

‘Un noble décor’: Modernity and Depictions of the Countryside in Colette’s *La Maison de Claudine* and *Sido*

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Introduction

For the maverick French author Colette, writing about her childhood offered a chance to reflect on the past while keeping a firm grasp on the present. Though frequently avant-garde in their social philosophies, her memoir-adjacent novels also make evident a measured introspection. As she writes of her own attitudes towards novels and life in semi-autobiographical novel *La Maison de Claudine*: ‘Je ne sais quelle froideur littéraire, saine à tout prendre, me garda du délire romanesque...’¹ This statement speaks to her work’s tension between the realist detachment of ‘froideur littéraire’ and the nineteenth-century romanticising visions of the pastoral evoked by ‘délire romanesque’. Indeed, Colette’s writing defied simple categorisation—particularly in regard to its subtly unconventional depictions of rural France.

As a close reading of *La Maison de Claudine* (hereafter *Maison*) and the similarly retrospective *Sido* show, Colette’s writing on her pastoral origins is distinctive. She challenges ideas and values associated with the countryside in French realist novels and specifically pastoral novels, all while remaining distinct from the realist tradition. In this sense, though Colette’s writing has an unmistakable nostalgia, it is remarkable in its divergence from traditional romantic countryside depictions. This divergence is especially apparent in her writing’s feminist thematic focus and doubting, self-reflexive stylistic

modernity; her books’ treatment of memory is self-referencing and avant-garde. She does not take the supposed ‘noble décor’ in which she grew up at face value.²

In this essay, I argue that while *Maison* and *Sido* look back in time for inspiration, they are forward-looking and complex in their depictions of the countryside. Colette’s illustration of country living challenges stereotypes of the rural France of her childhood, which was often either romanticised for its traditionalism, or understood as being politically, economically, and socially backwards in a more pejorative sense. Colette’s work and characters, however, subvert this idea: the experiences she records and embellishes render the countryside a more modern and creative place than her urban French contemporaries believed it to be.

Through devices such as humour, absurdism, and self-interrogation, Colette’s writing subverts more static depictions of nature reminiscent of the pastoral novel genre and its conservative origins in ‘la vie mondaine [,] la conception de l’honnête homme, [et les] mœurs rustiques’.³ As explored by Eugen Weber in *Peasants into Frenchmen*, despite the heterogeneity of cultures across rural France, Parisians living in the mid-late nineteenth century—the time of Colette’s childhood—imagined peasants as ‘vulgar, hardly civilised, their nature meek but wild’.⁴ A ‘fictional, tranquil countryside’ became

¹ Colette, *La Maison de Claudine* (first published 1922, Hachette 1961) 34. English translation: ‘I know not what literary coldness, healthy all things considered, kept me from romantic delirium...’

² Colette (n 7) 43. English translation: ‘noble decor’.

³ Maurice Magendie, *Le roman français au XVIIe siècle* (Slatkine Reprints 1970) 167. English translation: ‘the worldly life [,] the concept of the honest man, [and] rustic mores’.

⁴ Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914* (Stanford University Press 1976) 4.

the 'pastoral vision of the rural world' incorporated into primary school reading during the Third Republic, offering 'conservative peasants' as a counterpoint to France's urban turbulence.⁵

Though Colette was not a peasant, she lived among them; her books are notable for emphasising the heterogeneity and vivacity of the people populating her childhood. Diana Holmes argues Colette 'played to the tension in French culture between the nostalgic idealisation of a rural past [and the] urban, the intellectual'.⁶ Holmes also notes that French consciousness of the era associated the urban with 'energy and adaptability' and the rural with 'conservatism and physicality'.⁷ That Colette undermines this simplistic dichotomy, while also expressing a clear nostalgia for her choice recollections of pastoral France, renders her writing noteworthy.

