

Voltairine de Cleyre on Domesticity, Jealousy, and Abortion: Her Private Letter to Samuel H. Gordon ([c. July] 1897)

Introduction

by Robert P. Helms

Voltairine de Cleyre, by far Philadelphia's brightest anarchist light, was 30 years old when, during the late summer or fall of 1897, she wrote the following letter in London. The letter was never finished, nor was it signed, dated, or mailed. Yet the letter, clearly in her handwriting and style, came to rest in a large group of her letters in the papers of Joseph J. Cohen (1878-1953), de Cleyre's longtime associate in anarchism, which are stored in the Bund Collection, YIVO Archives, in New York City. It is one of the most compelling and dramatic of all her known writings.

Samuel H. Gordon (1871-1906) was a Russian Jew who had arrived in Philadelphia by 1890, and he immediately got involved in the labor movement, being arrested in August 1890 during the anarchist-managed cloakmakers' strike. He found work as a cigar roller, and later attended the Medico-Chirurgical College, graduating as an MD in 1898. He joined the Ritter der Frayhayt (Knights of Liberty) group soon after his arrival in the US, and he followed the anarchist-communism of Johann Most. Between his arrival in the city and the turn of the century, he gave lectures on "Anarchy," and on "Revolution: Its Necessity and its Justification," the latter having been discretely co-written by de Cleyre. Around 1898 Gordon created a splinter group of Yiddish-speaking anarchists called New Generation, which soon disappeared.

Gordon's intimate relationship with de Cleyre began in 1893, after Voltairine had started giving him private English lessons. The affair was intense but often quite painful, lasting six years. They attempted suicide together once, by means of drinking poison. She paid his exam fees at medical school from her very meager earning as a teacher, only to see him lose interest in the anarchist movement after he set up a practice at 531 Pine Street and his finances improved. His cold refusal of material help for de Cleyre when she was shot and lay near death in late 1902 severed his ties to the anarchists, and he was remembered by Emma Goldman, decades later, as "that dog Gordon." He relocated to Newark NJ in 1904 and died there in 1906 of acute gastritis, probably caused by arsenic-based treatments for syphilis, then a common and incurable disease that de Cleyre is believed to have suffered. His connection to de Cleyre is the principle reason why Gordon has ever been remembered after his death. He has been confused with a different Samuel Gordon, a physician in Philadelphia who graduated from a different medical school several years later.

Voltairine set sail for England on June 13, 1897 and left England again in late October. During the trip she lectured in England and Scotland, where she met with scores of important anarchist intellectuals and activists, including Peter Kropotkin, Fernando Tarrida del Marmol (1862-1915), and Jean Grave (1854-1939). During her stay in Britain, de Cleyre evidently received a letter from Gordon that is now lost. In it, he tormented her with an accusation of infidelity.

Before making her longer journey to Britain in late April, Voltairine traveled by train and boat from Philadelphia through New York, to Boston, and then back to Philadelphia. During that journey, the events related in the letter took place. She mentions the well-known anarchists Justus H. Schwab (1847-1900; saloon keeper at 50 First St., NYC), Harry M. Kelly (1871-1953; Boston), John Turner (7 Lamb’s Conduit Street, London), and a labor activist named John McLuckie, who had been the mayor of Homestead, Pennsylvania during that city’s famous 1892 steelworkers’ strike. McLuckie was in New York to see Emma Goldman about concerns he had regarding Alexander Berkman. Charles Falkenstein was the husband of Margaret Perle McLeod, de Cleyre’s friend, sometime house-mate, and fellow anarchist of Philadelphia. More mysterious is “Dr. Sittkamp,” whose name does not appear in the medical directories of the time, and who therefore either was not a licensed physician or performed abortions under a pseudonym, apparently in Philadelphia. The method used to induce miscarriage was the insertion in her womb of a corset stay (one of the ribs of the garment, being of various lengths). In 1897, corset stays were made from comb-like plates from a whale’s mouth, called “baleen” and used by the whale to filter plankton out of the water for food. The baleen were boiled to make them flexible, then cut into strips and slipped into the channels of the corset.

