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Paget in Parays

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It is well known that Violet Paget carried on a prolific correspondence with other writers, some rather obscure, others famous. She seemed to derive a considerable amount of pleasure basking in the reflected light of their glory, but it must not be overlooked that Miss Paget, herself, was read and appreciated by hosts of admirers both in England and on the continent.

Colby College Library has in its possession seven letters in French written to Miss Paget by Monsieur and Madame Alidor Delzant, both of whom were overtly impressed by Miss Paget’s style. Mme Gabrielle Delzant, reading for the first time Miss Paget’s Juvenilia, Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions, experienced a sympathetic response to the warm and sensitive portrayal of the Italian scene. In the letter dated 7 July 1900, Gabrielle writes that Miss Paget has presented

une vision de Venise aussi harmonieuse et plus poétique que celles que donnaient au Louvre les toiles de Canaletto. Il me semble que vous pouvez exprimer toutes les formes, toutes les nuances du beau. Votre manière ironique, fine, profonde, aîlée d’écrire nous fait voir ce que vous voyez, nous fait entrer dans les divines complications de votre esprit. Juvenilia a le ton de la conversation, mais d’une conversation inimitable comme celle dont vous nous avez fait jouir Mercredi.

This letter written from Paris, expressing Gabrielle’s admiration and friendship, shows that Gabrielle had a romantic style of her own and a keen sense of le mot juste. In it she begs Miss Paget to accept as a little gift a volume of the Maximes of La Rochefoucauld, who had sojourned in Parays, where the Delzants lived. This letter seems to be the beginning of a deep friendship which endured, unfortunately, only eighteen months because of Gabrielle’s untimely death. In this same letter Gabrielle invites Miss Paget to call on her in the tiny village of Parays in the department of Lot et Garonne.

It was not until late in the fall of 1901 that Miss Paget managed a visit to the Delzants in Parays. It was there that their friendship blossomed into a close association never to be for-
gotten by Miss Paget. Much of the time at Paraÿ's was spent in writing and reading, for Miss Paget’s room was in fact the library. It was quite perceptibly a summer home—no heat, no water, nor any other facilities—a truly Spartan abode. Nevertheless their days were extremely happy. The two women spent a good deal of time reading aloud to one another. It amused Miss Paget immensely that Gabrielle wanted to learn to read English aloud and she was thoroughly delighted that Gabrielle was using her works to do so. Colby College Library now has one of the books that Gabrielle used in this endeavor, *Genius Loci*, subtitled *Notes on Places*. Miss Paget gave it to Gabrielle in October 1901. It was returned to her in June 1903, after the death of Gabrielle. On the front half-title page is inscribed: “I gave this book Oct 1901 to my dear friend Gabrielle Delzant. It came back to me June 1903.” It measures 6 x 4 inches and is bound in light brown cloth—an 1899 edition from the publishing house of Grant Richards, London. Tipped in facing the title-page is a postal card reproduction of “a dear old schloss,” mentioned on page 210. Some of the “Places” are Augsburg, Touraine, Siena, Fribourg and Bayeux. The final essay, “Envoy,” is possibly the most instructive because of the marginal notes written in by Gabrielle. It is especially interesting to observe what words attracted Gabrielle’s attention. Her system of annotation shows that her purpose in reading the book was, at least partially, to add to her English vocabulary. In each case she has underlined the unknown word and then in the margin has written the English word with the French equivalent immediately below it. Thus, on page 204, *to plod* is rendered as *travailler péniblement*; on page 205, *that is the rub* as *voilà la difficulté*; on page 209, *to nibble* as *brouter*; and on page 210, *to take for granted* as *regarder comme admise*. On this same page *And so forth*, which should be translated as *et ainsi de suite*, is rendered as *tut de suite* — a peculiar slip which must have distorted the essential meaning of the sentence for her.

Who were Alidor and Gabrielle Delzant? Alidor (1848-1905) was an author in his own right closely associated with Paul de Saint-Victor, drama critic and man of letters of the late 19th century, and secretary to the French romantic poet
Lamartine. Paul de Saint-Victor was engaged in a study of the history of the theater, *Les Deux Masques*, which he was preparing for publication at the time of his death. After he died, Delzant became the editor of this uncompleted work. He was also one of the executors of the will of Edmond de Goncourt, another intimate friend of his. Alidor had gathered together an extensive library of about 50,000 volumes, as well as a collection of all kinds of curious items concerning most of the great French literary figures of the 19th century. His contributions to literature fall chiefly within the field of biography, the most important of which are: *Paul de Saint-Victor* (1887), *Les Goncourt* (1889), and *Gabrielle Delzant* (1904). His style is clear and simple, certainly of the romantic school, if one can judge from these touching words in his letter written after the death of his wife to Miss Paget from Parays, 10 July 1903.

