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VIOLET PAGET TO SARAH ORNE JEWETT

By RICHARD CARY

VIOLET PAGET (1856-1935) never used her family name professionally. Under the pseudonym Vernon Lee she composed some thirty volumes of fiction, drama, philosophy, esthetics, and travel, as well as an undetermined number of magazine and newspaper articles on pacific and polemical topics. A considerable figure in her era, she moved in the same circuit as Robert Browning, Henry James, Walter Pater, Andrew Lang, Mrs. Humphry Ward, William Rossetti, H.G. Wells, and others of that mark. Despite her somewhat forbidding presence — clipped hair and severe clothes, insurgent jaw and abrasive tongue — she drew admiration and allegiance from a succession of female friends, literary and artistic.

Sarah Orne Jewett (1849-1909) was not one of the several with whom Miss Paget shared her life intensely and then parted from with hot words or dumb hurt. Indeed, it is doubtful that they met more than two or three times during Miss Jewett's European sojourn in 1898. They were probably brought together by Madame Thérèse Blanc-Bentzon, influential French novelist, critic, and translator, who held the writings of both women in high regard. Miss Jewett fondly recalls luncheon on a Spring day at Miss Paget's villa — *Il Palmerino* — outside of Florence,¹ and in an undated (but reliably of July 1898) letter to her sister from Paris tells of seeing Miss Paget "who is here at a hotel on the other side of the river."² Their meetings were manifestly few but the effect, on Miss Jewett at least, was imposing. Usually exuding Maine self-reliance, she rather oddly set herself in subordinate reference to the younger Englishwoman: "I suppose that I am made like Vernon Lee."³

The 1967 edition of Jewett letters contains three written to Miss Paget in March and July 1907, and January 1908,⁴ the first two conspicuous for "literary" touches not to be found in any other letters in the volume. These have been the sole

1 Richard Cary, editor, *Sarah Orne Jewett Letters* (Waterville, Me., 1967), 166.

2 Letter headed "Tuesday," in Houghton Library, Harvard University.

3 Annie Fields, editor, *Letters of Sarah Orne Jewett* (Boston, 1911), 224.

4 Cary, *Letters*, 165-171.

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evidence of correspondence between the ladies until recent recovery of two letters sent in April and October 1907 by Miss Paget,⁵ which dovetail perfectly with Miss Jewett's. The five constitute a unit remarking the death of Madame Blanc and the desire of Miss Paget to market some of her scripts. Thus we are afforded new certainties about these matters and new views on the Paget-Jewett relationship through the prism of a third person.

Miss Jewett seems to have initiated the round. Her letter of March 17, 1907 commemorates in soulful phrases the passing of their mutual friend, praises two of Miss Paget's books, and inquires, "Shall you never come seafaring? Shall you never come to New England . . . for juniper and bayberry?" Miss Paget responded tardily, misaddressing the envelope to "Miss Orme Jewett" and misspelling the name of Mrs. Annie Adams Fields (1834-1915), Sarah's inveterate companion since 1881, with whom she had visited Europe on four occasions. Miss Paget's notorious scarfing wit flickers to the surface now and again despite her determined amiability.

Il Palmerino
S. Gervasio
Florence
April 29, 1907

Dear Miss Jewett,

I have been unwell, and away for a fortnight by the sea, during which time I only loafed, if clambering up the breathless stone-fanged paths of Liguria may be called loafing. Anyhow, that is my excuse for not thanking you at once for your very dear and beautiful letter.

Dear Madame Blanc was very fond of you and Mrs Field; you know how discreet she was about her own feelings, & how totally objective in her mode of speaking of people. But it was plain that you two, like one or two other friends in foreign parts (what I wonder has become of the little cropped headed nihilist and aristocrat whose name I cannot spell, accompanied by a mute but sympathising agricultural lady —? alas what has become of all dear Mme Blanc's *monde*?) were one of the consolations of her life, so cruelly (& unnecessarily!) tormented by her French mother's love.

Like you, I knew her some years before we ever met;⁶ I even

5 The first, printed here by permission, is in Houghton Library; the second in Colby College Library.

6 In her March 17 letter Miss Jewett says erroneously of Madame Blanc, "nine years writing before we met." It was in actuality seven years. Miss Jewett first wrote to thank Madame Blanc after her review of *A Country Doctor* in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* of February 1, 1885, and they met for the first time in the summer of 1892 in Paris.

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introduced friends to whom she was exquisite for my unknown sake; and before I had seen her I believe I had told her more of myself than one tells one's schoolfriends. In the same manner, & through her, I got to know Gabrielle Delzant long before I ever found myself face to face with her. I remember dear Mme Blanc's amusement at Gabrielle's & my rapturous excursions in tramways & strolls in rainy Paris streets. Gabrielle asked her whether she also, did not feel the ineffable grandeur of the museum of the Jardin des Plantes when shut, and the wild picturesqueness of the yellow train in the fog—"Tout ce que je sais c'est que vous courez sous la pluie comme deux amoureux" she said with her good ironical smile.