She addresses Gordon with the terms “Pussy Mine,” “Pussy/Pussie,” and “Mitchka.” Affectionate terms like this appear all over Voltairine’s personal letters, both coming to her and used by her, for friends and lovers. She called James B. Elliott “Jimsky,” she called Mary Hansen “Old Girl,” and Dyer D. Lum called her “Ghost Eyes.” For emphasis in the original letter, Voltairine underscores some words or phrases once, others twice, and on one occasion ***three times***.

Part of this letter was quoted by Paul Avrich in his definitive 1978 biography *An American Anarchist: The Life of Voltairine de Cleyre* (p. 84), but he did not quote or refer to the part of the letter which describes her abortion. Apparently Avrich was the first, and I was the second and last researcher to read this letter, since no other writer has made reference to it anywhere, except to repeat Avrich’s quotation. We do not know whether Paul simply missed the slightly veiled language describing the abortion or consciously omitted to mention it, but either scenario is possible. He was directly in touch with de Cleyre’s granddaughter Renee de Cleyre Buckwalter (now deceased), who was sensitive about points of her family’s internal history. Paul, being a gentleman, may have intentionally spared her the grief of reading this letter in its entirety. I find the letter too moving, and too important, to withhold from the reading public, although I appreciate that Voltairine herself would not wish it to be disclosed.

Here is the letter:

Pussy Mine: --I got your letter yesterday afternoon: it was posted on the third and it only reached me here on the 15th. I had a fit or two of blues at not hearing from you and was almost hysterically joyous at the sight of the envelope. But alas! What a grief! Nothing but reproaches, tears, suspicions, and --I am sorry to write it -- lies. I don't mean that you told lies, but I mean that you repeated other people's lies. You do not tell me who your informant about McLuckie was; you believe him & give me no opportunity to refute it. Will you give me a fair trial? Will you allow me to be confronted by my accuser? Will you give me the commonplace justice that the state allows?

At present, I can do nothing but deny the whole charge, from beginning to end. When I went to N.Y. I was met at Jersey City (at 1 o'clock in the afternoon, having left Phila at 11) by McLuckie. He was not drunk. We went to a restaurant on the Bowery for dinner. From there we went to see Justus Schwab. He could not be seen, but Mrs. Schwab and young Justus were there. We sat at one of the tables till around ¼ to 4. The boat leaves at 5 or 5:30. We went direct from the saloon to the boat, and there remained about half an hour talking till the boat left, when he bade me good-bye.

If you had a grain of common sense in the matter, you would remember that I had just been to Dr. Sittkamp and know that (as a medical student) no woman is supposed to be making journeys at such times, much less coming into contact with men; if you had to go through the horrible nausea, faintness, loss of ability to think, and the danger of the whole thing happening on the train or the boat; if you had lain on the Fall River steamer (by the way you had better go to the steamer books and inquire about that) as I did with a corset stay inside of that organ which you delight in theorizing about; if you had stood as I did with Harry Kelly on the street-corner, Sunday morning, April 26, and realized that the longed-for result was about to happen, there on the street, --if you had gone through the fear of that, and been compelled to sit talking to people afterwards and wondering how you were going to get to the closet in time; if you had had this happen at one o'clock and been compelled to lecture at 3; if this had been your sequel of a pleasurable experience with me, as it was mine with you, **you would be ashamed** to talk to me of McLuckie in such a way.

I was paid \$30.00 for my lecture. \$15.00 went for expenses, and the other 15 paid the doctor. I borrowed \$5.00 of Charlie Falkenstein before I left and \$2.00 of McLuckie in N.Y. This last because I did not know whether I would get well or not on Sunday and in case I didn't to come down by train Sunday night. As I did get better I came down by boat Monday night and went up from the boat to what I supposed was McLuckie's address to give him back his two dollars; and I did not find him. It was some kind of a saloon on E. 14th, I think no. 435. The woman told me he took his mail from there, but had not lived there for a month or so. I went back to the depot, took the train at 9 A.M., and was home at 12.

