

# Natalie Barney on *Renée Vivien*

Translated by Margaret Porter

Natalie Barney stood at the center of that group we usually refer to as "the Paris lesbians." Famous for both her love affairs and her literary salon, Barney's circle included Gertrude Stein, Romaine Brooks, Djuna Barnes and Colette, as well as Jean Cocteau, André Gide, Ezra Pound, and others.

Barney was a writer herself but little of her work has appeared in English, and she is more talked about than read. She was alive until 1972 but remains enigmatic, a "legend," the blonde Amazon who rode horseback in the Bois de Boulogne every morning. "She was charming," wrote Sylvia Beach in Shakespeare and Company. "Many of her sex found her fatally so..."

The following excerpt from one of her last books chronicles an important relationship in Barney's life, that with poet Renée Vivien.

In the article, Barney first describes her own girlhood in Cincinnati and Paris, then a love affair with Liane de Pougy, a courtesan. As this affair is ending, she is introduced to Renée Vivien by a mutual friend, Violette Shiletto. Both women are about twenty years old at this time, and Barney, absorbed with thoughts of Liane, pays little attention to Renée until she hears some of her poetry...

One evening Renée invited me for the first time into her room at the family boarding house, rue Creveaux. "To render it worthy of my coming" she had filled it with lilies, the flower that she had dedicated to me: "You will wither one day, ah! My lily!"

Meanwhile, it was the lilies which were withering. There were some of them in a too narrow jar of water and even on her bed. Their whiteness illuminated the somber corners of the room: it was a splendor, a suffocation, transforming this ordinary room into an ardent and virginal chapel inclining us toward genuflection—she before me, I before her.

I left her at dawn. The snow, last innocence of winter, had disappeared, but a light frost covered the ground where my footsteps imprinted themselves on this pallor between her street and mine.

Disturbing beginnings where two young girls sought each other by way of a love badly shared.

The yet somnolent senses of Renée scarcely responded to my desires; her budding love, exalted by imagination, appropriated my role of lover-poet. After each rendezvous, "for the night was to us as to others the day," I received from her flowers and poems, from which I choose these several fragments as so many avowals retracing the beginnings of our strange liaison:

See, I am of the age when the virgin abandons her hand  
To the man that her weakness looks for and fears  
And I have not chosen a companion of the route  
Because you appeared at the turning of the way.

... I feel tremble on my mute lips  
The gentleness and fright of your first kiss.  
Under your step, I hear the breaking of lyres...

With what kisses charm the languor of your soul...  
With what rhythms of love, with what fervent poem  
Honor worthily her whose beauty  
Wears Desire on her forehead like a diadem?

Embarrassed by this excess of adoration, to which I would have preferred joys better shared, I loved however the verses that she wrote to me. I rendered count that this attitude of adoration, for which I was the pretext, was necessary to her, and that without really knowing me, she found, thanks to me, a new theme of inspiration to succeed death and solitude: love—but love under an aspect which, since Sappho, had scarcely found a poet.

Renée Vivien had just offered me a whole notebook written in the hand of a good scholar whose writing had not yet taken flight. Under the cover on parchment where figured a lily and a lyre of doubtful taste, she had inscribed: "To Natalie, for her alone." After reading and rereading her verses, inspired by me and surpassing my own, I wanted them to be published. Renée, who however "aspired to glory"—for she had a more lofty idea of it than I—consented to see them appear, but on condition that she sign her book only "R. Vivien." When this first collection of verse appeared, from Alphonse Lemerre, and under this initial could pass for that of a masculine first name, a young lecturer who flattered himself on discovering and launching future geniuses, took as subject these *Etudes et Preludes* and declared to his audience "how one feels the verses vibrant with love written by a very young man idolatrous of a first mistress." There was, in fact, cause to misunderstand:

You touch without embracing like the chimera...  
Your form is a gleam that leaves the hands empty...

As he continued his lecture on this gift, Renée and I, seized with foolish laughter, had to precipitously leave the hall. No one in the audience could guess the cause of this brusque departure.



