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A Hermeneutic Reading of Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien

Antoinette Sherman

"The word 'hermeneutics' points back, as we know, to the task of the interpreter, which is that of interpreting and communicating something which is unintelligible because it is spoken in a foreign language—even if it is the language of the signs and symbols of the Gods."

—Gadamer, Truth and Method

My intention in focusing upon the works of Renée Vivien and Natalie Barney is to make more widely known two fine writers whose neglect can in part be attributed to their sex and unconventional lifestyles and to examine how and why these women emerged as rare exceptions at the turn of the century. This work is not motivated by a desire to resurrect two forgotten women writers or create a new canon of women's literature; rather, it is done under the belief that the consideration of women writer's (or any other minority) can be beneficial to expanding and altering attitudes, prejudices and ideologies. For this reason I have employed a hermeneutic approach to my reading of Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien, as I feel that this perspective best examines their works and lifestyles as they relate to the broader conditions of our cultural constructs.

Traditional representational discourses have constructed others within Europe—women, homosexuals, the insane—as well as others external to Europe. As two lesbian women born at the turn of the century, Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien were the traditional other to their native land. In response to this, each chose expatriation and made France her permanent home, where they created a working and living relationship that would last for
nearly fifteen years. Leaving one's world and culture behind, voluntarily or involuntarily, means engaging oneself in a complex process of composing one's identity and otherness. For Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien, French language and culture was a method of composing a new identity. Disillusioned with the sovereignty of the individual in their native countries, Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien set out to recover the real "selves" that had been left uncontaminated by a country that looked upon their choices as women as illegitimate. Illegitimate and offensive members of their native countries, the French identity to them became a legitimate and true self.

The hermeneutic perspective grapples with the ongoing process of constituting a self through an encounter with the other/s. The German word, Hermeneutics, probably first appeared in the 17th century in the title of J.C. Dannhauer's book, *Hermeneutica Sacra Sive Methodus Exponendarum Sacarum Litterarum* (1654). The term is derived from the classical Greek references to Hermes, the mythological son of Zeus and Maia. Like Pan, Hermes was represented as a god of many attributes, but is most frequently noted as the messenger god (as in Homer's *Odyssey*) and the god of eloquence (as in Aeschylus's *Prometheus*). As the envoy of the gods of Olympus, Hermes was given the task of sending messages to those who became estranged from the gods' direct influences. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Hermes was sent by Zeus to travel great expanses of ocean to Odysseus who was trapped by Calypso on the remote Island of Ogygia, where he could not receive assistance form the gods directly. Here the idea is that an eloquent message from the gods can be one's salvation.

The notion of divine salvation received through the sacramental word has long been emphasized in Christianity. St. Paul had claimed that one's salvation comes by receiving the sacra-
mental Word through the ears. This notion became much more formalized during the Reformation in Germany. At this time, a strong emphasis was placed on a more strict adherence to scriptural exegesis. As part of the Reformation movement, a new emphasis was placed on the fact that God did not speak to individuals through the intermediary of priests and a pope—who were increasingly viewed as fraught with moral laxness and avarice—but His word was revealed through scripture. Luther maintained that Scripture was to be interpreted in a very literal sense without the services of mediation provided by the clergy. From this, new creeds sprang up that were solely formulated on the basis of Scripture. The notion was that wayward souls estranged from divine revelation could find a path to salvation by receiving the sacramental word in scripture. By the 17th century, hermeneutics became another term for Biblical exegesis by the Protestants who needed a system for interpreting Biblical texts such that understanding and truth as put forth by God could be received.

By the 18th and 19th centuries, with the German Romantic movement, hermeneutics extended beyond Biblical exegesis to include juridical and philological interpretation. Romanticism in Germany represented a reaction to Kant and the Enlightenment. For Kant and the Enlightenment philosophers, truth was derived solely through the cognitive faculties of reason; a rigidly rational and logical scientific methodology. The Romantics, however, placed emphasis on the inheritance of attitudes derived from the study of past traditions. For the German Romantics, borrowing from the “historicist” school established by the Italian historical philosopher Giambattista Vico, the past was to be made to function as a means of understanding the present; one can study the nature of humanity through the histori-
cist's teleological lens. History evolves in a way analogous to the organic growth of an organism governed by teleological laws of development. In much the same way a human being's behavior and outlook changes as one moves from infantile, pubescent, and adult stages of maturity. These different stages of development can only be grasped by the historian through critical interpretation of cultural constructions—most importantly language. Indeed, for Vico, poetry was most sublime and nature was nothing more than the physical avatar of the divine word. Detractors notwithstanding, such as Vico, who had held that poetry is more sublime than prose and that nature is nothing more than the physical avatar of the divine word, this has been and remains to be the dominant architectonic of truth construction.

In his critique of aesthetics Gadamer points out that truth or understanding has been seen as only derivable from the methodology established by the scientific method—Kant and the Enlightenment (43). Gadamer finds that science can be a source of truth, but so can art, history, philosophy—the human sciences—Geisteswissenschaften, art also has a claim on truth. Poetry has been seen by scientists from Newton forward as "a kind of ingenious nonsense" (Bush 40). As Jeremy Bentham noted, "All poetry is misrepresentation. Indeed between poetry and truth there stands a natural opposition: false morals, fictitious nature. The poet always stands in need of something false. His business consists in stimulating our passions, and exciting our prejudices. Truth, exactitude of every kind, is fatal to poetry" (253-254). This view is affirmed in John Locke's statement:

If we would speak of things as they are, we must allow that all the art of rhetoric, besides their order and clearness, all the artificial
and figurative application of words eloquence hath invented, are
for nothing else but to insinuate wrong ideas, move the passions,
and thereby mislead the judgement, and so indeed are perfect
cheat; and therefore...they are certainly, in all discourses that pre-
tend to inform or instruct, wholly to be avoided and, where truth
and knowledge are concerned, cannot but be thought a great fault
either of the language or person that makes use of them (13).

The Enlightenment philosophers, borrowing from Spinoza,
Descartes, and others found that the orthodox approach to
epistemology holds that language is merely a translucent medi-
um through which ideas, emotions, or descriptions of objective
reality are conveyed. Thought or cognition, in this approach, is
taken to be prior to intersubjective discourse and is performed
within a non-linguistic framework. Linguistic mediation is
here considered to be a muddled conveyer of truth. This deni-
gration of linguistic mediation can be traced back to Plato's
assassination of the Homeric epic through the 17th century
Rationalists: Spinoza's quixotic attempt to express philosophy
and divine truth in the form of geometric proofs and
Descartes' analytic geometry.

Forging an opposition to this viewpoint, the Romantics in
the early modern period, drawing inspiration from Vico, defend-
ed art and poetry as beholding of truth value of a "higher order."
According to Richard H. Brown:

In reaction to this view, but at the same time accepting its assump-
tions about the nature of the scientific enterprise, defenders of art
turned inward for "that which" art represents. There developed a
strict dichotomy between "reality" and "symbols," between "truth"
and "beauty." Positivists tried to eliminate the use of symbols in sci-
ence, whereas critics and aestheticians tried to find a home for art
outside nature (26).
Human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften) in the twentieth century philosophy significantly broke away from this long-standing tradition and took a linguistic turn.