I am ashamed to think that she on last two occasions of my seeing her—the last was, I think, crossing from Dover, I took up her time entirely if brutally selfishly with troubles of mine, which any other but she would have thought rubbish beside those she herself was going through. But with her, as with Gabrielle Delzant, to be selfish & self-engrossed became a grace! 'Tis the fault, this heavenly sympathy & self-forgetfulness, of French women, surrounding them with such selfishness or lack of decent self-restraint as Edouard Blanc tormented her with. One would have whipped him, willingly; but *she* on the whole, liked to suffer for him & through him, with that pleasure in birth pangs which seems to follow French mothers all through their life.

Well; and now, save "l'excellente Mme Foulou de Vaulx"—what remains of all that circle of people one loved, or gnashed teeth at (Mlle Blaze to wit) or was amused by? The two daughters of Gabrielle Delzant have both shed me, one because she has married an ambiguous demagogue, the other because she has married "un jeune homme distingué" and "arriviste." Poor dull old Delzant broke his neck instead of going to death sleep after dinner over his books. Edouard Blanc has never written me a word.

Imagine, dear Miss Jewett, how welcome your letter has been to me.

Yes, I remember your coming. You shall have another majolica cup, or even my best jug, if you will return.⁷ I want to go to America—more & more since reading Wells & H. James⁸—but I am what the proper call "turned fifty"—I have little health & energy & many, too many schemes of (not much believed in!) work, and I have spent a lot of money, wisely no doubt, in buying this little place & discovering its threatened disasters, the money which one wants for a journey like that when one isn't young.

So, shall we ever meet again, I mean, in the flesh. Since you & Mrs Field & I *have* met again in the spirit; & if you allow, will agree not to separate in that element.

Write to me sometimes & believe me,

Yrs gratefully
V. Paget

7 Jewett to Paget: "I begged a little flowered Italian bowl of you, and I keep it on a shelf in my bedroom for an outward and visible sign!" (Cary, *Letters*, 186).

8 Although Miss Paget contemplated the prospect wistfully in several instances, she never did make the voyage to the United States.

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Besides her friendship with Sarah Orne Jewett, Madame Marie Thérèse de Solms Blanc (1840-1907) had in common with Violet Paget the use of a lifelong *nom de plume* (Th. Bentzon), and authorship of over thirty volumes of fiction, feminism, travel, literary criticism, and a plethora of periodical articles. Madame Blanc toured the United States in 1893 and 1897, each time staying for a period at the homes of Miss Jewett and Mrs. Fields, whom she entertained at her country house in La Ferté sous Jouarre for a month in the summer of 1898. Mrs. Fields published a memoir of her life and works in *Century* magazine for May 1903. Madame Blanc's matrimonial history was far from felicitous. At sixteen she was married to Alexandre Blanc, a financier given to speculation. At seventeen she bore a son, Edouard. M. Blanc squandered his own money and estates in short order, then proceeded to do the same with his wife's. By nineteen she was divorced. She did not see Alexandre for thirty years but thereafter he visited her regularly. When she died she left all her possessions to him. Edouard, in maturity tall, ugly, and extremely intelligent, lived one story above his mother's apartment. A distinguished geographer and lecturer, he was engrossed in his scientific studies and "perfectly indifferent toward every subject except literature."⁹

Gabrielle Delzant (1854-1903) lived with her husband Alidor (1848-1905) in Parays, a village in southwest France. A creature of exquisite breeding and high sensibility, she amassed information and prepared first drafts of two books but died before she could bring them to the point of publication. Alidor, noted bibliophile and literary executor, published biographies of Paul de Saint-Victor and the brothers Goncourt. As a memorial to his wife he compiled and edited in the year after her death *Gabrielle Delzant: Letters, Souvenirs*.¹⁰

Miss Paget's second letter six months later is similarly mis-addressed to Miss "Orme" Jewett, attesting the slightness of their connection and the former's sovereign disregard (Miss Jewett had signed her full name in March). In view of the

9. For a more detailed account see Richard Cary, "Miss Jewett and Madame Blanc," *Colby Library Quarterly*, VII (September 1967), 467-488.

10. For a more detailed account see Archille H. Biron, "Paget in Parays," *Colby Library Quarterly*, V (June 1960), 123-127.

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opportunistic bent of Miss Paget's supplication, the repeated solecism could have been particularly irking, but Miss Jewett chose blandly to overlook it.