Renée Vivien

As they began to ask my poetess for interviews and meetings, she feared being invaded and had herself represented by a governess of an aspect as anti-poetic as possible. This one had to make herself pass for Renée Vivien, which discouraged future pursuits and enthusiasms, for the rumor spread that the author of a work so troubling was deprived of all charm, eloquence or physical attraction.

A short time after, she took me to her home in London, where I was able to find in the celebrated book-store of Bodley Head a copy of the fragments of Sappho, translated by Wharton (no connection with my compatriot the novelist Edith Wharton, who would have trembled with horror at the idea of a possible confusion). This precious collection served Renée Vivien for comparison with her French translation; it became her bedside book and the source from which she drew the pagan inspiration for several of her books to come. One is not pagan who wishes to be: I felt already in her a Christian soul which was ignored. While I leafed through other books, John Lane, the editor-publisher, pointed out *Opale*, the first book of verse of a young poetess of Norfolk, whose second collection he was going to publish soon.

Several of these poems pleased me to the point that I wrote to their author, adding to my word of admiration *Etude et Preludes* and *Quelques Portraits—Sonnets de Femmes*. *Opale* responded with fire:

...For I would dance to make you smile, and sing  
Of those who with some sweet mad sin have played,  
And how Love walks with delicate feet afraid  
Twixt maid and maid.

"Why," I said to Renée, "shouldn't we assemble around us a group of poetesses like those who surrounded Sappho at Mytilene and who mutually inspired each other?"

This project pleased her so much that we began to realize it by suggesting to *Opale* to come to be near us in Paris, where we were returning to install ourselves in a

small hotel on the rue Alphonse-de-Neuville, next to that of the Rostands. My parents reluctantly let me do it, but only after imposing on me, as chaperone, a housekeeper who had already been mine in a pension where I stayed when I was in transit at Paris. It is she, besides, who presented herself under the name of Renée to discourage the curious. The sympathetic Professor B.C. was also hired to teach Greek to Renée in view of a translation into French verse that she wished to do of the fragments of Sappho. After her lesson, he corrected for me a new book that I was preparing: *Five Little Greek Dialogues*. I made use also of his learned and difficult penmanship for a transcription of my *Letters to a Known*, in which I resumed my adventure with Liane. This work finished, I removed the ring that she had ordered for me at Lalique, and which carried, engraved on the inside: "It pleases me so much that you endure to understand and love me."

Renée wrote two versions of our novel lived: *A Woman Appeared to Me*. Influenced by the bad taste of our "belle époque," she gave me the impression of ceding to the worst weaknesses of the "art nouveau."

This poet hardly possesses the gift of a novelist and cannot, consequently, lend life either to the one or to the other of her heroines.

The first version, *Vally*, was composed when we were entangled, and the second when she restored to me the name "Lorely."

*Vally* and *Lorely* have the same undulating body and similar eyes "of ice under hair like moonlight."

The author doubtless wished to create an impression of magic, but the magic refused to operate and it was absurdity that replaced it. To give weight to this afflicting affirmation, I pick this detail of a decor that she must have believed bewitching: "A dried-out serpent entwined itself around a vase wherein some black irises withered." While "dressed in a white robe that veiled me while revealing me, I unstrung some opals, plucked petals from some orchids . . ."

I should reproach Renée for the first of these fatal and artificial women made to resemble me, for in her second novel, from the mouth of this heroine, she makes me say, "In truth, each being becomes parallel to the appearance that our perversity forms of her: fear, by force of not comprehending me, to render me incomprehensible." In one of these books, she declares me "incapable of loving." I who have never been capable of anything but that! Opposing my love of love against her love of death, Renée esteems that I have had, by access only, to submit to this evil of the nineteenth century, "spleen," while she herself has made it the leitmotif of her life and her work.

That she had wished to go astray to such a point in suffering, proves to me how much her poetic genius had need of it.

Throughout the false mysticism by which she seems haunted, in a flash of lucidity she recognizes in me a reposing pagan soul. She recounts, in *A Woman Appeared to Me*, that I asked her on the day preceding Christmas, "What is this festival of Christmas? Does it commemorate the birth or the death of Christ?" Exaggeration for exaggeration, I prefer that to other distortions.