One of the most influential of the 18th century German Romantic philosophers was the theologian Johann Von Herder. Herder emphasized that a systematic study of past cultures, from the ancient Greeks up to the Renaissance could provide one with an understanding of the present culture of the common people, or Volkegeist. That is, like Vico before him, the human sciences were placed in a paramount position in the philosophy of human understanding. Preserving this tradition into the 19th century, Frederick Schleiermacher, however, modified it such that it was no longer seen to be simply an ancillary to theology and philology. Rather, hermeneutics came to be seen as the basis for all human sciences. No longer just a system for making written texts more understandable, Schleiermacher gave hermeneutics a more psychological bent and emphasized that all thought was inherently linguistic in nature. Such an idea also found a home in England with Ludwig Wittgenstein and in France with Ferdinand de Saussure.

Hermeneutics came to be seen as a system for mediating all humanistic traditions- whether they were artistic, religious or philosophical- that had become estranged from their original meaning and were in need of interpretation. Drawing on these interpretations as well as those of Hegel and Heidegger, Gadamer sees the subject of thinking as one embedded in language. For Heidegger one who speaks is caught up in the flow of language, which has a built-in way of conceiving the world. Gadamer sees a structure of prejudice, an inherent world deposited in language and forming an unavoidable constituent of ongoing events of understanding (Shapiro 15).
Central to the use of hermeneutics in my reading of the works of Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien is Gadamer’s understanding of Bildung. Hegel as quoted by Gadamer described Bildung, self-cultivation, as “a disposition of the mind that flows into sensibility and character” (10-11). This idea stems from the ancient mystical tradition of man holding the image of God in his soul and through life actions attempting to cultivate himself with this image as his model or perfect form. Bildung is a process of becoming, through self-cultivation, in both the Platonic and Hegelian senses of the word. It is a means to an end or a path whereby man, through acquiring a capacity or skill, attempts to mold himself into this perfect form or God-image. This involves distancing oneself from the particulars in a movement toward the universal. Bildung, for Hegel, has a process orientation that begins with the self that is alienated from the other, in this case the universal. The next is a movement of self to the other by embracing it (such as the learning of a foreign language) then making it part of the self. Gadamer writes:

To recognize one’s own in the alien, to become at home in it, is the basic movement of the spirit, whose being consistently is returning to itself from what is other. Hence all theoretical Bildung, even acquiring foreign languages and conceptual worlds, is merely the continuation of a process of Bildung that begins much earlier. Every single individual who raises himself out of his natural being to the spiritual finds in the language, customs, and institutions of his people a pre-given body of material which, as in learning to speak, he has to make his own. So we can see here that insofar as the world is humanly constituted by language it has a human signature on it. (383)

For Gadamer, Bildung is keeping oneself open to what is other. Renée Vivien and Natalie Barney participated in this
Gadamerian notion of *Bildung* through their expatriation and their complete immersion in the French language and French culture. In doing so, they found that insofar as they could depart from their known selves and embrace the unknown other, they were returned to their true, most legitimate selves. As Weinsheimer writes “the structure of *Bildung* is so crucial to Gadamer’s understanding of *Geist*...that it deserves special attention... In this structure of excursion and return we discern the circular structure of hermeneutic understanding” (70).

**Expatriation: *Face Aux Autres***

“For the outsider will say, ‘in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.’”
—Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*

A common motif throughout Western literature and folk-tale is the romance of the wandering hero, the story of exile and return. Beginning with Odysseus and extending into the literature of the modern period, the western hero has been exiled from his homeland, encountered that which is alien and other, appropriated and constituted a self through his encounter, and subsequently returned to the land of his birth. For late nineteenth century Europeans, as exemplified in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and E.M. Forster’s *Passage to India*, the journey into supposedly primitive and lawless spaces offered a refuge from the codified everyday life of modern European cities, a refuge from what Chris Bongie calls “the constitutive mediocrity of the modern subject” (22). For many modern Europeans, the other, native members of exotic and foreign lands, became a metaphor for the essential “self” or “otherness” that they felt to be lodged and
repressed within themselves. As Mariana Torgovnick writes, "Whatever form the primitive's hominess takes, its strangeness salves our estrangement from ourselves and our culture (185). The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas sees this appropriation of the other as a unique feature of western civilization and the Greek culture it is based on: "Throughout all its adventures, consciousness finds its way back to itself as itself, comes home to itself like Odysseus, who throughout all his journeys is heading only for the island of his birth" (211). Embodied in literature, this theme is repeated in life, where the ritual of exile and return marks the process of maturation and the shaping of individual identities according to dominant cultural values. In Western culture, the theme of exile and return is prevalent in European colonial practices, and in an intriguing and subtle inversion, American expatriation at the turn of the century.

For the European colonialist, the other, frequently embodied in the Oriental and his culture, was both seductive and threatening. Seductive to the Westerner in that he and his culture represented a life where the true and romantic self might find an escape from the alienating conditions of modernity, threatening in that he represented possibilities which were unacceptable to modern civilization, and therefore repressed and rejected within the European individual. The greatest threat to the colonialist was identification with the "otherness" of the Oriental or native, through which one ended up "going primitive," yielding to the loss of reason and savagery that characterizes the Oriental as the Westerner defines him. Here, as noted by Bernard Waldensels, arises one of the most paradoxical aspects of the other and the alien: it is something not yet known yet at the same time something that penetrates what seems to be more than anything else our own: our body, our language, our person (37). As Freud writes in Das Unheimlich, the "uncanny" is "in reality nothing
new or alien but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it through a process of repression” (241). In encountering the native or Oriental as other, the European colonialist discovered in himself something that was repressed, often his more primitive nature and superstitions. His reaction to this discovery was often horror alieni, that feeling of being completely transformed and permeated by the other, as is expressed in Kurt’s final words in Heart of Darkness, “the horror, the horror.”

