

Chronicle: Renée Vivien, From One Century to Another

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Renée Vivien died a century ago, at the age of thirty-two years. Buried in the cemetery at Passy, she lies at rest a very short distance from the imposing mausoleum of Marie Bashkirtseff, in a little neo-Gothic chapel that Hélène de Zuylen, her final companion, had erected in 1911 and on the walls of which are engraved a number of her verses, including notably her own epitaph:

Voici la porte d'où je sors ...	<i>This is the gate whence I depart...</i>
O mes roses et mes épines !	<i>O my roses and thorns!</i>
Qu'importe l'autrefois ? Je dors	<i>What matter the times of yore? I sleep</i>
En songeant aux choses divines ...	<i>Dreaming of things divine ...</i>

Voici donc mon âme ravie.	<i>Here is my enraptured soul</i>
Car elle s'apaise et s'endort	<i>She finds her peace and sleeps</i>
Ayant, pour l'amour de la Mort	<i>Having, for the love of Death</i>
Pardonné ce crime : la Vie. ¹	<i>Forgiven that crime called Life.</i>

On 18 November 2009 (one hundred years to the day after her death), the wrought-iron gates of this narrow shrine set about with stained-glass were opened, thanks to the generosity of Renée Vivien's great-niece, Imogen Bright, allowing admirers, in the course of an informal ceremony, to lay upon the altar her favourite flowers – lilies and violets – and to read, some her poems, some a few extracts from her correspondence, in an atmosphere of respectful dignity but without any sadness:

Le charme maladif des musiques moroses
Ici ne convient point à l'auguste trépas;
Venez ! Il faut couvrir de rythmes et de roses
La maison du poète où le deuil n'entre pas.

Rien que l'éclat des chants : pas de vain verbiage,
Ni le sanglot banal d'importunes douleurs;
Comme pour un splendide et joyeux mariage,
Il lui faut avant tout des fleurs, des fleurs, des fleurs.²

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*The sickly charm of the songs of gloom
Has not its place at this noble death;
Come! Wreathe with rhymes and with roses sweet
The poet's home whence is banished grief.*

*Just the lilt of song: no empty words,
Nor the dreary sobs of unwelcome pain;
But as at a splendid wedding feast
There should be flowers, and flowers again.*

This commemoration was followed on Friday 20 November by a one-day symposium under the title of “Renée Vivien: a woman of letters between two centuries (1877–1909)” – organised at the University of London Institute in Paris with the support of the Institut Émilie du Châtelet.³ It drew a broad audience and provided the occasion for paying tribute to a writer whose popularity has never waned among lovers of fine books who, since her death, lay out large sums in competing for the original editions of her writings in verse and in prose, elegant little volumes with covers often illustrated with delicate pastel works of the symbolist painter Lucien Lévy-Dhurmer. But the literary output, both decadent and feminist in tone and content,⁴ has long been eclipsed by the person of the poet herself, whose unfortunate loves, tragic destiny and homosexuality have constituted the principal elements of a discreet but no less fervent cult following.

Born in London in 1877 of an American mother and a British father, Pauline Mary Tarn, who wrote mainly under the pen-name of Renée Vivien,⁵ took up definitive residence in Paris at the age of 21. Straddling the dividing line between two cultures and two languages, the young poet embodied in complex and exemplary fashion that double attachment and that Entente Cordiale of which she was the contemporary. In the way of many English and American young women of her time, she chose France to be her home – and place of death – and the French language, of which she had perfect mastery thanks to a cosmopolitan education, for composing her poetry, her short stories and her novels. She brought to her work a feverish commitment veiled behind an apparent casualness, if we are to credit the famous report of Colette's, in *Le Pur et l'impur* (1932, under the title *Ces plaisirs ...*). Yet Renée Vivien was anything but a society bluestocking, a dilettante who wrote to fill in her idle hours and to shine among her social peers, in short, one of those proper – but often insipid – figures who provided rich copy for the women's press in the form of delicious articles dedicated to the latest ladies of letters in the limelight, complete with their photographs: ladies who were first and foremost wives, mothers, and perfect mistresses of their homes, but then to top it all, also writers. Shunned by her fellow lady-authors who regarded her as altogether too scandalous, black-listed by the critical establishment which condemned the *perversity* of her pen – once it was discovered that the author of those impassioned odes to a coy mistress was in reality an *authoress* – Renée Vivien immured herself in a personalised world of ideals, in which Hellenic antiquity occupied a large place alongside a taste for strong liqueurs which were said to have hastened her end. The comfort of her financial position nevertheless allowed her to publish at her own expense with Alphonse Lemerre (specialist publisher of the *Parnasse contemporain*), before preferring non-commercial publication, entrusting the printing to Edward Sansot from 1907.