On rereading these two novels, I have the painful impression of having posed for a bad portraitist.

Barney relates next how she and Vivien traveled to New York and to the Barney home in Bar Harbor after the death of their friend Violette. Renée was deeply depressed. She continued her study of classical Greek with the hope of translating Sappho, while Barney attended dinners and balls at the will of her parents.

After a visit to Bryn Mawr College, the two separated in tears—Vivien to return to Europe and Barney to go to her parents' home in Washington, D.C., for she had promised to spend the winter with them.

I wrote in vain to Renée who, according to Mary S., had just installed herself in the large apartment on the ground floor and not in the little apartment planned and prepared at great expense by our governess. Mary S. saw her only in passing, so greatly busy was Renée with furnishing it in an original manner.

Was it this moving which prevented Renée from answering my letters? Or was it her book *Evocations* which had just appeared and which she had sent to me? Uneasy, I tried to understand through this book what could have provoked her silence: sometimes, reassured by her poems "for Atthis"—Atthis being one of the little names that she had given me—but surprised at being evoked in the past tense:

For I remember divine expectations,  
The shadow, and the feverish evenings of yesterday...  
Amidst sighs and ardent tears,  
I loved you, Atthis.

Several descriptive stanzas followed preceding this finale:

Here is what breathes and mounts with the flame,  
And the flight of songs and the breath of lilies,  
The intimate sob of the soul of my soul:  
I loved you, Atthis.

What is it that prevented a like feeling for living? I chafed with impatience and apprehension, attached to my duty of worldly frivolities without personal resources to escape. Finally, in the springtime, I returned to Paris with my family. Before even going up to my room in the Hotel D'Albe, I precipitated myself to Avenue du Bois, where the concierge informed me that "Mademoiselle went out just a moment ago."

I waited in the courtyard of Number 23. My heart beating, I perceived her finally arriving in an automobile and ran before it, when she gave the order to her chauffeur to go out again by the court at the end without stopping. Was it possible that she had not seen me? Or that she did not wish to see me? With a leap, I went to Violette's sister's house. Mary received me gently, but could not or would not inform me on this mystery. I spent some hours near her, in the hope that Renée would come up unexpectedly, and from this apartment situated just above that of Renée, I spied her apparition in the little garden. Fearing that the perfidious governess had intercepted the letter in which I announced my coming, I wished to have my heart clear about it and I had it, in fact, that same evening. Renée descended into her little garden accompanied by a sturdy person. The manner in which this person surrounded her with her arm left no ambiguity about their intimacy. She had then conquered Renée, but how? Certainly not by her physical appearance. Perhaps,



Liane de Pougy and Natalie Barney

under all that fat had she not only the authoritarian visage of a Valkyrie but a heart of gold? Renée had never aspired to all the useless luxury with which the new chosen one was surrounding her, her personal fortune having always more than sufficed for her needs. Who then could profit from this prodigality, if not our astute governess?

I prayed my friend Emma Calve—who suffered equally from an abandonment and whom I had sought to comfort at the time of her triumphal tour in *Carmen* in the United States—to lend me her irresistible voice; and when night came, we disguised ourselves as street singers. She sang under the French windows of Renée Vivien: "I have lost my Eurydice, nothing can match my sorrow," while I pretended to pick up the pieces of money thrown from the other floors. Finally, Renée partly opened her glass door to better listen to this surprising voice which was attacking the celebrated aria: "Love is the child of Bohemia which has never known law." The moment having come, I threw my poem attached to a bouquet over the gate of the garden, so that she could see and pick it up. But as some passers-by began to surround us, we had to eclipse ourselves in the shadow before my *chanteuse*, recognized in the shadow thanks to her voice, was pursued by applause.

I soon received a reply to my sonnet from the governess, and not from Renée as I had hoped. Having collected verses and bouquets "destined to a person whom she had the good fortune to have in charge," the governess "prayed me to cease these dispatches, as distressing as they are useless."