At the same time that European intellectuals were beginning to criticize European practices of colonialization and its appropriation of the other as a way of defining its own culture, an inversion of this process manifested itself through the “Lost Generation” of American writers who flocked to Europe in the 1920’s. Unlike European colonialism, American expatriation was not propelled by a harsh expansionist economic system, but rather by individuals who were attempting to gain a European point of comparison from which they could judge their own cultural perspectives and produce work that would reflect a new American aesthetic derived from fusing American and European cultural horizons. America at the start of this century was still very much, for all its political independence, a provincial culture. When a century of troubled growth and cultivation drew to a close, many gave voice to the idea that in all the subtle ways which constitute a meaningful life, American democracy had failed. As noted by the poet Marianne Moore, America was a country with no proofreaders, silkworms, or digressions, and the language had reduced itself to a level which even dogs and cats could read. In this fascinating reversal of processes, the once colonized and exotic America looked to Europe for a refuge from mediocrity, as a land where the romantic individual might give definition to his
or her true self. Most of the expatriates who traveled to Europe during the 1920's, however, failed to do exactly this. Matthew Josephson, whose expatriate magazine was titled "Secession," noted in his 1930 book "Portrait of the Artist as American" that the pilgrimage of the Yankee spirit towards complete freedom of ideas resulted in highly individualistic artistic personalities, but also led to a certain infantilism in the national character (30). Henry James had noted with horror how the Americans flocked to Europe and yet looked upon everything European with a stingy, defiant, grudging attitude. Confronted with linguistic barriers, few expatriates could read European writers and did not have, or use, the opportunity to meet them. Consequently, we have a genre of referential writing in which the expatriate writer seems trapped in a hall of mirrors, having nothing to do but describe each other describing each other.

Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien stand out as provocative exceptions. Barney and Vivien expressed their allegiance to an international community of letters by writing in French. They confronted the unfamiliar, in this case French culture and language, added it to the repertory of their knowledge, then absorbed it into their own cultural perspective. They abandoned the expatriate role of one who is purely different and obtained an expanded American feminine aesthetic. Barney and Vivien undertook a great risk by dauntlessly stepping out of familiar ground and trespassing upon the province of those who had a right to claim familiarity with their chosen areas of scholarship.

In the following pages I would like to pursue the cause of the marked contrasts between the work and lives of Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien and the overwhelming majority of expatriates who came to France at the turn of the century. The common conclusion regarding American expatriation in France is exemplified in an excerpt from Malcolm Cowley's "Exile's Return:"
As I read over these chapters written almost twenty years ago, the story they tell seems to follow the old pattern of alienation and reintegration, or departure and return, that is repeated in scores of European myths and continually re-embodied in life. A generation of American writers went out into the world like the children in Grimm's fairy tales who ran away from a cruel stepmother. They wandered for years in search of treasure and then came back like grown children to dig for it at home. But the story in life was not so simple and lacked the happy ending of fairy tales. Perhaps there was really a treasure and perhaps it had been buried all the time in their father's garden, but the exiles did not find it there. They found only what others were finding: work to do as best they could and families to support and educate. The adventure had ended and once more they were part of common life (289).

Cowley indicates that he believes the lost generation of American writers constituted a literary confraternity engaged in discovering treasure, but ultimately only affirmed in the good of the common life they had left behind. As Anita Plath Helle notes in her dissertation *Speculative Subjects*, an interesting question to ask here is whose common life is being affirmed? While Cowley would have most certainly included women amongst the expatriates, this passage hints at an intriguing aspect of travel literature and the motif of exile and return in western culture. While there is nothing inherently or essentially masculine about travel, voyage literature has generally transmitted and reinforced patriarchal values and ideology from one male generation to the next. Masculine traditions and values are carried over into the expatriate's descriptive language of Paris, which qualifies it as a feminine entity, wicked and corrupt. Through consorting with such a mistress, the innocent American is made wiser and perhaps grows in a sense of morality. This is evident in the title of Samuel Putnam's work, *Paris Was Our Mistress: Memoirs of a Lost and Found Generation.*
Cowley's description of expatriation is marked by a vision of a rebellious generation of youth who, like prodigal sons, eventually returned to the ideals of their forefathers. We have few stories of prodigal daughters in Western culture. Historically, the sphere relegated to women is not one of mobility, but of stability. In the theme of exile and return, women are not the individuals who undertake journeys, but those who remain immobile. The women who came to Paris in the first decades of the twentieth century were part of a political and demographic phenomenon. They were the first generation of women to truly enjoy the freedom to travel and write about their adventures. In light of this, it could be said that the women who were amongst the expatriates were motivated by profoundly different cultural forces than many of their male contemporaries.

At the turn of the century it had become clear that the long-continued strategy of the women's suffrage movement was nearing its crucial turning point, culminating in the triumph of 1920. This and other changes brought a fragile and tenuous freedom to the lives of most American and some European women. While political changes were very slowly transforming the lives of many women, societal expectations and conventions remained large and unbudging. Many of the women who came to Paris in the 1920's were daughters of a Victorian age that sought to cloister them in a world of marriage and childbirth. The vast majority of women who chose the role of expatriation were lesbians, unmarried and childless. Unlike many of their male contemporaries, they were not looking for definition and affirmation of the good of the common life that they had left behind, but rather, for a new self-definition where the repressed self might be made legitimate.

For homosexuals who went to Paris in the 1920's, the choice was propelled by political reasons in addition to societal expec-
tions. France at this time was one of the few countries where homosexuality was not a crime punishable by incarceration. It was to France that Oscar Wilde fled after his release from prison; to France where Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge were driven after the publication of Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*. For the writer, Paris also offered publishing freedom to those who wished to deal with issues considered unacceptable and lewd by mainstream American and British society. Hall’s novel and the works of other expatriate women such as Djuna Barnes and Gertrude Stein offer unique insight into the lives of lesbian expatriate women in France.

The works of many of the expatriate women, like that of their male contemporaries, tend to be self-referential; often demonstrating an intense interest in the stylistics of the English language, one of the hallmarks of the Modern literary period. In addition to this, a common thread throughout the lives of the expatriate women seems to have been a very real awareness of the necessity of obtaining or maintaining economic independence. Without financial independence, any intellectual freedom is short lived. As Virginia Woolf argued throughout her works, the writer is the product of his or her historical circumstances, and material conditions are of crucial importance. To Woolf, women succeeded as writers before they succeeded in other professions because of the relative cheapness of paper, “Pianos and models, Paris, Vienna, and Berlin, masters and mistresses, are not needed by a writer” (58).

While many women were driven to Paris in the 1920’s in search of freedom, it seems that in doing so they were asking for the equivalent of masters and models, materials whose demand on the purse is much greater than simple pen and paper. Thus, women who were not independently wealthy, such as Djuna Barnes, eventually found themselves living in abject poverty or
returning to America. Those who were able to achieve and main-
tain freedom of life in Paris did so through economic indepen-
dence obtained through large inheritances from wealthy families.
This, for the most part, was a freedom obtained through privi-
lege that had preceded their lives in Paris. Thus the history of the
successful expatriate woman is almost always a story of immense
privilege, a fact that both encouraged and inhibited their artistic
achievements.

Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien fit into this general descrip-
tion of the expatriate woman. Both came from wealthy families
and supported their lifestyles through rather sizeable inheri-
tances. Both were attracted to France because it allowed them to
conduct their lives as they choose, which meant going against
established societal expectations and openly writing from a les-
bian perspective. What makes these women extraordinary, how-
ever, is not so much their chosen lifestyles, but their complete
embracement of French language and culture, the complete fus-
ing of themselves with the other. Renée Vivien, who died at the
age of thirty-two, published more than nine volumes of poetry,
one novel and two volumes of prose, all in French. Barney pro-
duced twenty volumes, consisting of poems, plays, epigrams,
 essays and a novel, most of them in French.

