



# A Perilous Advantage

The Best of  
Natalie Clifford Barney

Edited and translated by

**Anna Livia**

With an introduction by Karla Jay



*A Perilous Advantage*

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“Being other than normal is a perilous advantage.”  
—Natalie Clifford Barney  
Foreward to *Souvenirs Indiscrets*

*New Victoria Publishers*

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## **Introduction**

by Karla Jay

*“If I had one ambition it was to make my life itself into a poem.”*

- Natalie Clifford Barney

Natalie Barney's entire life seems to have been carved of some more dramatic material than most of us have or would choose to have. Barney came from the wealthiest circle of American industrialist families and eventually inherited over four million dollars. (Today, this would equal about a billion dollars.) After her birth on October 31, 1876 in Dayton, Ohio, she grew up in Cincinnati and then in Washington, D.C. and Bar Harbor in select social circles.

Her father, Albert Clifford Barney, lived off the proceeds of a railroad fortune, and her mother, Alice Pike Barney, was also an heiress. Her father was far less devoted to the family than Barney suggests in "Renée Vivien." He seems to have been a self-centered man who had no great interest in either his work or his family. He retired on the fortune made by his ancestors and tended to ignore his wife and two daughters unless they did something that offended his rigid social sensibilities, such as Natalie's lesbian love poems (*Some Portraits and Sonnets of Women*), which his wife had either naively or defiantly illustrated with portraits of some of Natalie's lovers. Then Albert would intervene and assert his patriarchal authority, but generally he was more interested in enjoying himself in London while the rest of his family chose Paris.

Natalie greatly preferred her mother. Alice was an accomplished portrait painter who had studied with Whistler, and she shaped her daughter's devotion to the arts. Though Barney suggests in her memoirs that she was almost obsessively in love with

her mother, the images and almost the words for this emotion are borrowed from Proust. Here, for example, is how Barney remembers waiting up for her mother:

Such was the feeling I had for my mother, and when she bent over my bed before she went out to a party, she seemed more beautiful than anything in my dreams; so, instead of going to sleep, I would stay awake, anxiously waiting for her return, for whenever she went away I was afraid something terrible might happen to her. (text p. 4)

In *Swann's Way*, Marcel's memories of his childhood goodnight kiss seem remarkably similar:

My sole consolation when I went upstairs for the night was that Mamma would come in and kiss me after I was in bed.... I reached the point of hoping that this good night which I loved so much would come as late as possible, so as to prolong the time of respite during which Mamma would not yet have appeared. (Proust 13-14)

Perhaps, Oedipal/Electra devotion to one's mother was a proper sentiment at the turn of the century, but certainly, in a book written for the French public, quite familiar with Proust's famous remembrance of childhood, Natalie's (re)construction of her own earlier years would strike a resonant chord. It might also make her forthcoming confession of lesbianism easier to understand for a public well-versed in Freud (even though, as we shall see, Barney considered herself to be "naturally unnatural"). By evoking a cultural icon of Oedipal obsession, she attempts to make even a hostile reader accept the fact that she "learned to love our neighbor" in ways the Bible doesn't address, and the reader is not surprised when young Natalie's adoration of her mother is transformed into crushes on her mother's models during Natalie's adolescence in Washington and Paris.

The only oddity that emerges in retrospect about Natalie's childhood is that her adoring mother, who had both daughters educated by a French governess and then sent Natalie to a select boarding school, Les Ruches, never seems to have encouraged Natalie to go to college at a time when higher education was becoming popular for the daughters of the rich. Nor did it occur to Natalie to go, even though her best friend, Evalina Palmer, attended Bryn Mawr. We might assume that both mother and daughter shared a disdain for rigid and traditional academic endeavors, and both preferred to remain in Paris to pursue an artistic and romantic life.

Natalie was not altogether without educational aspirations. While living in Paris, she hired Charles Brun (called "B.C." in "Renée Vivien") to teach her Classical Greek and to tutor her in some of the finer points of French poetics. Later, Renée joined her in her studies. Few women knew Greek, and decades later, Virginia Woolf would call it the "secret language" of men, one from which women were generally excluded because they were not taught it. By choosing to study Greek, Natalie and Renée rejected traditional subjects reserved for women and entered immediately and directly into the private domain of men. Renée proved the more apt pupil of the two and by the end of her life, she had managed to translate Sappho's fragments and expand upon

them several times.