II Palmerino
S. Gervasio
Florence
Oct 25, 1907

Dear Miss Jewett—

I have been wanting for months to thank you—to tell you how enchanting I felt your letter to be; and I haven't. I have been busy, anxious, my poor brother has at last been saved from the sword of Damocles suspended over him but saved by a kindly & silent Death. I have been very busy, a little out of sorts, away. In short, I haven't written to you. And instead of writing now, in any decent sense of the word, I am merely going to bore you with a very troublesome commission. I want to make an *English Writer's Notebook on England*, but I want to get paid for it, & therefore to put it through a serial. The *Atlantic Monthly* took the two instalments I am sending herewith, but it has refused the remainder which I had had laboriously copied out. The only people wanting to read about England are Americans, & America doubtless contains magazines besides the *Atlantic*. But my MS is colossally big, on heavy paper, & moreover it is my only copy save the half illegible scrawls in my pocketbooks.¹¹ I don't want to send it about with the risk of loss. This printed sample shows exactly what I am offering. There are four numbers each about the size of the printed—i.e. Things of the Past, Things of the Present, The Celtic West, and "Some Cathedrals and Oxford."

Will you offer the *serial copyright* (book copyrights all reserved) of these to anyone you think likely to take them? If I get them accepted in *principle* (i.e. on the supposition of their being equal to the printed sample) I will send the MS to America. As to terms American payment is always handsome. *The point is that a decision can be perfectly come to on the printed specimen.*

Dear Miss Jewett, what a bother for you. But I have no one else to help me, or no one except you I really care to ask so great a favour. And to you I can say that my brother's death has left me, for the next few months, rather out of pocket, & that I am therefore trying to sell whatever finished MS I have to pay off a loan I have had to make. A kind friend, towards whom indebtedness is but a pleasure, is taking me with her for a month to Greece, where I never expected to go; & after that I am going for a fortnight to Cairo. I shall not be back for two months from the moment when you receive this letter, so do not write to me yet. And don't be angry with me for bothering you.

I am sending you the Tauchnitz *Hortus Vitae* with the letter to Mme Blanc.

Yours gratefully
V. Paget

¹¹ The original holographs of these essays are not present in the Colby collection. Other manuscripts "on heavy paper" measure as much as 9¼ x 13½ inches.

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Eugene Jacob Lee-Hamilton (1845-1907) was in fact Miss Paget's half-brother, of the same mother. After serving several tours of duty with the British foreign office, he resigned for reasons of health in 1875. Over the following three decades he produced a dozen creditable volumes of poems, plays, fiction, and a metrical translation of Dante's "Inferno," but the pre-eminent verity of his life was the illness that impelled him out of work and into bed for twenty consecutive years.

The nature of his affliction is still moot. His personal physician called it "weakness of the muscular tissue of the heart" brought on by overwork during the Franco-Prussian war; two consulted neurologists diagnosed it as "purely functional" and largely the result of "autosuggestion." His friends were equally polar: some likened his "dreadful disease" to that which condemned Heine to a "mattress-grave"; others saw Lee-Hamilton indulging the advantages of a long invalidism, pale and romantically suffering in the Florentine sunshine. Whatever the cause, from his thirtieth to his fiftieth years he lay continuously on his "Hybrid of rack and of Procrustes' bed," devoting his time to mathematical problems, writing, and entertaining such visitors as Henry James, Paul Bourget, Edith Wharton, Ouida, and William Sharp.

In 1894 a "miraculous" recovery began to take place. Within months he rose from his "thing of wood, of leather, and of steel"; by 1896 was riding a bicycle around Florence. He next embarked on a visit to the United States. Shortly after return, to Miss Paget's "wrath," he announced his intention to marry. Ultimately she became reconciled and financed the ceremonies on condition there be no children from the union. The resultant child died before her second birthday. Unsettled by his wife's near-fatal delivery and strained by his daughter's abnormality, Lee-Hamilton foundered in a vortex of maladies — Bright's disease, arterio-sclerosis, asthma, heart collapse, "a certain amount of hysterical exaggeration, and a tendency to revive the conditions of his old illness." After surgery and a stroke of paralysis, he succumbed in September 1907.

Notwithstanding traces of sibling rivalry in their correspondence, Eugene and Violet were tenaciously loyal to each other. She constantly puffed his literary wares among poets and publishers, and avouched his influence in *Baldwin* (1886): "To

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my brother, Eugene Lee Hamilton, I dedicate this book of views and aspirations, grateful for all he has done in forming my own." In turn Lee-Hamilton presented his verse-tragedy, *The Fountain of Youth* (1891), "To Vernon Lee, with her brother's love."