What does it mean when one foregoes one's native language
in favor of another? Language is a major function of culture; pro-
viding a medium of communication and having profound cul-
tural influences upon those who practice it. Often a person who
has good command of a European language has assimilated
other aspects of the culture as well. I would like to suggest that
for Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien, foreign language was a
method of changing the self into the other.

Disillusioned with the sovereignty of the individual in their
native countries, Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien set out to
recover their real “selves” that had been left uncontaminated by a country that looked upon their choices as women as illegitimate. Unacceptable and offensive members of their native countries, the other to them became the legitimate and true self. The other’s language is not primarily an object of representation for them, but rather a means through which the other’s culture, material existence and politics can be drawn into the realm of the understandable. With this transformation into the other, each woman changed her name. Pauline Tarn became Renée Vivien, Renée in French meaning reborn, and Natalie Barney acquired the nickname “L’Amazone” through her habit of wearing riding attire, called an “amazoné” in French. As literary predecessors from which to draw example both women looked to French symbolism, ignoring much of the experimentation that was being attempted in the writing of their contemporaries. While so many of the expatriates were attempting to make the English language simpler, like Hemingway and Gertrude Stein, Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien rejected it entirely.

As stated earlier, the other is often something that initially seems foreign, yet is simultaneously familiar as something that is repressed within ourselves. Both Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien, even at a very shallow surface level, were introduced to French at an early age. Natalie made several trips to Paris as early as 1883, and Renée attended French classes held “in a street off the Rond-Point of the Champs-Elysées” (Jay 5). Both lived in Paris with their mothers at an early age and associated many fond memories with that time.

The choice of writing entirely in a second language may seem a daunting task, yet is no less challenging than the breadth of the focus of Natalie Barney’s and Renée Vivien’s work. Through embracement of the other, Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien fashioned new identities for themselves. The question
that I would like to explore in the following pages is what history of the subject do they take with them to construct this new identity and how is this new identity, composed of the other, part and parcel of the “same old” self?

**Natalie Clifford Barney**

Natalie Clifford Barney was born in Dayton, Ohio on 31 October, 1876. Her father, the immensely wealthy Alfred Clifford Barney, had made his fortune through the inheritance of a railroad car company which he had subsequently sold to the Pullman Sleeping Car Company. Natalie’s mother, the portrait painter Alice Pike Barney, also came from a family of immense wealth, which had left her as heir to a whiskey fortune. This combined wealth left Natalie with a fortune of well over three and a half million dollars (Jay 2), a fact that would greatly influence her lifestyle and literary achievements.

Natalie’s exposure to French language and culture began in early childhood with tutelage in French from her governess and several trips to Europe with her family during the years 1883-1889. After repeated censureship of her writing due to its explicitly lesbian content, the young Barney made Paris her permanent home at the turn of the century. In *Adventures of the Mind* Natalie writes, “In coming from the United States to live in France I was only returning to some of my dearest origins...but the homecomings, especially after several centuries, bring back something of the foreigner” (25-6). Natalie took great pride in the fact that her great-great-grandmother was French, and several of her male ancestors had made visits to France, yet at the same time she recognized that this did nothing on a conscious level to alleviate her own feelings of foreignness. Thus begins Natalie’s project of immersion in French culture; a return to that part of herself that felt France
to be home. Eventually she would write, "On the other hand, the French mind, this stream of sweet-water crossing the bitter seas, brings its effluvia and well-being as far as my country, where, more and more, thanks to this contact, an understanding flows in and continues to carry its benefits" (26). Natalie was entirely aware of the benefits that arose from the fusing of French and American horizons, through which an understanding that supersedes either culture was allowed to develop.

This fusion of cultural horizons was apparent not only to Natalie, but to the French society of which she subsequently became a part. In the foreword to "An Academy of Women" the second part of Adventures of the Mind, Lucie Delarue-Mardus describes Natalie Barney as "This American who speaks our language with no accent, who writes with a prodigious virtuosity, who is not wholly French and who is no longer wholly American, which allows her to be a bit foreign everywhere" (139). This passage speaks of Natalie's unique position within French society, where she was not purely the other, French, nor any longer an expatriate American. Through the fusion of French and American horizons Natalie Barney created an entirely new space for herself composed of French and American culture. This unique space and self manifested itself linguistically in Natalie's language, where she often combined French and English to form an entirely new and private grammar. Lucie Delarue-Mardus gives the example of a letter written by Natalie to a couple she had known for twenty years:

[Natalie] bravely wrote down in her letter: 'How are yous, Y-O-U-S?' because she said 'I say you to both of them, then I have to add an s don't I, as in all French plurals'...[she] constantly has these amusing little exoticisms in her conversation" (139).
Unlike Renée Vivien, who detested her mother tongue, Natalie Barney used French as a useful alternative to English when English failed to allow her to define herself and her thoughts, carrying certain prejudices within it. As she explains in *Some Portraits and Sonnets of Women*, the French language seemed more poetic than English, in part because she could have no illusions about the words she had used since birth. As further explanation, Natalie offered the theory that her soul was inhabited by several departed French poets, and for this reason her passion for French language and culture was so strong (Jay 119). Natalie found English to be both limited and limiting, like the American culture she had left behind. Though one wonders how seriously one should take Natalie's proclamation of possession, it nonetheless articulates one of the paradoxical aspects of the other when encountered by the self: the other, while alien to the self is still somehow known, as if something repressed within the self. This is an idea very similar to the feeling of being possessed by the souls of French poets who recognize their language and culture despite your own inexperience. Natalie's statement of possession is similar to her description of her exile to France as a homecoming or return to "dearest origins."

Natalie Barney's choice of French was a political one in addition to the causal factor of an early French education. At the time French was still the international language of diplomacy, and fluency allowed her to address the cultured men and women of the world. This was a choice that was in complete opposition to the patriarchal nationalism of many of the expatriates, like Hemingway and Gertrude Stein, whose books were written about Americans for Americans. For Natalie Barney, French was a tool for gaining entrance into French society. When addressed in their own native language, many French writers felt compelled to respond to her. During the years she retained her Paris
salon she was friends with Marcel Proust, Paul Valéry, Remy de Gourmont, among other French writers and intellectuals.

In contrast to Renée Vivien, Natalie’s focus was primarily social rather than literary. She felt that her books developed themselves out of her lived experiences rather than through any conscious effort on her own behalf. As she writes in *Adventures of the Mind* “Every ten years, I force myself to empty my notebooks, the drawers of my writing desk. What they contain becomes books, almost without my knowing” (19). In her books Natalie’s style dominates as the epigram, that flash of wit that brings the English writer Oscar Wilde to mind. Indeed, Natalie begins her *Adventures of the Mind* with an account of her early childhood encounter with Oscar Wilde, in which she describes the two of them sitting together on a raised throne facing the arriving public (31).