If it is true that sentiments are not commanded on order, it is even more true that they are not countermanded! My rage having no equal but my anguish. I sent an S.O.S. to Eva,\* who arrived at once to be near me. Horrified to find me in such a state of despair, she went to plead my cause with Renée, who refused to see

\*A childhood friend of Natalie's, probably her first lover.



Olive Custance, known as *Opale*

me again. Her existence ("since it is, it appears, necessary to live") must suit her so according to all appearances, for she knew me bound to her flight and obsessed by her verses, while she, inspired by my memory, had no further need to be troubled by my presence.

I learned then the machinations of our governess. Abusing the credulous jealousy of Renée, she had persuaded her—with proofs to give it weight—that one of my suitors, the Count de la Palisse, had gone to the United States for the unique purpose of marrying me. How had Renée been able to believe such an absurdity? Perhaps because she violently repulsed the least advance of her suitors she understood nothing of my complaisances, and more, that the company of intelligent men interested and pleased me often more than that of a pretty woman? In general, I remained the fraternal friend of men. Why, besides, this "angry opposition" between Sodom and Gomorrah, instead of a sympathy without equivocation?

Balanced and sociable, I could not foresee the unreasonable changes of Renée, and I remained profoundly afflicted by them.

The crude ruse of our governess had moreover succeeded in throwing the poor and unhappy Renée into the arms of another! By what intrigues or what chance had those arms proved to be those of one of the richest women of the Israelite world? This strong and willful person was not only known for her prejudiced tastes, but for endowing her successive mistresses with a sumptuous dwelling and a life annuity. This prodigality did not explain to me why Renée, who already had a considerable fortune, had fallen into this gilded trap.

Our governess, after expensively furnishing the little apartment chosen and abandoned, had presided over the luxurious fitting-out of this large ground floor where all passed through her intervention, which did not prevent her from touching some wages as watch dog of the captive. A voluntary captive perhaps and one who, after the death of Violette and the lies adroitly accumulated against me, had immense need of quiet and security.

It was then that I received a dispatch from an Austrian princess, with whom Eva and I were connected. She alerted me that she had just arrived alone at Bayreuth. We departed then for the Wagnerian Festival, where we were able to procure two seats, thanks to connections of the princess. From the first presentation of the Tetralogy, I spotted Renée and contemplated her from our balcony. Eva went down right away to tell her that I was waiting for her up above. Renée, giving her place to Eva, came to sit beside me. Both being invaded by this music, our eyes, then our hands met in the shadow, and we found ourselves so again each evening.

On telling me farewell she promised me, tears in her eyes, to arrange to find me again before the end of this same month of August. Our rendezvous was set at Vienna, from where we would continue the trip together on the Orient Express toward Mytilene, by way of Constantinople.

This time she kept her word and I found her again with an unbounded exaltation but I had to hold back, for she remained on the defensive. However, she identified me with her cult for Lesbos, in writing:

Sweetness of my songs, let us go toward Mytilene.  
Here is where my soul has taken its flight.

Let us go toward the welcome of the adored virgins.  
Our eyes will know the tears of returnings;  
We shall see at last fade away the countries  
Of the lifeless loves.

How important to her was this decor! But then I would have been content to be with her no matter where, away from the world, on condition that I found her there completely.

Thus I was less disappointed than she in perceiving that isle that Countess Sabini had described to us as having "the shape of a lyre spread on the sea." At the approach to Mytilene we heard a phonograph from the port nasalizing, "Come *poupoule*, come *poupoule*, come." Renée, who had been waiting since dawn on the bridge, paled with horror. When we trod that dust consecrated by the sandals of Sappho and her poetesses we regained awareness of our pilgrimage, despite the modern eruptions.

I kept myself from remarking to her that at Lesbos, far from encountering the Greek type of the beautiful companions of Sappho, we saw not a single woman of that lineage, but only some handsome stevedores, fishermen and shepherds. The remainder of the population had their traits as bastardized as their language, in which Renée found no longer the accent of classic Greek.