Generally, Natalie seemed more interested in living lovers than dead languages. After some adolescent crushes, experimentation, and early relationships, she was smitten by Liane de Pougy, the most famous courtesan of the Belle Epoque. Natalie's determination to "rescue" Liane from the demimonde, even if Natalie had to marry a suitor, William Morrow (called "Freddy" in her memoir) in order to raise the capital to do so, shows an early inclination to play the knight in her relationships with other women. This proclivity helps explain why she was drawn to Renée Vivien, whom she felt she had to save from her obsession with death, and later to Romaine Brooks, whose unfortunate childhood left her with little love of social commerce. From an early age, Natalie seems to have been drawn to unsuitable lovers, each of whom was incompatible in a different way, each of whom was impossible for her to live with, each of whom would leave her longing for (and feeling free to pursue) other women.

Because Natalie saw herself as a page (a knight in training) rescuing damsels in distress, the women in question had to appear to be rather more innocent and helpless than they were in reality. Renée Vivien is depicted by her and also by her biographers as having had no physical relationships with women prior to her liaison with Natalie, despite her deep emotional attachment to Violet Shilleto. It is unclear whether or not there was any physical relationship between Renée and Violet. Natalie does omit Renée's involvement with Olive Custance ("Opale") as well as Renée's correspondence with a Turkish noblewoman in a harem. Barney was well aware of both affairs, particularly the latter since she and Renée stopped to visit this woman in Constantinople on their way to Lesbos in 1904. That Natalie was well aware of Renée's other relationships is revealed in the remark she makes to Renée after the latter has discovered the infidelity of Hélène, the Baroness von Zuylen de Nyevelt: "Really, Renée, do you have the right to be so indignant?" Well, Renée would have that right had she been faithful herself!

To admit that Renée Vivien was perfectly capable of having multiple affairs herself would ruin the tale of how Natalie tried but failed to rescue her from the grip of the ruthless and unattractive Baroness. Natalie tends to emphasize the Baroness's power and tries to turn the reader against her by alluding to her Semitic origins (the Baroness was one of the Rothchilds). Renée is depicted as a helpless pigeon in the grasp of a vulture, but Natalie fails to point out that Renée was the heiress to a dry goods fortune. Thus, she had no need of the Baroness's money and was just as capable of fleeing the Baroness as she was of suddenly ending her relationship with Natalie. By emphasizing the power of Hélène de Nyevelt, aided and abetted by a greedy governess, Natalie presents Renée as the helpless victim of irresistible forces—someone without the will or the strength to leave despite her clear preference for Natalie. In a revealing comment, Natalie confesses, "I was obsessed by her flight from me...." Natalie, as the page, saw herself as the one who loved and then moved on to other adventures. By breaking with Natalie, Renée had turned the tables on her in a painful way.

In death, Renée found the ultimate way to reject Natalie, who had remained in contact with her after the final breakup of their relationship. The cold finality of this end is emphasized by the rudeness of an unknown butler informing Natalie at the door, "Mademoiselle has just died." It seems highly improbable that a butler would make

such a statement to a person of quality such as Natalie. He would be more likely to admit her to the house and let the priest or another person of her own social class break the tragic news. Here again, I think Barney borrows a bit from Proust, where little Marcel's written request for a kiss from his mother is completely and irreparably crushed by the unfeeling announcement of the servant Françoise, "There is no answer." (*Swann's Way*, 34).

While ostensibly and loudly mourning the loss of Renée, Natalie went ahead with plans to open her salon at 20 rue Jacob where she had moved shortly before Renée's death. There, she entertained the literary, artistic, and musical luminaries of the Western world for over fifty years, and her Friday "at home" conveniently brought the most talented and lovely women to her door; many of them, including Colette, Djuna Barnes, Lucie Delarue-Mardrus, Dolly Wilde (Oscar Wilde's niece), Nadine Wong, and probably Elisabeth de Gramont stayed in her bed as well. Men and women alike fell in love with her charm, charisma, and beauty (her white blond hair and piercing blue eyes struck all who met her).

Romaine Brooks lived nearby, and though she was involved with Natalie from before World War I, she remained somewhat socially aloof and watched the parade of Natalie's other lovers from a discreet distance. She, too, has been depicted by Natalie and her housekeeper, Berthe Cleyrergue, as amazingly faithful to Natalie, but Radclyffe Hall's letters, for example, indicate that Romaine was quite smitten with the author of *The Well of Loneliness*, though the latter found Romaine a bit too aggressive and masculine for her own tastes. Again, the forlorn, long-suffering Romaine may not have been as passive a victim of Natalie's infidelities as Natalie would lead us to believe. It is true, however, that Barney's relationship with Janine Lahovary which began when Natalie was in her late seventies was the *coup de grâce* in their relationship, not so much because of Barney's infidelity but rather because of the intensity Romaine detected in Natalie's feelings for Janine. Romaine probably hadn't felt so threatened since Natalie had had a decade-long affair with Dolly Wilde. Romaine was not being paranoid, for Barney remained with Janine Lahovary until Natalie died in 1972.