The image of Natalie Barney sitting on a throne facing an arriving public was actualized in her own life through her Paris salon and her philanthropic efforts based in her “Academy of Women.” The fact that Natalie Barney, an American lesbian, was permitted to open a salon at all is quite interesting. Generally salons were the exclusive provence of wealthy French societal women. Karla Jay points to the historical fact of the Dreyfus affair as having upset French society sufficiently enough to permit her to take part in a leisure activity which was normally reserved for French nobility. Alfred Dreyfus was arrested on 31 October, 1894 under suspicion of having handled the enemy confidential documents. He was court-martialed and sent to die on Devil’s Island for the crime of treason, though many suspected—and Zola proclaimed loudly in “J’Accuse”—that Dreyfus’s principle crime was being of Jewish origin. His sentence and exile engendered a battle of opinions that rent French society asunder. “Intellectuals, artists, writers,
and scholars were found on both sides with figures like Émile Zola, Marcel Proust, Anatole France, Charles Peguy, the Reinach brothers and Andre Gide lining up strongly as Dreyfusards while Charles Maurras, Paul Valéry, Edgar Degas, Maurice Barrès, Paul Bourget, José-Maria de Heridia, Francois Copée were anti-Dreyfus’ (Jay 5). In order for wounds to heal and Parisian society to overcome its split in opinions, it needed outsiders to host salons and cool the intellectual and artistic front. Natalie Barney, an American lesbian from Cincinnati, was perfect for this role. The fact that Natalie Barney was “a bit foreign everywhere” allowed her to host a salon without meeting any of the normal standards of American or French society with the exception, that is, of financial wealth.

In Barney’s efforts in France, her ideas were often more audacious than her actual literary execution of them, but her salon was the one concept that was as extraordinary in reality as it was in her imagination. For this reason I would like to limit the scope of my focus on Natalie Barney to her salon and the literary works that ensued from its meetings. Most incredible is Natalie’s conception of an Academy of Women; where each Friday women would share their newest and best material with other guests of the salon. Natalie founded the Academy of Women in response to the Académie-Française, which at this time had not permitted women to be counted amongst its members. In her philanthropic efforts Natalie Barney can be placed among other upper-class, Anglo-Saxon women such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who used salons and other charitable institutions as a way to affect social change when excluded from direct political action. This was not, however, what could be called feminism as it is manifested today. Barney was only interested in promoting an elite group of women who she saw as being her social equals.
As Natalie Barney's work sprang from her lived experience rather than abstract literary ideas, the text *Adventures of the Mind*, limber offspring of her salon and the Academy of Women, will be my primary focus. In *Adventures of the Mind* Natalie consciously paints a portrait of herself through depictions of the other; the other consisting of French intellectuals and literary giants with the exception of a few fellow expatriate Americans. In the concluding chapter of *Adventures*, titled *Leave Taking*, Natalie writes, “In leaning over multiple faces have we perhaps discovered only our own image? For in correcting this book, we were astonished to see, having composed it, how much it composes us” (198). Natalie’s use of the first-person plural is appropriate and deliberate, as she is saying, to echo Rimbaud, “J'est un autre” that is “I is another.” Natalie creates her self portrait through the inclusion of direct comments made about her by her contemporaries, as well as through her treatment and description of the men and women who visited her Paris salon.

In her “Forewarning” Natalie presents *Adventures of the Mind* as the product of unconscious act, like a somnambulist whose own voice wakes the sleeper with a start (21). Yet the image that she creates of herself is not produced through the dreamy words of a sleep-walker, but through a woman who is very carefully constructing an image of herself through appropriation of societal symbols and traditions. Natalie begins her novel by stressing the fact that the letters included are by no means letters from lovers, but rather of those who have escaped love in order to develop themselves in more unexplored domains, “which are like disputed territories” (23). This is a complete reversal of normal expectations of a memoir published by a woman about her contemporaries, which would usually focus on her personal life much more than her intellectual life.
Natalie's first adventure of the mind begins with an encounter with Oscar Wilde in 1882, during the time he was criss-crossing America lecturing on art history and aesthetics. Natalie was five when she met Wilde, who she had come across while running to escape a pack of vacationing children. Wilde rescues her and the two of them sat together on a raised throne facing the arriving public (31). In 1885, when Natalie was seventeen, Wilde was sentenced to two years imprisonment with hard labor for homosexual practices. Natalie writes "When I learned, as an adolescent, that my friend had just been imprisoned in England, I wrote to him...hoping to comfort him as he had comforted me, reminding him of his marvelous protection against the pursuits of other little people" (31). Thus began Natalie's lifelong identification and connection with Oscar Wilde. Later Barney would write plays in Wilde's style, become briefly engaged to Wilde's former lover Lord Alfred Douglas, and have a long affair with Wilde's niece, Dolly Wilde. After sitting briefly on Wilde's lap, Natalie places the rest of the men in Adventures of the Mind firmly at her feet.

The novel continues with an account of her friendship with Pierre Louys, author of Aphrodite and Chansons de Bilitis (Songs of Bilitis). Songs of Bilitis was originally purported to be Louys' translation of Greek erotic prose poems composed by a poetess contemporary of Sappho, yet was later revealed as Louys own highly successful literary hoax. Nevertheless, he was admired for writing lascivious (and lesbian) love poems. In her presentation of her friendship with Louys, Natalie portrays herself as Louys' muse and companion, "the friend with hips," the woman who Baudelaire dreamt of and obtained in "Femmes damnées" (56), the woman who is sister rather than mistress. She is the lesbian who Louys has written about and, Natalie implies, failed to understand. In contrast to her guise as symbolist androgynous
muse, Louys appears as a frail and interesting man who has allowed himself to be shut up within the limits of form.

Natalie continues her original reversal of woman as mistress to woman as companion into further reversals of culturally gendered positions of men and women. She focuses on Pierre Louys' physical appearance and personal life more than his work or intellectual achievements. She describes the appearance of his beard, the state of his marriage, and his advancing blindness. In its concluding description, the essay leaves the reader with a pitiful image of Louys, completely blind, wandering slowly about his library handling books he can no longer see.

Natalie's descriptive treatment of Louys sets a precedent for the rest of the male writers she will depict in *Adventures of the Mind*. Always Natalie appears as an athletic and cerebral woman, a modern androgyne, whose intellectual and physical prowess far exceeds that of her male companions. The men who appear in the novel are described almost exclusively in relation to the personal lives and physical appearances. Barney portrays Remy de Gourmont, one of the principle critics of the Symbolist movement, as a terrified recluse whose face has been ravaged by Lupus. "His scarred face, his lips swollen and stammering" (52). She eventually persuades him to come out of hiding, and rows him across an artificial lake near the Bois de Boulogne.