Generally associated with the flamboyant American Natalie Clifford Barney, a rich heiress and openly Lesbian literary aesthete whom she met in 1899 and with whom she had a passionate but stormy relationship, Renée Vivien is today regarded as more than just “that slender young woman with a pale face veiled by an abundant cascade of blonde hair who owed her place within a certain

society more to the ambiguity of her lifestyle than to any great talent”, as André de Fouquières (1953: 18) was still describing her when relating her brief liaison with the courtesan Émilienne d’Alençon.

A major figure of the so-called feminine literature of the turn of the century, as attested by the anthologies of poetry and other essays of the 1900s devoted to the *French Muses*,⁶ Renée Vivien, after a long period of eclipse, seems to have emerged from her purgatory thanks to recent academic research and to various re-editions that have seen the light of day over the last twenty years or so.⁷ Her work has finally been recognized for its originality and she now has a place of honour, supported by various portraits, on websites devoted to Lesbian literature. Such recent enthusiasm for her can be readily explained. Indeed, behind titles as innocent-sounding as *Études et Préludes* (Studies and Preludes) (1901), *Évocations* (1903) or *À l’heure des mains jointes* (When our Hands were Joined) (1906) there is unfolded a sometimes fatal conception of love, a view of sexual pleasure that is always Sapphic in nature, and a very unconventional idea of the feminine condition. Her homosexuality, her condemnation of marriage, her scorn for family and her absolute refusal of motherhood distinguish her from her contemporaries like Anna de Noailles or, to a lesser degree, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, who were more inclined to cultivate the more refined image expected of them by celebrating the figure of the male and nature, and by aligning themselves to the vitalist trend in vogue at the time. A very competent Hellenist and translator of Sappho (1903) – a Sappho resolutely Lesbian, elevated to the status of tutelary divinity for having combined a lyric genius with an exclusive unisexual love – then of a collection of poems of nine woman poets of Greek antiquity under the title of *Les Kitharèdes* (1904), Renée Vivien developed on the one hand a personal “genealogy” of the creation,⁸ and on the other hand, a feminine mythology which diverges significantly from the standard tales. Her mythology is dominated by glorious or superbly rebellious female figures. Vivien exalts Lilith to the detriment of Eve, preferring the witch to the fairy, and openly identifying herself with the warrior Amazon indifferent to male seduction. In particular she offers a renewed identity for the androgyne, prefiguring the gendered approaches that her collections in verse and in prose will profitably adopt thenceforth. Several short stories from *La Dame à la louve* (1904) lend themselves particularly well to a reading that deconstructs masculine and feminine roles,⁹ while the poems blur habitual gender markers, setting up a gender fluidity from which queer theory has abundantly drawn:

Ma bouche a possédé ta bouche féminine
Et mon être a frémi sous tes baisers d’amant,
Car je suis l’Être double, et mon âme androgyne
Adore en toi la vierge et le prince charmant.¹⁰

*My lips have possessed your virginal lips
And my heart has thrilled with your lover’s kiss,
For Two I am in One, and my man-woman soul
Adores in you the maid and the dashing young prince.*

The radicality of her stance, which took veritable shape through a reinvented Lesbos, that is, one that is gynocentric, also is not far from prefiguring certain pages of Monique Wittig, from *Le Corps lesbien* to *Les Guérillères*. Finally, by dedicating a novel, *Passion according to Renée Vivien* to her, the Catalan poet Maria-Mercè Marçal evidenced her growing significance for contemporary literature.¹¹