Although Barney was drawn to Paris and remained there because of the intellectual climate of the city, she paradoxically adopted an anti-literary and anti-intellectual stance, an attitude which may have had as much to do with her American roots as with anything else. Although decrying the philistinism of her compatriots, Barney brought with her to Paris her native American pragmatism, which tends to view with suspicion any idea which is not immediately practicable.

As is evident in many of the selections, Barney viewed her literary output in an ironic light. One of her oft-repeated lines is: "My only books/Were women's looks." She frequently remarked that one should not write about romance, but live it. Elsewhere, she quipped that her favorite book was her checkbook.

Remarks such as these shed some light on her anti-academic stance. Barney obviously felt that ideas should be *lived*, not merely entertained. It was more important to be a humanitarian than a bibliophile. The attempt by Barney, along with Renée Vivien, to establish a neo-Sapphic creative community on Lesbos in 1904 and Barney's establishment of a literary salon for women in 1927 are examples of the urge they shared to convert theory into practice. (It is not far-fetched to suggest that Renée

Vivien, darkly attracted to the *idea* of death, actualized the concept in her own quasi-suicidal end.)

Barney's writings contain many derogatory remarks about intellectuals who refuse to partake of the mundane or sensual aspects of life around them. In *The One Who Is Legion*, intellectuals are berated as "fraudulent usurpers of fame, mind-pickers and culture snobs." In *Critical Sallies*, she writes of "the English who pronounce the word art with a capital T" (125) and complains, "I do not understand those who spend hours at the theater watching scenes between people whom they would not listen to for five minutes in real life (125)." So strong a condemnation was also a reaction to the cultural snobbery of Europeans, as repugnant to Barney as the importance Americans placed on financial success.

This anti-intellectual stance was also part of a general rebellion against the literary and cultural situation Barney found herself in as a woman writer. Because she rejected the traditional male-dominated, Judaeo-Christian ethic in regard to religion and heterosexuality, she also rejected male definitions of literature as part of the culture she repudiated. In Renée Vivien's thinly disguised autobiographical novel about her affair with Natalie Barney, *A Woman Appeared to Me*, Vally (Barney's counterpart in the novel) remarks that the best way to write naturally is to make spelling mistakes. Vally goes on to note that there are so few women authors because they are forced to write like and about men. What Barney means here in part is that any writer who claimed serious critical attention had to remain well within the traditions and standards of style and context which male literary critics found congenial.

Barney clearly did not remain within those confines, and one of the results of her rupture with the male dictates of literary creation may have caused her to receive less acclaim from the literary establishment she so beautifully entertained in her home than she might otherwise have had. By refusing to conform, what Barney is attempting to do here is to (re)define the natural in literature, much as she re(de)defined so-called natural sexuality in her life and works. In a way that is perhaps unconscious, she unravels the patriarchal dictum that good writers should think and write like men. Instead of developing clear paragraphs and crafting well-developed plots and characters, Barney throws her ideas at the reader in a somewhat militantly non-linear, pseudo-random order. She replaces paragraphs with sentences that parade past one by one and stand so alone that they dare you to focus on one particular idea rather than on the others or the work as a whole, or even more rebelliously, to skip around in a way that would have driven your elementary school teacher into a tantrum.

Barney calls these one-sentence or one-fragment ideas her 'scatterings' (the title of *Eparpillements*) or simply her *pensées* ("thoughts" or maxims)—a word that appears in the titles of two of her books. It is the latter term that was intended to provoke the male literary establishment, for the word *pensées* is typically associated with the seventeenth century writings of Blaise Pascal. Pascal, a French Jansenist scholar and writer, used the *pensée* to develop philosophical ideas about the nature of life, death, and an afterlife. Barney explodes the philosophical intent of the *pensée* by using the term for witty epigrams, *bons mots*, and perverse adages as well as for miniature tales and character sketches that are only a paragraph or two long. One source for these portraits is La Bruyère, whose witty character sketches livened the

salons of the seventeenth century, but her most direct mentor in these endeavors is the witty, ebullient and irreverent Oscar Wilde, on whose lap she once sat and to whose lover (Lord Alfred Douglas), she was once engaged. She felt bound to these two men by a shared love of perverse witticisms that turn commonly accepted ideas, and by extension morality, on their heads. In a quip about lacemaking, Barney focuses the attention on the hole instead of on the beautiful object. If we associate Barney's *pensées* with the dour Pascal, we too have been eyeing empty space instead of the fabric.