Marcel Proust is described as a hypochondriac who begins each of his letters to her with statements such as, "I have again caught a cold" (61), "I have a fever of 40 degrees [104° F]" (59) and "I am recovering from an illness which greatly resembles death" (58). In her criticism of Proust's writing, particularly *Sodome et Gomorrhe* (Cities of the Plain) Natalie finds Proust's writing to demonstrate a form of sickness that derives from his inability to derive any true sustenance from life. She finds that like Pierre Louys, Remy de Gourmont, and many of the male
writers she is acquainted with, he has shut himself off in his own isolated realm of form. This isolation is evident in his portrayal of lesbians, which Natalie finds unrealistic. Her criticism of the male writers who appear in *Adventures of the Mind* is the charge that many male critics have leveled against women writers, that their writing demonstrates an isolated sphere of existence that shows no knowledge of the real world. Natalie claims specific authority to speak and judge their writing as she herself is a lesbian, the subject of many of their poems and novels.

The image that Natalie Barney creates for herself through her depictions of the male writers in the novel is enforced through her descriptions of her female acquaintances. Throughout the novel Barney assumes the identity of the Amazon, a nickname given to her by Remy de Gourmont. The sustenance of this identity, like her identification of herself as the Symbolist muse of Baudelaire, the “friend with hips” derives itself from the Symbolists and, more specifically, from the courtly love tradition. As the Amazon Barney identifies herself as the cruel huntress, whose weapons are her intellect and her language, “For shouldn’t one be bilingual to understand all those nuances, and to go forth to the true conquest of another country?” (126). This essential cruelty hints at the poetic muse of the courtly love tradition, who remains unmoved by the poets love for her and his consequent suffering.

This supreme indifference is demonstrated by Natalie’s reactions to the supplications of her male admirers, and through her portrayal of the women who appear in the novel and their comments about her nature. Aurel, pseudonym of Mme Antoinette Gabrielle Mortier de Faucambeuge, describes Natalie Barney in Symbolist terms, “Fairy of destruction, who saps my moonstruck confidence in the human, why do you leave us, maleficent Natalie, with a task of pleasure that proves you right over
nature?” (137). If Natalie Barney is to appear as Amazon huntress, however, it should be noted that her female counterparts are wearing no less magnificent a guise.

The second half of Adventures, titled An Academy of Women opens with an introduction to Lucie Delarue-Mardus, French poet and prose writer. Delarue-Mardus had chosen two men to introduce her as the writer whose work was to be reviewed at the Academy meeting; each fails miserably. Natalie writes, “In incensing their goddess, these disciples succeed in concealing rather than revealing her” (141). The implicit suggestion is that women are the most apt and capable at presenting and celebrating other women, and that when men seek to do so the inevitably obscure their subject. This is consistent with Natalie’s criticism of Louys and Proust. In her depictions and celebrations of the women who appear in Adventures of the Mind, Natalie focuses on their intellects and their works, a complete reversal of her treatment of the male writers in the novel. If she does focus on their personal qualities, it is only to hail their immense strength and fortitude. In her description of Rachilde, Barney writes, “immense strength that does not delude itself and which, taking all goals for targets, misses none of them” (154). All of the work that these women produce displays genius, and they often are the very epitome of the Decadent or Symbolist that their male counterparts long to comprehend.

In Adventures of the Mind Natalie Barney creates a portrait of herself through depictions of the other. Underlying this depiction is French Symbolism which Natalie invokes as a means of demonstrating her authority to speak on the subject, as well as her unique position within French society. As a lesbian and an expatriate “who is not wholly French and who is no longer wholly American,” Natalie Barney was able to create a new identity for herself which freed her from standard societal expectations.
The themes raised in Natalie Barney's work that position the lesbian a cruel and powerful, amazonlike, yet still the epitome of the symbolist or decadent muse are evident in Renée Vivien's work. The title of Yves-Gérard Le Dantec's biographical work *Renée Vivien: femme damnée, femme sauvée* ("Renée Vivien: Woman Damned, Woman Saved") does much to suggest the focus of her literary and intellectual pursuits. The description of Vivien as a "damned woman" hints at her lesbianism and her connection with the Symbolist poets. Baudelaire included lesbians in his poetry such as the two poems titled "Femmes damnées," but he did so to condemn them, as the titles of the two poems suggest. A feeling of condemnation would permeate much of Renée Vivien's work, where she often assumed the role of the exiled martyr and in her search for salvation would eventually convert to Catholicism.

Renée Vivien was born Pauline Mary Tarn on 11 June 1877. Most accounts place her birth in the United States, and it is known that Vivien's family moved to France in 1881. Though she had an English governess and both of her parents were English speaking, as a young girl Renée Vivien read almost exclusively in French. When Vivien was nine, her family moved to England. During the following years, according to Vivien, her mother tried to drive her insane in order to have her committed to a mental institution, after which she would procure Vivien's sizeable inheritance for herself (Jay 7). Eventually Vivien became a ward of the court and was given a legal guardian. Once she
reached her majority she permanently left the country and made her way to France.

Both Renée Vivien and Natalie Barney must be viewed in relation to their heritage from the French Symbolists rather than to the canon of women writers, for any similarities to the latter are purely accidental. Neither seem to have read any woman writers other than Sappho. Throughout her works Renée Vivien employs the images and myths of the Symbolists in order to create a new perception of herself and the definition of women. For Renée Vivien the choice to write in French was simple: from an early age she had detested English, which she associated with her mother and her motherland. The extent of Vivien’s hatred for English makes itself evident in a circumstance related by Jean-Paul Goujon in his essay, “Un Livre inédit de Renée Vivien.” When in the course of her writing she became interested in the subject of Anne Boleyn, Renée Vivien’s attention was drawn to two biographical works written at the turn of the century by Mary Strickland and W.H. Dixon. Although both of these were written in English, Vivien asked Charles Brun to translate them for her into French (144). For Vivien, French was the language of liberation as well as the language of the Symbolists, even though the movement was over by the time she began writing. Unfortunately, in appropriating the voices of the Symbolists as her own, she often, perhaps unwittingly, adopted the ideological assumptions and prejudices inherent in the Symbolist language.

Perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of Renée Vivien’s work is her imagined audience, which was entirely composed of women. In “Vous pour qui j’écrivis” (You for whom I wrote) she imagines, “You for whom I wrote, O beautiful young women / You alone whom I loved, will you reread my verse... / Will you say, ‘This woman had the ardor which eludes me...[sic]/ Why is she not alive? She would have loved me” (149).
We for Vivien always refers to women, as in the poem “Nous irons vers les poètes” (We Will Go Towards The Poets”) she writes, “Nous souvenant qu’il est de plus larges planètes / Nous entrerons dans le royaumes des poètes (We will remember that there are bigger planets / We will enter into the kingdom of the poets). The choice of a female audience is not as obvious as it may seem. It was not unusual for the well-educated woman, particularly during the time of Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien, to disassociate herself from other women and identify with male society. Gertrude Stein declared that she found the woman’s movement to be a bore primarily because she felt herself to have transcended the inhibitions and barriers that the average woman faced. Yet unless she acknowledges her sisterhood with other women, one who sees with the eyes of the mind finds herself in the untenable position of the exceptional woman, a sort of honorary man.