Of only marginal appeal in her own time and constantly testing the boundaries, this “anxious and melancholy Muse” (Formont 1934: VII) who so dreaded being forgotten has little by little gained in modernity, and even in popularity, and henceforth is finding a readership skilled in deciphering the audacity that lies behind the formal classicism of her works. If the lyricism of her verse is attractive, there is an astonishing boldness of theme which, through the *polysémie* of her vocabulary, offers with natural aplomb a highly personal vision of *l’amour la poésie*, to paraphrase Éluard:

Ta voix a la langueur des lyres lesbiennes,
L’anxiété des chants et des odes saphiques,
Et tu sais le secret d’accablantes musiques
Où pleure le soupir d’unions anciennes.¹²

*Your voice has the charm of the Lesbian lyres,
The sweet cares of Sappho’s harmonious odes,
And you know the secrets of heart-rending song
Wherein weeps the sigh for the loves of old time.*

In this “Sonnet féminin”, where the metre at once lays bare and reconceals the textures of sexuality woven within it, Renée Vivien, by applying only feminine rhymes (hence her title), allows to be heard the harmonious accents of a love *which does dare say its name*. This is not the slightest of its merits.

The time for a genuine rediscovery in the form of a homage rendered had therefore arrived. Thus, paralleling the scholarly and elegant re-edition of her poems published by ErosOnyx (2009) and the publication of the first collective work entirely devoted to her (*Renée Vivien à rebours. Études pour un centenaire*, 2009), the one-day symposium organised in Paris (whose Proceedings will be appearing through the Éditions Champion), by revisiting a variety of aspects of her work and her writing, has brought into focus Renée Vivien’s literary legitimacy. As a commemorative event and a public occasion intended to allow her voice to be heard in every sense of the term, the symposium also provided a space for exchange and dialogue between researchers and interested readers, between specialists and those with a purely amateur fascination for her life and works. Finally, it enabled a new impulse to be given to studies henceforth baptised “Vivienian” and the posterity of that “exile from Mytilene”¹³ to be assured – at least until the next centenary.

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson

Notes

1. “Építaph sur une Pierre tombale ” (“Epitaph on a Tombstone”) in *Haillons* (1910).
2. “Sourire dans la mort” (“A Smile in Death”), in *Poèmes retrouvés*, compiled by Jean-Paul Goujon in his edition of *Poésies complètes of Renée Vivien* (1986 : 442).
3. The publishing house ErosOnyx, when this symposium was mooted, also lent their support.
4. It is too frequently ignored that Vivien contributed to the journal *La Fronde* and that some of her poems appeared in the homophile review *Akademos*, set up by Jacques Adelswärd-Fersen in 1909.
5. She published several collections, written in conjunction with Hélène de Zuylen, under the pseudonym Paule Riversdale.
6. As examples can be quoted the essay “Le Romantisme féminin” in Charles Maurras’s *L’Avenir de l’intelligence* (1907), *Les Muses françaises. Anthologie des femmes poètes* by Alphonse Séché (1909), *Nos femmes de lettres* by Paul Flat (1909), *La Littérature féminine d’aujourd’hui* by Jules Bertaut (1909) and *Muses d’aujourd’hui* by Jean de Gourmont (1910).

7. Jean-Paul Goujon published a biography under the title *Vie de Renée Vivien* in 1986, immediately followed by a complete edition of her poems, both works published by Régine Desforges. Since then, Vivien has been the subject of several dissertations, the most recent in date being that of Marie-Ange Bartholomot-Bessou (2004). Finally, the short story collection *La Dame à la louve* has recently been republished by Folio, in the collection “Femmes de lettres” directed by Martine Reid. These three specialists of Vivien’s œuvre took part in the one-day symposium.
8. Marie-Ange Bartholomot-Bessou (2009: 151) speaks very precisely of a “genealogy of the female creation”.
9. See Martine Reid “Le genre, autrement (dans le recueil *La Dame à la louve*)”, contribution to the one-day symposium.
10. “La Double Ambiguïté”, in *Échos et Reflets* (1903) published under the name of Paule Riversdale.
11. In his contribution to the one-day symposium under the title of “From Renée Vivien to Maria-Mercè Marçal: inspiration and re-writing”, Jean-Paul Goujon clearly traced the chain of linkage between these two poetic voices.
12. “Sonnet féminin” in *Cendres et poussières* (1902).
13. Expression used by Héra Mirtel (1910).

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