Several authors prior to Colette are remembered for their subversive pastoral writing: consider George Sand and *La Petite Fadette* or Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Like much of Colette's writing, these novels question patriarchal norms and complicate narratives based around the domestic. Still, *Maison* and *Sido* differ from the above works through Colette's present-day self-insertion into her narratives and through her ongoing questioning of memoir writing, even as she records her own memories. Writing about her mother, for instance, Colette comments on how 'J'aurais volontiers illustré ces pages d'un portrait photographique', which entails her musing in-text on the impossibility of representing her mother on the page exactly as she was in life.⁸ Moreover, Colette wrote about the nineteenth century largely while living in the twentieth, providing her with a retrospective view on how nineteenth-century ideas about rural France informed its literature. Her books blend fiction and memoir, rendering evident the subjectivity involved in remembering, and how recording memories is itself an act of creation as much as of re-creation.

There exists tension in these books' crafting and tone owing to how they interact with values from epochs half a century apart. Colette was born in 1873 and, at the time of her writing, had seen France grow more urban and industrialised, had moved from countryside to city, and had lived through the First World War.⁹ She had also experienced an evolution of French social values running parallel to France's growing modernisation and changing social order, especially in relation to gender and sexual freedoms.¹⁰

This context means *Maison* and *Sido* hold a distinctive position in relation to France's literary tradition. Their depictions of the countryside are retrospective and nostalgic, and are also a response to the literature with which Colette grew up: her house was filled with books spanning early nineteenth-century romanticism as well as the realism and naturalism that emerged partly in reaction to romanticism's dominance.¹¹ Colette consequently became aware

of conflicting schools of literary thought at an early age—or so she claims in 'Ma mère et les livres', a vignette from *Maison* highlighting these tensions that ran across the literary and real alike. In the vignette, Colette's childhood preference for fairy tales is contrasted with the graphic naturalism of Émile Zola, in whose work Colette 'ne reconnu[t] rien de [sa] tranquille compétence de jeune fille des champs'.¹² Reading Zola causes her to faint and leaves her 'pâle et chagrine' upon awakening.¹³ Coupled with Colette's mother's dismissive comment on Zola's depiction of childbirth, declaring it 'beaucoup plus beau dans la réalité', Colette questioned the authority of naturalist literature's vision—and the realism of realism—as well as male writers' abilities to write women convincingly.¹⁴

In examining the feminism, humour, self-reflexivity, and unconventionality present in *Maison* and *Sido*, this essay analyses key preoccupations and motifs present in both texts: how different physical spaces in the countryside are depicted; the presence or lack thereof of backwardness in rural communities, whether political or social; and the role nostalgia and memory play in shaping these books' ideas. Through such analysis, I argue for a reappraisal of Colette's retrospective pastoral writing as being notably modern and subversive within a pastoral literary tradition that has historically depicted the rural world as a 'picture of peasant utopia... characterised by wisdom, balance and a purity of sentiments'.¹⁵

Physical Spaces in the Countryside

At first glance, *Maison* and *Sido* might appear conventional in their enshrinement of the 'charme agreste' that a grown Colette associates with her childhood.¹⁶ Vignettes like 'Printemps Passé'¹⁷ are in some ways emblematic of Colette's country recollections, populated by wise peasants, innocent young lovers, and plants whose beauty and growth are described as 'divine'.¹⁸ On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that Colette's writing modernises these ideas.

From 1848 to 1914, a time of significant political change and industrialisation for France, primary constants were ongoing urbanisation and 'a clearly articulated and powerful ideology of separate spheres for men and women'.¹⁹ This ideology typically relegated women to the domestic, indoor sphere and men to the public one. In rural contexts, however, the lines between these spheres had the potential to be blurred, particularly in relation to gardens.

A distinctive feature of Colette's books is that she transposes women from houses into gardens. Rather than emphasise the house as a woman's domain, Colette offers an alternative: gardens are unpoliced realms over which men hold little sway. They are associated almost entirely with women, even figuring as the locus of their social power. *Sido*, for instance, is shown to draw strength from her garden; she declares that to live in Paris, 'il m'y faudrait un beau jardin'.²⁰ This comment makes evident not only the importance she places on the garden, but also its nature as a distinguishing element of country life.