Like many other women writers and artists throughout history, Renée Vivien rewrote familiar stories replacing traditional depictions of women with female heroines who consciously define their fates. Like the painter Artemisia Gentileschi’s portrayals of the Biblical figures of Judith and Bathsheba from a woman’s perspective, Renée Vivien redrew the Old Testament figures of Lilith and Vashti. In the Biblical tale of Vashti, the Queen is portrayed as being proud and willful, and subsequently put aside for the more submissive and therefore desirable Esther. In her rewriting of the tale, Vivien gives Vashti a voice, through which she is able to articulate her motivations for disobeying the King. Removing her veil in front of the king’s court signified shame and a loss of chastity to Vashti, a loss which she found unbearable and less preferable than death. The preservation of chastity over life is a theme that runs throughout Renée Vivien’s work, as in “The Woman of the Wolf” and “The Nut Brown Maid.” Often her heroines give the impres-
sion of actually enjoying running to their deaths rather than lowering their heads even slightly to the yoke of societal expectations. While this could be contributed to Symbolist influences and a Poe-like morbidity, it seems that Renée Vivien used the choice of death over societal surrender as a way to demonstrate the passion and commitment of her heroines. The heroines’ deaths over submission to patriarchal society proves that their passion is real, that it knows no bounds; theirs is the kind of passion where one does not hesitate to go beyond the bounds of one’s own self, where one is not afraid of annihilation of personal consciousness.

Often Vivien’s stories play with simple role reversals as in “La soif ricane...” (“The Snickering Thirst”), in which two adventurers, Polly and Jim make their way across the empty prairie of the North American wild. In the Symbolist tradition, Vivien often employed mythical landscapes whose actual geographical face was not important. Geographic relevance is located in its impact upon the moods and definition of its characters. In the story, the male character Jim suffers from various weaknesses generally characterized as belonging to the fair sex. His hyperactive imagination prevents him from taking normal action and making decisions, and when confronted with a prairie fire he faints while Polly saves both of their lives by setting a counter blaze which the fire cannot cross. Rather than being inspired with gratitude, Jim vows to kill Polly in revenge for her revealing his cowardice to himself. Throughout “The Snickering Thirst” Jim is obsessed with the memory of a woman with “A pale, thin face [he]...had once loved...[he]...adored the shadow of her eyelashes on her pale cheeks.” The source of this memory Jim cannot remember, “I don’t even know anymore if that odd little girl who read for those long hours is living or dead. I believe she must be dead because sometimes I feel an emptiness in my
heart” (17). Here the pale beautiful flower of the Symbolist ideal is contrasted against the ruddy-faced yet efficient Polly.

Often the female characters in Renée Vivien’s work inspire the male toward a mixture of lust and murderousness. In “La Saurienne” (“The Crocodile Lady”) the narrator, Mike Watts, recalls an encounter with a woman, the Crocodile Lady, who bears striking resemblance to a reptile and tells the narrator:

The king and queen of the crocodiles are my intimate friends, she continued, The king lives at Denderah. The Queen, who is as powerful as he and even more cruel, preferred to go forty leagues higher up the river, in order to reign by herself. She wants undivided power. She loves his independence also; as a result, they live separately, while remaining very good friends. They meet occasionally in order to make love. (70)

In the natural world of the crocodile lady, males and females share equal power. When the Crocodile Lady attempts to seduce Mike Watts through a show of power by riding on the back of a crocodile, he gouges her eyes out with his knife. As he tells the story her concludes by saying, “I carved out her eyes, I tell you. Oh one thing I am is courageous for sure” (71).

Renée Vivien’s heroines stir up an odd mixture of disgust and misunderstanding from the male characters of the stories. Often, as with the Crocodile Lady, they feel an almost obsessive will to dominate or destroy the strong and intelligent woman. To the male characters in Vivien’s short stories, women are the traditional other self, through which one has nothing more than a dialogue with one’s self. By not performing the traditional roles relegated to women, however, the female heroines reveal qualities to the male which they do not like about themselves, arousing a desire within them to do harm. In “The Snickering Thirst” Jim feels and almost imme-
diate desire to do harm to Polly when she reveals his own cowardice to him.

More often than not, the strong heroine in Vivien's short stories is not beautiful, and the strongest of them all, the Crocodile Lady in "La Saurienne" could be said to be distinctly ugly. Thus it seems a strange contradiction that the women who Vivien apostrophizes in her poetry look nothing like the hearty heroines of her short stories, but rather, like the image of the pale beauty that haunted the mind of Jim in "The Snickering Thirst." This could be due, in part, to Vivien's symbolist inheritance, whose poetic ideal of feminine beauty was embodied in a female figure who was inactive, motionless, and pale. Part of this contradiction, however, could also be explained through Renée Vivien's profound discomfort with the physical nature of the body.

In her "Flowers of Selene" Renée Vivien presents a vision of Aphrodite that is so congenial to Symbolist thought that it could easily be the "Flowers of Evil" of Baudelaire.

Le feuillage s'écarte en des plis de rideaux
Devant la Vénus des Aveugles, noire.
Sous la majesté de ses noirs bandeaux.
La tempe a des murs d'ebène et d'ivoire.
Et le sanctuaire est la nuit des nuits.

The foliage parts like the folds of curtains
Before the Venus of the Blind, black
Under the majesty of her black blindfold,
The temple's walls are made of ebony and ivory
And the sanctuary is the night of nights (183).

Aphrodite herself is described:
Aphrodite changeante, implacable Immortelle,
Tu jaillis de la mer, périlleuse comme elle.
La vague sous tes pas se brisait en sanglots.

88
Amère, tu surgis des profondeurs amères,
Appartenant des tes mains l’angoisse et les chimères,
Ondoyante, insondable et perfide.

Fickle Aphrodite, implacable Immortal,
Thou sprang from the sea as perilous as she.
The waves under thy feet broke into sobs.
Bitter, thou sprang from the bitter depths,
Carrying agony and nightmares in thy hands,
Undulating, unfathomable, and perfidious (111).