Her fragmentary style and her nonchalant approach to diction are the strength of Barney's "scatterings." The quick sharp wit of her plays and *pensées* is often based on the art of misquotation. The wit devolves from the unexpected twist she gives to what appears to begin as a familiar remark. Her observation on the sources of originality is a good example: "To mis-quote is the very foundation of original style. The success of most writers is almost entirely due to continuous and courageous abuse of familiar mis-quotation." There is a kind of Wildean perversity in her designation of misquotation as at once courageous and original. Like Wilde, she claimed for the epigram a significance belied by its apparent lightness: "The epigrams of today are the truths of tomorrow. The epigram mist has replaced the Oracle."

Her epigrams are characterized by style, wit, and a flair for the unexpected. Liane de Pougy praised Barney's epigrams as "exquisite, witty, and profound.... On each page she almost carelessly tosses a little masterpiece, written with humor and irony as fine as a dart..." (*Mes Cahiers bleus* 108, quote translated by Karla Jay). The description is a just one, and Barney's barbs make one laugh at the wound just inflicted.

Conventional grammar is often replaced with dashes and ellipses, for it is especially the latter, those three little clitoral dots, that typically omit the unspoken/unspeakable words of women's desire. The ellipsis, favored by Barney, Vivien, and Woolf, among others, was an often-used subversive tool of lesbian writers at the turn of the century, for it stresses that which is left out and unsaid in a world of legalistic male minds that want everything spelled out (and correctly, too). The ellipsis... yes, it may be the primary signifier of female desire that dare not speak its name, and Barney, one of its primary devotees.

But bold as her challenge to literary conventionality may have been, there was a side to Barney which was deeply conservative. Paradoxically, despite her denigration of intellectualism and her championship of spontaneity, she confined herself to a style and idiom more appropriate to an earlier era than her own, in a way which can only be termed "academic." In part, this choice was created by her worship of the French Symbolists (Baudelaire, Verlaine, Mallarmé) as primary literary influences. Since all of them had stopped writing by the time she began, it made her style seem conservative and rather outmoded. Therefore, one must ask why indeed Barney wrote in French, while most of her contemporary fellow expatriates for the most part wrote in their mother tongue.

As she recounts in "Renée Vivien," Barney had a French governess, who read aloud to her from Jules Verne and the *Bibliothèque rose*. Later, she attended Les Ruches in Fontainebleau. Obviously, one factor in Barney's choice of French as a language of expression was her bilingual education, a factor Barney liked to make

light of: "Being bilingual," she remarked, "is like having a wife and a mistress. One can never be sure of either" (quoted in Grindea, 22).

Education in itself does not ultimately answer the question of choice of language. Barney had a deep love not only for French authors but also for the French language. She explained, half in jest, in her preface to *Some Portraits and Sonnets of Women* that the French language is more poetic than English, in part because English was more familiar and therefore seemed more pedestrian to her than her adopted language. She felt that she could have no poetic illusions about the words she had used since birth. As a further explanation, she offered the theory that her soul was inhabited by several departed French poets (one can only wonder which ones), and that was the reason her passion for the French language and for France was so strong. She hoped that one day the French would look upon her as one of their own authors (in the way that Joseph Conrad is viewed as an English rather than a Polish author, for example), but Barney remained a linguistic as well as a sexual outsider in the end.

Barney's audience has principally been French. Her first book of poems, *Some Portraits and Sonnets of Women*, though published in France, was soundly denounced by critics in the United States who saw in its Sapphic message a frightening visage of the libertine attitude they had always suspected the French of having. Barney tried writing under a masculine Greek pseudonym, "Tryphé," in imitation of one of her mentors, Pierre Louÿs, who had pretended to be Bilitis, one of Sappho's followers. However, in Barney's case it concealed the vibrant lesbian message of her writing whereas for Louÿs it simulated one.