But the little rustic hotel which received us kept an ancient simplicity, with its water pots of baked clay and its good cooking in olive oil, served by an old domestic

who had her head encircled by a band and was followed by a bald dog without age.

The nights were more beautiful than all those we had known, and from the first, what a cry of victory I had to stifle!

Receive into your orchards a feminine couple,  
Isle melodious and friendly to caresses . . .  
Amidst the Asiatic odor of heavy jasmine,  
You have not at all forgotten Sappho nor her Mistresses . . .  
Isle melodious and friendly to caresses,  
Receive in your orchards a feminine couple . . .

The next day the entire island offered itself to us like an open bed. Spread out in the sun on some wide banks of soft algae, breathing the salt air, we continued to dream on this murmuring shore of the Aegean Sea. Renée, in her poem on Mytilene, describes it:

When disposing their bodies on beds of dry algae  
The lovers fling tired and broken words,  
You mingled your odors of roses and peaches  
With the long whisperings that follow kisses . . .  
In our turn tossing words tired and broken,  
We dispose our bodies on your beds of dry algae . . .

Without the community of Orientals installed in their summer villas, we would have been able to believe ourselves in the fifth century B.C. Renée acquired some medals of that epoch, struck in the image of Sappho.

In the enchantment of this sojourn, without messenger and without other souvenir, we rented two little villas joined by the same orchard, for Renée had resolved to never leave Mytilene. She would wait for me "faithfully and without budging" if, later, I had business elsewhere.

"I have yet less business elsewhere than you," I replied imprudently, for this reminder made her contract her fine eyebrows. I then came up with an idea I knew worthy of pleasing her: "Why shouldn't we form here that school of poetry so dreamed of where those who vibrate with poetry, youth and love would come to us, such as those poets of yesterday arriving from all parts to surround Sappho?"

Renée was in fact seduced by that perspective. Installed in the larger of the two villas, she worked again on her translation of Sappho, which was nearly finished.

"But Atthis, where is she?" I said.

"Atthis is present here," she replied, taking out of her bag *Five Little Greek Dialogues* and also the manuscript of *Je me Souviens* that I had sent to her at Bayreuth. This manuscript had neighbored with her cold cream and carried the trace of it on the parchment of the cover.

"Before it gets damaged more, it is necessary that we publish it."

"I wrote it for you alone."

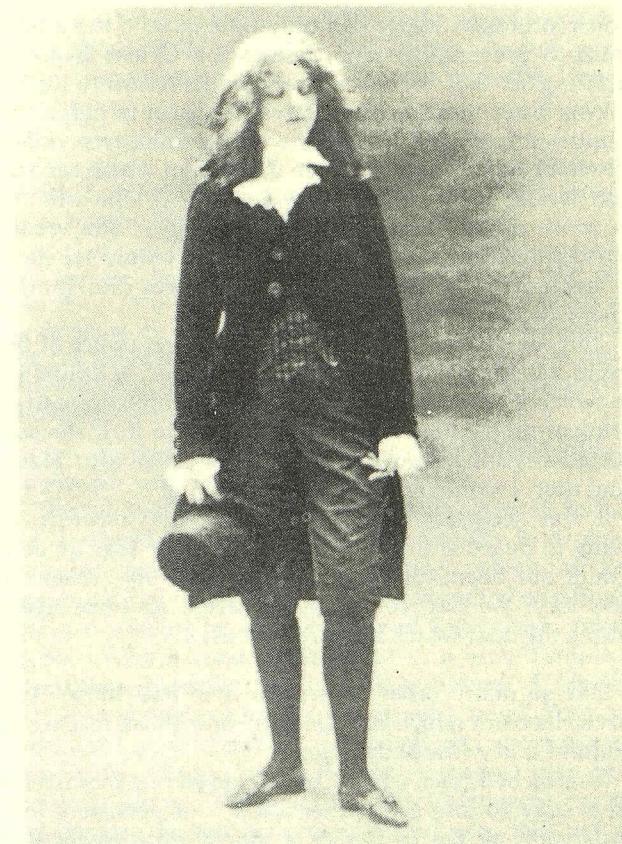
"Also, you see, it has not left me."