As in Mallarme’s “Herodiade,” Aphrodite is an indoor goddess whose temple is dark and cloistral. She brings nightmares and agony to her followers, who “live in a weary dream, lonely/as the moon...” (91). In this vision, Aphrodite’s main attributes of feminine strength are her coldness and unflinching preservation of chastity. Here Vivien is taking part in a tradition much older than that of the Symbolists, she is casting her eye toward the courtly love tradition and the Petrarchan lover. In courtly poetry, the lover addresses his verse to a woman who is cold and motionless, unmoved by any of the passions that sweep through the male lover. The lover has no hope of requital, but this becomes part of his obsession. Interestingly enough, the poem is not at all about the mistress, but the poet’s blind love of a cruel and ideal beauty. It is a poem about the poet. In playing the role of the lover addressing a cruel mistress Vivien is unwittingly invoking the same sort of male image as that which she criticizes in her short stories. One who sees the Other only as a type of mirror into one’s own soul. In this way Renée Vivien failed to perform a critique of fin de siecle attitudes toward the female as artistic subjects as seen through the eyes of her male mentors.
In appropriating the language and images of the Symbolist poets, Vivien perhaps unwittingly appropriated the thought. Perhaps unaware of the immense challenge that separating symbols from their cultural contexts presents. This hints at another argument entirely; if women are to truly construct an accurate representation of feminine experience must they do so through inventing a new woman’s language? This was a question being asked and experimented with through the works of Dorothy Richardson, Virginia Woolf, and Gertrude Stein; all of whom were writing at the same time as Renée Vivien. Heidegger addresses the relationship between language and thought in the following quote:

I am speaking of the special relationship, inside the German language, with the language of the Greeks and their thought. It is something which the French are always confirming for me today. When they begin to think they speak German: they say definitely that they could not manage it in their language. (62)

One might argue then, that in appropriating the language of the French Symbolists, Renée Vivien unwittingly adopted their same vision of women, a vision that starkly contrasts with her own work and mission of creating a new woman-centered literature with strong heroines. There are further implications, however, when one considers that Renée Vivien isn’t apostrophizing simply to the other, she is invoking the mirror image of herself. The world of the symbolists for Renée Vivien and Natalie Barney was particularly conducive to the world of Lesbos as she viewed it: a world sharp with sighs and sodden with tears where the lover perpetually waits in vain for the absent and faithless beloved. In A Woman Appeared to Me Vivien describes her meeting with Natalie Barney, Vally in the novel, as the introduction of both her beloved and her doom. By appropriating Symbolist language to describe
the love between women, Susan Gubar feels that Renée Vivien, "Subversively implies... that the lesbian is the epitome of the decadent, and that decadence is fundamentally a lesbian literary tradition" (86). This is evident in Renée Vivien's use of the French words for night and day. The night, *la nuit* belongs to women, while the day, *le jour* belongs to men. This has a certain, if limited, positive literary value. The negative effects of this appropriation far outweigh the positive, and seem far too destructive to not compromise and contradict the goals of Vivien's prose work.

Another possibility might be that Symbolist images lent themselves to part of a contradiction that was within Renée Vivien herself. In poems such as "*Je s'aime d'être faible*" ("I Love You for Being Weak") and "*Mains sur on front de malade*" ("Hands on the Forehead of a Sick Woman") Renée Vivien uses the frail motionless pale woman of Symbolist poetry in order to capture spirituality. In "I Love You for Being Weak," a litany of the charms of frailty, Vivien praises the woman for knowing how to behave in the presence of the night and all that is sacred. In "Hands on the Forehead of a Sick Woman," Vivien describes the spiritual comfort that only women are capable of offering. What Vivien seems to be praising above all, however, is the fact that the frail beautiful woman is less physical than spiritual. Vivien's main argument with men seems to have been their intense physicality which they demonstrated through violence or other attempts at domination. Preserving one's chastity, thus, is not only denying patriarchal expectations but also, denying the physical. In a quote concerning the marriage of a woman Renée Vivien writes:

The day of her marriage, I was saddened over this virginal grace about to barbarously immolated. Hideous maternity would deform her sexless body. And conjugal rutting would defile her flesh, once pure like tender eglantines... I remained inconsolable in the face of the deflowering of a dream. (50).
Throughout her own life, Renée Vivien demonstrated a profound discomfort with the human body, which eventually led to the development of a personal cult of death, where death offered permanent and perfect transcendence from the body. According to accounts by Colette and other friends, toward the end of her life, Renée Vivien showed all of the signs of anorexia, refusing to eat anything other than fruit and rare imported wines. She died at the age of thirty-two.

Marianne Torgovnich writes that “the most basic form transcendental homelessness can take is discomfort with the body” (55). Vivien’s feelings of alienation and otherness eventually led to an attraction to the Catholic church and identification with the figure of Christ, whose position as outcast and crucified she felt to be comparable to her own. Like Christ, she sees herself crucified, “For a long time I was nailed to the cross / and some women, seeing that I was suffering, laughed. / Then, some men took mud in their hands / Which spattered my temples and my cheek” (35). Imagining herself the object of scorn and hostility did not lead to forgiveness for Renée Vivien, but to a constant feeling of otherness, self-loathing, and an eventual escape from life. In Adventures of the Mind Natalie Barney writes of Vivien: “More than any other woman, she was the priestess of death, and death was her last masterpiece” (187).

Single-handedly, Renée Vivien attempted to shift the historical presence of women. The fact that she may have failed in some aspects does not take away from her attempts and partial successes.
The state of exile can almost be said to have been a *de-rigeleur* element of the Modernist condition. At the turn of the century, troubled by the subtle ways in which American democracy had failed in providing for a meaningful life, American writers looked to Europe for a refuge from mediocrity, as a land where the Romantic individual might give definition to his or her true self. Exile for many American writers assumed the form of expatriate life in Paris. There they hoped to develop a French perspective that would illuminate their search for a resolution of the discord between the traditional ideal of America as a land of opportunity and the actuality of arrested possibilities for many of its citizens.

Most of the expatriate writers, however, failed in doing this. Confronted with linguistic barriers, few could read European writers and did not have, or use, the opportunity to meet them. Consequently we have a genre of referential writing in which the expatriate writer seems trapped in a hall of mirrors, having nothing to do but describe each other describing each other. Eventually, most of the expatriates would return to America and write, as Malcolm Cowley did in *Exile’s Return*, that the lost generation of American writers were ultimately only affirmed in the good of the common life they had left behind. This was an affirmation of the good of “Americanism,” a perspective which was achieved without the fusing of French and American cultural horizons, but through simple alienation. As Mariana Torgovnich has pointed out, whatever form the other’s culture takes, its strangeness salves our estrangement from ourselves and our culture (185).

Natalie Barney and Renée Vivien stand out as provocative exceptions. Motivated by profoundly different cultural forces than many of their contemporaries, Barney and Vivien expressed
their allegiance to an international community of letters by writing in French. They confronted the unfamiliar, in this case French culture and language, added it to the repertory of their knowledge, and absorbed it into their own cultural perspectives. They abandoned the expatriate role of one who is purely different and obtained and expanded American feminine aesthetic. For Renée Vivien, the abandonment of her former self was absolute and perhaps a bit unhealthy, as her refusal to read or speak English limited her sphere of possibilities. For Natalie Barney, the French language brought an increased understanding, carrying with it a multitude of benefits. Barney and Vivien undertook a great risk by dauntlessly stepping out of familiar ground and trespassing upon the province of those who had a right to claim familiarity with their chosen areas of scholarship. Although their work often appears overreaching or demonstrates failures that might have been avoided if they were to write in their own native language, it is precisely this trespassing that makes their work long overdue for consideration.
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