Although Miss Paget underwent intervals of tight purse, she was generally in sufficient funds and is known to have furnished financial assistance to Eugene during his latter years. Her extensive friendships with well-placed ladies often begot the kind of hospitality and largesse she describes here. In this instance the benefactress was Lady (Maya) Mackenzie Owen. (On November 27 Miss Paget wrote Clementine Anstruther-Thomson that Maya "not only paid for everything on this journey but is, practically, paying my [journey] to Egypt.") They left ship at Patras in November, roamed around Olympia, crossed to Delphi, and then on to Athens. At this point Miss Paget contracted fever, and her proposed voyage to Egypt was canceled. Her unpublished *A Vernon Lee Note-Book* (now in Colby College Library) includes a segment of ten chapters on the Greek experience, at least six of which appeared in the *Westminster Gazette*, January to April 1910.

The two installments of "An English Writer's Notes on England" had appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*, LXXXIV (July 1899), 99-104, and LXXXVIII (October 1901), 511-519. To Miss Paget's request for help in placing the four related essays Miss Jewett responded with customary kindness and encouragement on January 3, 1908. She explains that the *Atlantic* is currently running a series of French travel sketches by Edith Wharton; she is waiting to hear from a New York editor; she plans to see another personally; Bliss Perry has spoken with "most true appreciation" of Miss Paget's work; and she begs Miss Paget not to be "impatient if it seems to take longer than is reasonable."¹² But the hard fact is that Miss Jewett's influence was on the wane. Due to a disabling accident more than five years before, she was no longer able to write for publication. Understandably, her effective contacts in publishing circles had dwindled. Four years after she died *Scribner's* printed under the same general title, "Things of the Past," LIV (August 1913), 177-194; "Things of the Present," LIV

¹² Cary, *Letters*, 170.

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(November 1913), 609-619; and "The Celtic Past (Cornwall, Wales, Ireland)," LIV (December 1913), 712-724. Miss Paget seems to have trimmed and incorporated the material of "Some Cathedrals and Oxford" into the first of these articles, but the projected volume never materialized.¹³ Among Miss Paget's unpublished works at Colby is a 228-page typescript entitled *A Vernon Lee Note-Book*. Comprising apparently the original entries from which she produced the polished essays for the *Atlantic* and *Scribner's*, it was offered to various publishers but rejected. Part I takes in the British tour; Part II, the Greek adventure; Part III, a miscellany of philosophic comments on people, localities, and nature.

Miss Paget's *Hortus Vitae* (London, 1904) consists of twenty-three essays "on the gardening of life." The dedication, in the form of a ten-page letter "To Madame Th. Blanc-Bentzon," is actually a panegyric to Gabrielle Delzant, for whom Violet had intended the book but who died before it went to press. Miss Jewett retorted fervently: "I have just read again — again, *again!* — your preface to *Hortus Vitae* and 'New Friends and Old,' and then I laid down the book and took up my pen feeling as if you were a new friend and old, together and at once!"¹⁴ An inventory of Miss Jewett's library shows that she retained a copy of this book (not the Tauchnitz edition) and eight other Paget titles: *The Enchanted Woods*, *Genius Loci*, *Limbo*, *Penelope Brandling*, *Pope Jacynth*, *The Sentimental Traveller*, *The Spirit of Rome*, and *Vanitas*. She also wrote glowingly about *Ariadne in Mantua* and *Sister Benvenuta and the Christ Child*, but with some reservations about *Miss Brown*, the three-volume roman à clef which gave rise to appreciable ado among the caricatured Pre-Raphaelites.

Exchanges of letters between authors provide indispensable mosaic tiles for the biographer, bibliographer, and historian. More important, such letters open doors to the private spirit of both writer and recipient. The revelatory value of the series discussed above is explicit. In the first years of the 1880s Violet

¹³ Miss Paget's travel notes on Germany, Italy, France, and Switzerland fared better. They are gathered in *The Sentimental Traveller*, published by John Lane (London, 1908).

¹⁴ Cary, *Letters*, 165.

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Paget burst into the arena of literary London, grappled with the lions of the day, and turned them purposefully to her own ends. A quarter of a century later her asperities are relatively mellow, her fierce self-serving no less rampant, her cachet and her design essentially the same. So, too, Sarah Jewett. Sprung from a secure and benign background, uncompetitive, unself-conscious, she trails nostalgia and poetic optimism while exerting herself on another's behalf. What the confidences of these two middleaged writers illustrate without cavil about themselves — and about human character in general — is reconfirmation of the Gallic maxim, *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*.



If I were asked to name three American books which have the possibility of a long, long life, I would say at once The Scarlet Letter, Huckleberry Finn, and The Country of the Pointed Firs. I can think of no others that confront time and change so serenely. The latter book seems to me fairly to shine with the reflection of its long, joyous future. It is so tightly yet so lightly built, so little encumbered with heavy materialism that deteriorates and grows old-fashioned. I like to think with what pleasure, with what sense of rich discovery, the young student of American literature in far distant years to come will take up this book and say, "A masterpiece!" as proudly as if he himself had made it. It will be a message to the future, a message in a universal language . . .

WILLA CATHER