12 *ibid* 36. English translation: 'recognised nothing of [her] quiet country girl competence'.

13 *ibid* 37. English translation: 'pale and sad'.

14 *ibid*. English translation: 'much more beautiful in reality'.

15 Baker (n 4) 8.

16 Colette (n 1) 151. English translation: 'rustic charm'.

17 English translation: 'Springtime of the Past', or 'Spring Past'.

18 Colette (n 1) 150.

19 Holmes (n 5) xvi.

20 Colette (n 7) 18. English translation: 'I would need a beautiful garden'.

5 Alan R H Baker, *Fraternity Among the French Peasantry: Sociability and Voluntary Associations in the Loire Valley, 1815-1914* (Cambridge University Press 2004) 8.

6 Diana Holmes, *French Women's Writing 1848-1994* (The Athlone Press 1996) 133.

7 *ibid* 134.

8 Colette, *Sido* (first published 1930, Hachette 1961) 31. English translation: 'I would gladly have illustrated these pages with a photographic portrait'.

9 Brooke Allen, 'Colette: The Literary Marianne' (2000) 53(2) *The Hudson Review* 193-207, 196.

10 Angélique Richardson and Chris Willis, *The New Woman in Fiction and Fact Fin-de-Siècle Feminisms* (Palgrave Macmillan 2002).

11 Colette (n 1) 31-37.

Gardens can ‘structure la diégèse’ of a story through their possibilities of enclosure, entrapment, or infringement of boundaries.²¹ As such, gardens merit special focus in close readings. Gardens are symbolically important: according to ecocritical theory, for instance, gardens in literary culture can be ‘as much a moral as a physical space’²² and can serve as a ‘school for virtue’,²³ representing female moral and sexual purity. Consequently, it makes sense to analyse how Colette portrays country gardens: her depictions offer insights into the morality or philosophy conveyed in her stories, as well as how she perceives the place of women with the rural society of her childhood.

In terms of female and moral purity, Colette does not radically reshape gardens’ symbolism. Her garden-based interactions with her mother are largely safe and serene—a garden both offers physical protection from the ‘danger [et] solitude’ of the world beyond and acts as a place where children can encounter new ideas but remain safe from anything excessively threatening.²⁴ Sido gives her daughter books by Zola to read on the grass, for example—but she censors those she deems inappropriate. Nevertheless, Colette’s incorporation of humour into her depiction of gardens is significant. Through depicting the private, often mischievous lives of her female characters, she suggests that gardens have an exploratory capacity and are not solely a place in which a woman preserves her innocence.

From *Maison* opening in a garden to both books’ rhapsodic descriptions of the plants and beasts dwelling there, Colette’s writing positions gardens as key features of country life. They are influential spaces that ‘donnaient le ton au village’.²⁵ They are also both exposed and private: bridges of sorts between public and domestic spheres. Indeed, in Colette’s work, gardens are figured as places of communication with the potential to transcend the domestic sphere’s insularity. When Colette writes ‘Nos jardins se disaient tout’, she is referencing neighbours’ tendencies to talk over fences as well as how the state of a garden can indicate the wellbeing of a house’s inhabitants.²⁶ This notion that gardens can indicate the wellbeing of their caretakers is evidenced by the passage noting that Sido’s garden is tended less once misfortunes strike the family.²⁷ In this sense, gardens in Colette’s books are important socially, existing porously on the edge of the domestic and the public and thus offering an alternative to the rigid, gendered separation of spheres described by Holmes. They can also serve as a gauge of what is happening inside the house and consequently makes them especially valuable for anyone otherwise unable to communicate violence they may be experiencing behind closed doors. Gardens align with communication; houses, when threatening, with silence. Colette’s depiction of country gardens as specifically female spaces is significant. As noted by Jerry Aline Flieger, Sido epitomises this tendency in Colette’s work: she is ever standing in her garden and

her very house is ‘recalled as “a garden and a circle of animals”’.²⁸ In her garden, she possesses ‘suzeraineté’.²⁹ She is also depicted as being in touch with nature, her powers ranging from ‘infaillibilité’ when predicting weather to an instinctual understanding of plants and animals.³⁰ As Sylvie Romanowski argues, this understanding comes not from any magical power, but rather ‘from her instincts, her intuitive participation in nature’.³¹ Such qualities cement Sido’s natural place as being outdoors—a conclusion supported by Colette’s own observation that her mother’s ‘glorieux visage de jardin [est] beaucoup plus beau que son soucieux visage de maison’.³²