As a result, her early writing alternated between French and English. She wrote poetry in both languages. Interestingly enough, her most personal work—especially her unpublished and privately published work—such as *The Woman Who Lives With Me* (the prose poem that she used to woo back Renée Vivien after their first rupture) was written in English. But the form she wrote in called for a French audience, for the French were used to reading epigrams and portraits whereas the genre had never succeeded in England beyond dinner party repartee or part of a play's dialogue. In addition, novels with lesbian content had a long history in France, and Barney was familiar with Thoéphile de Gautier's *Mlle de Maupin* as well as the lesbian characters in the work of such distinguished writers as Balzac and Zola whereas in the United States almost another century would pass before Dickinson was read as a lesbian!

The final factor in Barney's choice of French was her friendship with Rémy de Gourmont. Gourmont was a literary critic for the *Mercure de France* (a leading newspaper), and in a country in which people rarely agree on anything, Gourmont's writing was almost universally acclaimed, the Renaissance scope of his knowledge winning wide respect. When he became a recluse after being hideously disfigured by lupus, Barney was the only woman he would let in his home, and she alone could persuade him to venture out beyond his immediate neighborhood. Gourmont wrote two books—*Letters to the Amazon* (1914) and *Intimate Letters to the Amazon* (1927), in which he praised her as his muse and delight. By the time Barney published her own *Thoughts of an Amazon*, the French public was more than eager to hear from the lips of Gourmont's goddess. Americans, on the other hand, were mostly ignorant of Gourmont's work; therefore, his muse Barney was not translated into her native language.

Thus, it may be the case that the French people chose Barney as much as she embraced the French language. Yet the choice of French was fraught with literary danger which Barney herself was able to admit. She voiced her nontraditional themes in academic formalistic poems and plays in verse when most contemporary French writers considered these forms outmoded. Barney tended to imitate poetic forms that had been fashionable at a much earlier date. Colette noted about Vivien (but this was also true of Barney) that anachronisms in their writing came from having studied French literature relatively late in life. Like most people who have been transplanted into a culture not theirs by birth, French masterpieces struck Barney with a novelty that would be unlike the reaction of those familiar with them from childhood.

Barney's revolution, therefore, was not one of form but of content. First and foremost, she was blatantly gleeful about her lesbianism at least twenty years before Radclyffe Hall wrote the apologetic *Well of Loneliness* (1928). As early as 1901, she told her mother that she was "naturally unnatural," and later she came to view lesbianism as "a perilous advantage" rather than something to be ashamed of or contrite about. Certainly, by the time she wrote her "Illicit Love," she was well aware of the work of Havelock Ellis, of the early German homosexual rights movements, and perhaps of U.S. homophile organizations like One, Inc., the Mattachine Society, and the Daughters of Bilitis. But her defense of lesbianism goes well beyond the typical homophile plea for acceptance. As Amelia Lanier had done in *Eve's Apology in Defense of Women*, Barney rewrites Genesis to further her cause. She shows that God cursed heterosexuals as well as homosexuals in the Old Testament (actually, the O.T. Patriarch found He had made very few acceptable humans); after all, Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve, were thrown out of the Garden of Eden.

In light of modern life and technology, it seemed prudent to Barney to review all of so-called ancient wisdom. The world, as she saw it, was overpopulated and paradoxically threatened at the same time with extinction due to the technology of the H-bomb that had so devastated Japan during World War II. In contrast, the non-reproductive love of lesbians (before turkey baster babies) seemed to her a safe and sane alternative to overpopulation, and her essay almost presages the reproductive freedom that women first experienced in the 1960s when the birth control pill was developed: When sexuality was finally severed from reproduction, it liberated gay people as well as non-gay women. Lesboerotic love was totally harmless when compared to the destructive elements man had thought up. And as her scatterings clearly indicate, she associated war exclusively with men and felt that women had little to gain from either war or nationalism.<sup>2</sup>

I use the word *lesbian* advisedly here, for Barney felt no common cause with gay men, as her essay on Gide points out. Although she had a modicum of sympathy for the sad lot of Oscar Wilde as well as for her gay male friends and acquaintances, which included Cocteau, Gide, and Proust, she felt that their promiscuous, lustful ways were destructive sexual behavior whereas her own sexual adventures constituted a charming plan to make dozens of friends.

She also saw women as another oppressed group she was part of and needed to defend. In her unpublished memoirs, she declared that she had become a feminist after taking a childhood trip through Europe and seeing how poorly women were treated there. Like Zora Neale Hurston, she noted that women were the mules of the world.