> Je crois que si j'avais suivi ses travaux d'un peu plus près, si nous n'avions pas eu—l'un pour l'autre—ce sentiment de pudeur dans notre vie commune,—si je ne m'étais pas borné à lui trouver, chez les librairies et sur les quais de Paris, les fleurs de son miel que je lui apportais chaque jour, il n'y avait qu'un pas à faire pour la décider à écrire des livres, à suivre votre exemple, et le XVIIe siècle français aurait compté quelques bons livres de plus.

Alidor spent a good deal of time working through the compilations of materials that Gabrielle had made toward a study of Port-Royal, Majorin’s niece, and la Princesse de Liancourt. She left behind an abundance of memoranda which he decided to edit and publish rather than write a book about Gabrielle herself. (Evidently he changed his mind later.) M. Delzant felt that these studies constituted “une sorte de trésor intime . . . la source de très douces consolations.” Despite twenty-five years of marriage to Gabrielle, he came to know her only after her death, through the medium of her writings.

As mentioned above, Gabrielle (1854-1903) had first discovered Violet Paget by reading *Juvenilia*. In 1902, Miss Paget presented Gabrielle with a two-volume edition of this work, inscribed in Volume II: “To dear Gabrielle from Vernon Lee June 1902.” These volumes, cloth bound in blue and brown, published by T. Fisher Unwin of London, have also been presented to the Colby College Library by Miss Irene Cooper Willis. They, too, are meticulously annotated in the margins

Miss Paget has left no doubt that she was passing through a period of melancholia and despondency at the time she received her first letter from Gabrielle Delzant. This explains to some extent the profound impression that Gabrielle made on her, as can be corroborated in the letters from Miss Paget to Miss Clementina (Kit) Anstruther-Thomson. The correspondence from Vernon to Kit shows the progress of this friendship for Gabrielle.

Mme Delzant is one of the most wonderful women. Not only the admirableness of her brains, but much more the extraordinary charm of high breeding, mental, moral and even physical (for she has the loveliest manner) of the creature.

Later in the same month from Parays again:

I want you to know that knowing Mme Delzant, and receiving the gift of her friendship, has made a very great difference to me.

And further on, in the same letter, she refers to Gabrielle as one of the most delicate and dignified and fine grained lives I can imagine.

Still later in the same month, in a letter from Parays, dated 25 October 1901, she admires her contempt for illness because she attended the school at St. Denis for the daughters of the Legion of Honor where the children were told, “Souvenez-vous, mesdemoiselles que vous n'avez pas de corps.” It gave her her fine manner, no doubt, and a certain brave Spartan quality.

Then we read of her profound sadness as Gabrielle’s death approaches. Miss Paget writes to Kit of this imminent separation and what it means to her, in a letter dated 13 December 1902:

Gabrielle Delzant has taken away my sense of loneliness by giving me the sense that I make a difference to her. It is strange how it changes my life.

Then on 13 February 1903:

I think you know what Gabrielle Delzant had become to me, and how my new life was based in the sense of her love for me. Absence made no
difference. There was the creature always loving, always believing, always helping, giving to everyday life a continuity and significance. Well! I shall have had it for 18 months! And 18 months is something in one's life. I don't think the husband, after the first shock, will mind much, for he minds nothing. The younger child is too young. Geneviève (the elder daughter) may soon be happily married. But I feel that, as I cared, appreciated more, and in a way needed more, I shall lose more. Of course it will all appear to happen outside me. One has no claims, and one must swallow one's grief when one has none. If I be unable to work, I shall go away somewhere.

I am astonished at the way in which I have been able to write, read, talk, all today. I suppose I still have an immense hidden fund of hope. But my reason tells me — I feel persuaded, it's all over.

And the next day:

I have heard again. The operation took place all right, but Gabrielle was so weak that there seemed not much hope. M. Delzant writes, "Si nous la sauvons," — death seems such an absurdity — except in the very old, who want it.

Gabrielle died on Sunday, February 15, 1903.

It does seem that this friendship effectively drew Miss Paget out of her melancholia during this eighteen-month period. From it she appeared to gain a new lease on life and a philosophical attitude toward death, as she once more writes to Kit: "I confess that the death of Mme Delzant has brought home to me the desirability of always being ready to die." Although Miss Paget was unmistakably distraught over the death of her friend Gabrielle, she eventually recovered; indeed she survived her by thirty-two years.

In 1903, she dedicated *Hortus Vitae* to Madame Th. Blanc-Bentzon, telling her that it was to have been dedicated to Gabrielle Delzant. This dedication contains her final tribute to Gabrielle: "Life is worthy to be lived well, with fortitude, tenderness, and a certain reserved pride and humility . . . the essential, unspoken tenet of Gabrielle Delzant's life."