Colette’s emphasis on gardens as valuable women’s spaces is further demonstrated by her decision to depict men as being largely absent from them. When describing the network of gardens spread throughout her village, she places men ‘sur les seuils’, where they smoke and spit.³³ In this sense, she heightens gardens’ symbolism: they represent women’s domains as well as women’s bodies and autonomy. The norm implied is that men do not—and certainly should not—enter gardens without invitation.

Colette also subverts notions of male power in the countryside through her juxtaposition of her father with Sido. Unlike his wife, Colette’s father is ill at ease in the countryside. He lacks her authority over animals—‘Jamais un chien ne lui a obéi’—and this causes him to feel ‘secrètement humilié’.³⁴ He lacks intuition, speaking of potentially meeting his children on the road while Sido correctly assumes they will have cut through the fields.³⁵ Where Sido is described as growing more alive each time she touches country earth, meanwhile, Colette writes that the same earth and countryside ‘éteignait mon père, qui s’y comporta en exilé’.³⁶ In her memory, he is forever ‘fixé’ in his ‘grand fauteuil de repos’, surrounded by books she sometimes perceives as being as dusty and irrelevant as he is.³⁷ This unfavourable contrast and disempowerment of the father—and man of the house—makes evident the importance of the garden in rural life, which occupies so much more of Colette’s memories than does her father’s study. This truth is epitomised when Colette writes about how she could paint from memory the garden—representative of her mother—but that her father’s face ‘reste indécise, intermittente’.³⁸

By associating women so strongly with motifs of gardens, nature, and life, Colette’s memories and writing leave little room for men and male authority. This omission is a distinctly modern lens through which to depict her childhood, especially given men’s outsized social and economic power in France during her upbringing. Colette’s emphasis on gardens and women in the countryside reveals that at least in her experience of rural France, power was not always distributed along the gendered lines stressed by other chroniclers of

21 Simone Bernard-Griffiths and Marie-Cécile Levet, ‘George Sand sous le signe de Flore’ in Simone Bernard-Griffiths and Marie-Cécile Levet (eds), *Fleurs et jardins dans l’œuvre de George Sand* (Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal 2004) 18. English translation: ‘structure the diegesis’.

22 Stephen Bending, ‘“Miserable Reflections on the Sorrows of My Life”: Letters, Loneliness, and Gardening in the 1760s’ (2006) 25(1) *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature* 33.

23 Judith W Page and Elise L Smith, *Women, Literature, and the Domesticated Landscape* (Cambridge University Press 2011) 17.

24 Colette (n 1) 23.

25 Colette (n 7) 10. English translation: ‘set the village’s tone’.

26 *ibid* 11. English translation: ‘Our gardens told each other everything’.

27 *ibid* 31.

28 Jerry Aline Flieger, *Colette and the Fantom Subject of Autobiography* (Cornell University Press 1992) 33.

29 Colette (n 7) 15. English translation: ‘suzerainty’.

30 *ibid* 17. English translation: ‘infallibility’.

31 Sylvie Romanowski, ‘A Typology of Women in Colette’s Novels’ in Erica Mendelson Eisinger and Mari Ward McCarthy (eds), *Colette: The Woman, The Writer* (The Pennsylvania State University Press 1981) 72.

32 Colette (n 7) 15. English translation: ‘glorious garden face [is] much more beautiful than her anxious house face’.

33 *ibid* 11. English translation: ‘on the thresholds’.

34 *ibid* 45. English translations: ‘Never had a dog obeyed him’; ‘secretly humiliated’.

35 *ibid* 44.

36 *ibid* 42. English translation: ‘extinguished my father, who behaved there as an exile’.