Opening my little book of *Dialogues*, I saw that she had underlined there certain passages concerning Sappho and, intrigued, I reread:

"Do you believe that she was so irresistible as they have said?"

"She was irresistible as all those who have followed their nature. She is as all those who have dared to live. She is as irresistible as Destiny itself."

"Why did she truly love only women?"



Renée Vivien

"Because only women are complex enough to attract her and fleeting enough to hold her. They alone know how to give her all the ecstasies and all the torments . . . It is in ourselves that we lose ourselves and in others that we find ourselves again. I believe her more faithful in her inconstancy than the others in their constant fidelity."

Leaning on my shoulder to read the text with me, Renée murmured in my ear:

"That Sappho there, she is you."

"That which describes one is not what one is, but that which one would wish to be."

"That which we shall become, and so that 'someone in the future will remember us.'"

"Thanks to your translation of Sappho and also to that of her poetesses, I shall write a play for which I have already determined the plot and which will destroy the myth of Phaon, for Sappho will die in it as she ought: because the most beloved of her friends will have betrayed her."

"Do not speak of betrayal nor of mourning 'in the house of the poet where mourning does not enter.'"

. . . We knew that at the hotel our mail waited for us. Avoid it? But then where spend the night? From our entry into the hotel, a parrot greeted us with a strident and mocking voice, and the concierge, taking our names, handed us our mail. Throw it in the sea without even taking cognizance of it? But then, uneasy at our silence, would they not come to disturb us? Would it not be better to open it and perhaps respond to it? A letter from Renée's friend announced her desire to visit this celebrated island and make to rendezvous shortly at

Constantinople. Renée had only time to send her a telegram to prevent her from taking the Orient Express, advising her that she was already on the return route.

Was it not more loyal to have her learn in person of Renée's intention of breaking with her than to give her the shock of such a decision in a telegram which, at any rate, would not stop her? She was of those who will not let loose or be deceived without struggle. She would arrive, therefore, and then what scenes would we have to undergo? I suggested hiding ourselves "no matter where away from the world."

"She would alert the consulate, the secret police of the entire world. Her power, like her fortune, is unlimited and even if you went away and I let her come, instead of tiring of such a life, she would clamp onto it. If she suspected anything she would install herself in your place. And that, I would not endure."

It was necessary then to leave in order to return to living in peace and to developing without fear or constraint our beautiful project. But meanwhile, from the next day, we had to resign ourselves to once again taking the boat which had brought us.

Like so many other lovers, we still had those "bad farewells from which one returns" and those recoveries exultant and without duration.

Unattached, then irresistibly attracted one toward the other only to lose each other anew, our persistent love underwent all the phases of a mortal attachment that perhaps death alone would be able to conclude.

I always loved Renée but with a vanquished love, enslaved by the circumstances that she had permitted to get the better of us:

Your clear gaze troubles and confuses me...  
Yes, I know it, I was wrong in many circumstances,  
And very piteously, I blush before you,  
But everywhere sorrow has hemmed me in and pursued me.  
Do not blame me anymore then! rather console me  
For having so badly lived my lamentable life.

Thanks to that "lamentable life," and to the happiness that she lacked, she has become what she has always wished to be: a great poet.

In reading, "La Venus des Aveugles" and "Aux Heures des mains jointes" I found how much these verses had strengthened. They no longer dragged "perfumed pallors" and other mawkishness. They were no longer languid but heavy with lived images, reflecting the cruelty of an existence undergone at first not without revolt, then with resignation and grandeur.

My verses have not attained calm excellence,  
I have understood it, and no one will read them ever...  
There remain to me the moon and near silence,  
And the lilies, and especially the woman that I loved...

My hands keep the odor of beautiful hair  
Let them bury me with my souvenirs, as  
They buried with queens, their jewels...  
I shall carry there my joy and my worry...

Isis, I have prepared the funeral barque  
Which they have filled with flowers spices and nard,  
And whose sail floats in folds of shrouds  
The ritual rowers are ready... It is growing late...