She saw that even women in power who are "the mistresses of slaves... [are] the slaves of the masters." And she knew that the financial power of men made a woman's relations with men an act of commerce, whether or not one was technically a prostitute. The best-developed example of her feminism in this collection is Barney's defense of breasts in the essay by the same name. It is superficially a reply to an attack on female anatomy by Ramon Gomez de la Serna. Barney, however, goes well beyond that by somewhat agreeing with misogynists that anatomy equals destiny, an ideal she subscribes to only in order to place primary erotic importance on women's breasts so that orgasm and pleasure are (re)centered in an organ denied to men. In a typical Barney twist, man is again God's poor first attempt of which woman is the perfected second try.

Barney's mockery of heterosexuals in general and men in particular is part of a broader attack on and dismissal of traditional values like marriage and religion, two of her favorite targets in her epigrams. She thought that original sin was not very original after all and hoped that all those "right-thinking" Christians could be replaced by people who think, presumably for themselves (115). She derided marriage as "a double defeat" because "it works on the lowest common denominator: neither of the ill-assorted pair gets what they want (110)."

Though Barney derided legal arrangements, she valued love and friendship quite highly. The portraits in this collection of Renée Vivien, Colette, Gertrude Stein, and Rémy de Gourmont attest to the warmth of her affection. Like La Bruyère, she believed that portraiture was a literary art form, again one that was not appreciated by her American compatriots. Still, she loved the form, and like many accomplished painters, she created several portraits of each model. Those found in *Adventures of the Mind* (1929) are quite formal and stylized images that highlight the intellectual accomplishments of each friend. The ones in this collection are from *Indiscreet Memoirs* (1960). By the time she had written it, all of these friends were dead, and she felt she could expand upon their private qualities in a way that would have been obtrusive had they still been alive. She believed that once someone was dead silence was the worst indiscretion: She had learned this all too well after Salomon Reinach had had the private papers of Renée Vivien sealed in the National Library in Paris in order to "protect" her reputation. Instead, his action helped push Vivien's poetry into obscurity. Barney sensed that the best way to keep these friends in the public eye was to celebrate their existence.

Not until twenty years after Natalie Barney's death has her work finally begun to appear in her native language. Now at last, we have Anna Livia's lively, accurate, and colloquial translation of Barney's version of her tempestuous affair with Renée Vivien, of Barney's witty sayings, portraits of her friends, and lesbian view of the world. Now at last, the women of the future for whom Barney wrote can become her newest friends.

#### Notes

1. I would like to thank the Scholarly Research Committee and the Summer Research Grant Program of Pace University as well as the Feminist Research Group for helping to make this work possible.

2. I have written at length about Barney's pacifism during World War I and Fascism during World War II in "The Amazon Was a Pacifist" in *Reweaving the Web of Life: Feminism and Nonviolence*, edited by Pam McAlister (New Society Publishers).

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*Apology:*

May I be forgiven my coldness on account of its sincerity.  
Ardour too can be cold.



Why should I bother to explain myself to you who do not understand  
—or to you who do?



Quintessence? Mere leftovers... thoughts half thought.



You only learn what you already know.

*Readers May Choose Their Own Dedication:*

At the beginning of this book I write your name in invisible ink  
—your little name, which blooms.



Despite myself I write for you; despite myself I erase you.



For those who find their own thoughts here, before or after they thought them.



...Because you appear in it, and so does she, and she.



For my beloved stranger, quickly lest I no longer dare.



...So that certain pages may serve her as a corrective lens.



Testament of abiding, though instant friendship.



Do not try too hard to read between the lines, nor even between the pages



...Whose eyes I love, and whose vision of the world.



For my lady, whose lucidity is so much the rarer in that it is not  
invariably, entirely vicious.



...whose every word is an epigram.



I venture to disturb you in the hope that I will please you.  
...so that your long, myopic lashes will flutter against these pages.



... whom I have loved too well to be in love with still?



For he who became a priest, perhaps for time and peace to read.



For she who calls me "chaser of glow-worms."



Not for those who call me "Miss."



For those who call me "Natly."



For so many profiles, as they turn their backs.



For a mind high-brow with prudence.



For that more than upright citizen, bent backwards by his own importance.



For that other, bent so far forward toward others that he has never discovered his own balance.



And for she whose cautious little feet never risk a step for fear of falling.



For M... who views the world through her own vanity. For her we are no more than pocket mirrors.



I wrote this little book of epigrams for you, but others will read it more often.



For A, B, C..., all dead—alas how small the world is getting.



And for D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, T, U, V, W, X, Y, Z,  
—whom I would have forgotten.



## **Part One: Natalie and Renée Vivien,**

*a tempestuous romance*