This is the account. I have no occasion to lie. I would have gone to McL.'s room, I would have walked in the street with him drunk if I had pleased; but he wasn't drunk and I didn't go to his room. Your informant is a miserable, miserable, accursed liar; and you, knowing well what I have written here about my personal situation, knowing that I was bearing alone the miseries of your actions and mine (and I always have & must because I am a woman) are very, very mean to condemn me without giving me the chance to meet my accuser first.

Is McLuckie in London? Well if he is I didn't know it, and I don't know anyone else who does. I have as little idea of where McL. is as last year's autumn leaf. I am very sorry for it but it is so.

You are ill Mitchka: you really are, --morally ill much more than physically. You imagine everything; there is no end to your diseased imaginations. Somebody told you that somebody had a letter from me! Now Pussy, is an unknown somebody always going to make a fool of you. The steamer landed on June 23 noon; (we passed Queenstown on the 22 only); at 5 o'clock I posted my letter to you. I do not know what days the mail steamers leave, but you can assure yourself of the date by consulting the Liverpool postmark; you can't suppose that I was powerful enough to influence the post office to change a date.

About the address! Really dear, I did forget, and I was annoyed about it within 6 hours after we left the dock. There were so many things to remember, and you were so cold and unkind that you put everything out of my head. I made no secret about giving my address to anybody. I gave it to several, and I really thought anyhow you would know it must be Turner's.

I have much pain in writing this. For the last five days I have an abscess on my right arm. It is very painful and very slow in forming, and it pains when I write because I cannot rest my arm on the table.

Now I want to tell you something, Pussie. If you love me you will try to show it in some other way than sending me letters like this, full of injustice. If you want me back I shall come all the sooner if you treat me as a free woman not as a slave. Last summer I wanted to enslave you, --at least so much that my days and nights were tears because you preferred other people to me, though theoretically I knew I was wrong. I will never, never live that life again. It is not worth while living at that price. I would rather die here in England and never see your beautiful face again than live to be the slave of my own affection for you. I will never, let come what will, accept the conditions of married slavery again. I will not do things for you, I will not live with you, for if I do I suffer the tortures of owning and being owned. I will serve you as a friend, on the terms of friendship, if you will allow me. But I will not mix pocketbooks, nor do services for you which end in wanting to possess you. All the repressed individualism in me has escaped now. I want what I always wanted in the days before we tried living together. I want separate house; I want the respect between you and me that there is between us and everyone else. I don't want our love for one another to be an excuse for breaking down the barriers of individual ownership, whereby love is strained till it is lost. I shall not inquire into your actions outside of myself; I don't want you to inquire into mine.

[END]

Selected Sources:

On Voltairine de Cleyre's career, writings, and associates, the following will provide the reader with ample information, and everything will be clearer if you begin with Paul Avrich:

Paul Avrich, *An American Anarchist: The Life of Voltairine de Cleyre* . Princeton University Press (1978).

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Crispin Sartwell and Sharon Presley (eds), *Exquisite Rebel: The Essays of Voltairine de Cleyre: Anarchist, Feminist, Genius* . SUNY Press (2005).

Voltairine de Cleyre, *Written in Red: Selected Poems* . Franklin Rosemont, editor. Charles H. Kerr (1990).

On Samuel H. Gordon see the following, aside from the abovementioned texts:

Chaim Leib Weinberg, *Forty Years in the Struggle: Memoirs of a Jewish Anarchist* . Translated from the Yiddish by Naomi Cohen; edited by Robert P. Helms. Litwin Books, 2009.

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AMA Directory of Deceased American Physicians (1998). Entry for Gordon, Samuel H..

Death notice for Samuel H. Gordon, *Evening Bulletin* (Philadelphia), November 11, 1906.

“Strikers Beyond Bounds,” *The Press* (Philadelphia), August 5, 1890.

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