Increasingly appreciated in numerous milieus, Renée consented to unite her admirers and friends around her,

and we assisted at some very strange soirees where I found Colette, Moreno, the Ernest Charles, the Lesdrain and our old Professor, assiduous and rejuvenated—without our governess, who some time ago had been thanked for her diverse offices. At these reunions I was accompanied by an actress with golden eyes, brown hair and a difficult character, whose presence dissipated all suspicion for Renée's friend—who did not appear at any of these *fêtes*, but had herself informed on all that happened there.

One evening when I found myself at Renée's she announced to me that her friend, who had no more uneasiness about us, had a wish to meet me and would come to dine with us. I manifested the intention to flee, but Renée begged me to stay. Her friend would interpret my refusal badly. She arrived promptly, arrayed in an evening gown that she had ordered from Laferrière, a dress which I had to admire. Since this meeting would facilitate Renée's life, I had no choice but to resign myself to it.

While waiting to find myself face to face with my rival—she whom the Princess H. disrespectfully named "the blunder"—I asked Renée why she evidently attached so much importance to questions of costume where it concerned her friend, while she accorded them so little when they concerned herself?

"I like better to leave that bore to others and to ornament only my dwelling," she had told me, adding, "I hate the fittings and have not enough personality to triumph over them. I did however wish to be party to it by ordering a dress at one of the great *couturieres*, and went, before the appointed time for the fitting, to wait in a corner of the big salon till someone came to announce my turn. Having taken along a good book to keep me company, I read it without paying attention to what was going on around me. But when the evening obliged me to lift my head toward the light that they had just lit, I closed my book and got ready to go. My saleswoman, panic-stricken, tried to stop me. I replied to her, too happy to have an excellent pretext, and despite her excuses, 'that a similar inadvertence arrived only to the most patient... to the best clients....' Resolute, I got out the door, assuring her, with a smile, that I would never return...."

When that opulent person entered, her hand extended, I remarked how that blue robe covered with little islands cut into a cloth of silver, surrounded with diamonds, seemed to evoke the islands of the Aegean Sea—an allusion at which we all smiled differently. After the dinner, the Chinese butler brought Renée tea, which in place of drinking she threw with saucer, cup and spoon into the fireplace burning before us. I thought in spite of myself of her prayer: "Who then will bring me the hemlock in his hands?"

Did she throw that cup because it contained or did not contain the hemlock? Or because she judged this remedy derisory of her pain?

An instant interrupted by the violent nervousness of her gesture, we took up again a conversation on horses, whereon her friend and I had found a ground for understanding. She explained to me that a neighbor had proposed to buy from her a grey dappled horse of a breed that her stable was the only one to possess and which would match so well with one which the buyer already owned. Ought she to accept? She was hesitating, for to

sell one of her horses pained her as much as the offer flattered her. On this, the hour to withdraw having sounded, she offered to drive me back. With a glance, Renée prayed me to accept. We left then together through the Bois as far as my pavilion, where she wished to enter with me. I excused myself, making pretext of an unsupportable headache (a malady that I have never in my life felt). She could only leave with a look of reproach.

Some time after that evening—in the course of which she had tried in vain to teach me to smoke—the lady sent me a little cigarette case in enamel filled with tiny cigarettes, under the cover of which she had had engraved: "Always to the extreme, is it not, Mademoiselle?" Since I had done nothing to encourage the sending of this unusable gift—unless it was to ironically admire her dress—I supposed her on the look-out for adventure. I learned very soon after that the neighbor who had offered to buy her horse had made the bet before several persons of which she who reported the wager to me said, "Not only to possess this horse, but the owner along with." I right away advised Renée of this who, after having made her own investigation, had to recognize that the neighbor in question had won her bet. As she showed herself more indignant than pained by this affair, I tried to reason with her:

"Look, Renée, have you the right to get indignant on this point?"

"It is as if I had consented to marry a horse-dealer and that after sacrificing myself to someone so vile, this horse-dealer dared to deceive me. I will not endure this injury."

