up another elaborate choreography of comment surrounding the unsolved shooting of a dog. Sister of Count Pasolini, the countess Angelica Rasponi of Florence and Ravenna translated Paget's *Ariadne in Mantua* into Italian. In turn Paget dedicated her *Laurus Nobilis* "To Angelica Rasponi Dalle Teste From Her Grateful Old Friend and Neighbour Vernon Lee 1885-1908." By one of their mutual friends Angelica was described as "one of the cleverest, most original and genial Italian women I have known."

The sharpest irony of this protracted petty episode which engaged the energies and emotions of so many talented people over so many years is felt in the observation of Irene Cooper Willis that "Such a book as *Beauty and Ugliness* was doomed to failure. It bored the general reading public, and the method of its approach to the questions it dealt with was too amateurish (using the word in no derogatory sense) to make it acceptable to the academic world" (p. xii). Some of the less flattering epithets tossed at it by contemporary critics:

Colby Library Quarterly 461

“very diffuse,” “untidy,” “rambling,” “bewildering mass of stuff,” “repetitive,” “incoherent.” Thus the proud agitation over priority of aesthetic concepts and instances sinks in importance to merely a striving among delicate egos for social approval. The inordinate amount of time and thought, heat and writing expended in recruiting allies and formulating impeccable positions harshly documents the inability of Violet Paget as a creative individual to function independently of her social milieu, profess as loudly as she might her blazing scorn of it. Berenson, after first flush, had the good sense to desist. Through the domestic diplomacies of Mary Costelloe, now Mrs. Berenson, the two neighbors did resume meeting in the twenties. But they conversed cagily, for the old obloquy between them never fully faded.