Uneasy at the excessive way in which she resented this adventure that I considered harmless, after several years of a rare fidelity on the part of her companion, I questioned our Professor, still devoted to Renée. He informed me that she had decided to break "with this banal and hypocritical life." She put this project into execution. First wrapping up her favorite knick-knack, a jade Buddha, she liquidated her bank account and took away all her money. In the train which took her to Marseilles, while looking for her ticket for the conductor, she let fall a packet of bank notes in front of the other travellers. Fearing to be followed and robbed, she let herself be "picked up" by the secretary of her friend—a friend who shortly following sent me a card, where I read this single word: "Judas."

After this debacle and this humiliation, I do not know to what excess Renée gave herself up, without so much as renouncing her plan of voyage. She escaped anew, having this time better combined her departure with some relatives who accompanied her on a world tour. After her first stop, I received in fact a word from her, informing me that she had taken to the open sea to reflect, far from all that she had loved, on the continuation that she would give to her "miserable existence." Wounded on all sides, she had already withdrawn her books from sale. Some carping critics had decided her.

The aspersions, the gross attacks, through her imagination, motivated three of her most beautiful poems: "On the Public Place," "The Pilory," and "Vanquished."

In the face of such results, I could only blame exaggerated sensibility and susceptibility. But I deplored that, by my insensitivity in precipitating the separation from her friend, I had added the drop of fatal bitterness. I feared for her health, already so damaged and which

could not tolerate the least shock or the least reproach.

At the time of a visit to her house, probably just before her voyage toward the Orient, Marcelle Tinayre saw her so:

She entered like a phantom. Already very ill, she wished to see me again.... Her body more fragile than formerly, revealed nothing of its contours under the very simple dress of black muslin. How she has changed, alas!

Always I shall re-see her, shadow in the shadow, recounting not her life, but her soul. She was speaking of the other world.... And all of a sudden, she said, "When I am so sad, so alone, so ill, I think that I would like to die Catholic. It is the sole religion where there is poetry and beauty." She added, smiling, "But no priest would permit me to keep my little Buddhist idols...."

How all this contrasts with the artificial Renée whom Colette presents in *Ces Plaisirs*!

Though feeling that her despair surpassed all human aid, I wished to leave my house at Neuilly in order to wait for her return in a new place, where no bad memories had collected. I had then searched and finally found a dwelling between courtyard and garden, on rue Jacob, where I became the vestal of a little Temple of Friendship. In order to escape the moving, I rejoined that actress whom I had let depart with relief. From my arrival at Saint Petersburg, I learned that I was replaced: first by an attache of the French embassy, then by a Russian colonel. When I took the train again for the long return, an old diplomatic friend who had put me current with my misfortune brought me Voltaire's *Candide*.

Scarcely installed in my new dwelling, I learned that Renée was ill "of a malady traversed by agonizing crises and that she no longer wishes to see anyone." However, that same evening I went to ask news of her, a bouquet of violets in my hand. Half-opening the door, a butler that I had never seen replied: "Mademoiselle just died." This announcement was made in the tone of "Mademoiselle just went out." I had not the presence of mind to insist that someone put these violets near her. Then, staggering, I regained the Avenue du Bois and fainted on one of its first benches.

When I regained consciousness, I returned home and shut myself in my bedroom. Neither able nor wishing to see her dead, it was necessary at once to make contact again with all of her that remained to me. Like a grave robber, I took hold of the precious little box that she had given me. Its key lost, I had to open it by force. It contained so many tangible souvenirs that I felt her presence wander around me. They could then no longer prevent me from rejoining her. That this haunting not abandon me! For if I were no longer haunted, what would remain for me? Forgetfulness. But what lover, what poet, would wish it?

I plunged into all her relics: the manuscript of the poems written for me, accepting life—a vacillating life—through my tears....

The day after the next, I followed her interment like a somnabulist for it was not in this tomb that I could search for her, but well elsewhere and within myself.

Margaret Porter is a poet and translator who wrote for years under the name "Gabrielle L'Autre." She was a founding member of *Tres Femmes*. The Muse of the Violets, a selection of Renée Vivien's poetry, has been translated by her and Catharine Kroger and published by Naiad Press.