37 *ibid* 37. English translations: ‘fixed’ or ‘set’; ‘large rest chair’.

38 *ibid*. English translation: ‘remains undecided, intermittent’.

the era. This reality is also evident in how she depicts the relationship between backwardness, freedom, and restraint in the countryside, as the following section explores.

Backwardness and Subversion

While many vignettes in *Maison* and *Sido* linger on idyllic natural landscapes and the archetypal peasant characters inhabiting them, the books are noteworthy in how they humanise these landscapes and figures. This humanisation is particularly evident in Colette's description of nature's oddities, human mischievousness, and the books' tension between freedom and restraint.

Nature in nineteenth-century French literature was often idealised. This tendency emerged in reaction to France's rapid modernisation following the Reformation: 'utopian fantasies of nature...can be found from Romanticism onwards'.³⁹ Idyllic pastoral visions in fiction were popular particularly during the Third Republic, for they 'served to inculcate the values of sobriety, thrift, diligence, and fraternity' that were 'vital to the republican order'.⁴⁰ Colette departs from convention when she depicts nature as sometimes being not only needlessly cruel, but also strange or bizarre.

The small, meaningless cruelties and sadness present in finer details of the country idyll emerge in several of Colette's tales involving animals and plants. For example, a pullet presumed lame from birth proves to be a casualty of one of Colette's stray strands of hair, which the family eventually discovers 'ligotait étroitement l'une de ses pattes et l'atrophiait'.⁴¹ Colette's brothers, figured as 'deux sauvages' whose adolescent growing pains 'exige des holocaustes', pass through a violent stage as a natural part of their growth.⁴² They bully others and find sport in cruelties presented as inconsequential, such as pinning butterflies to corkboards or trapping fish.⁴³ Colette herself, her curiosity about plants leading to her knowingly digging up and killing several, is described by her own mother as a 'petite meurtrière'.⁴⁴ Another vignette shows Colette's dismay upon recognising that her dog is capable of being both 'la plus douce des créatures' and a 'brute féroce'.⁴⁵ Through moments like these, Colette nuances her childhood's bucolic setting, suggesting that the countryside does not wholly offer an escape from the violence more typically associated with urban France.

That the duality of people's and animals' natures is presented as somewhat absurd—even darkly humorous—also complicates the existence of violence in Colette's countryside. Her writing indicates that violence does not always exist in a moralistic or meaningful way. This suggestion in turn subverts the more conventional, fable-like style in which she recounts certain memories.

Indeed, the absurdity and comedy of nature is an overlooked yet important theme in Colette's books. Toutouque the dog, for example, behaves as a mother to kittens and other dogs' puppies

indiscriminately.⁴⁶ The vignette 'Ma mère et les bêtes'⁴⁷ also focuses specifically on animals behaving in unconventional ways. These include a 'chaîne de chattes s'allaitant l'une à l'autre', a cat that eats strawberries, and a spider that drinks hot chocolate.⁴⁸ For Colette, nature is not always sensical or a vehicle for moralism and clear answers: sometimes it is simply peculiar or amusing.

The mischievousness of certain characters in Colette's books echoes the humour and absurdity their author identifies in the natural world. Reminiscent of Toutouque mothering kittens and puppies indiscriminately, Sido and her friend Adrienne 'échangèrent un jour, par jeu, leurs nourissons'⁴⁹—a playful act that Adrienne delights in and laughs about years later. This playfulness contradicts Romanowski's reading of Sido as 'irreverent perhaps, but only with regard to religious observances'.⁵⁰ Rather, while it is true that Sido is irreverent in church—she hides a collection of Corneille's plays in her Bible—her willingness to push boundaries and play goes well beyond this example.⁵¹ She is not a sedulous housewife; Colette emphasises her 'humour, spontanéité' and 'malice' that gets the better of her.⁵² An entire vignette, 'Le Rire', is dedicated to her unpredictable, undignified, joyful laughter, even in the face of tragedy.⁵³ She also allows her children free rein, supporting them in their adventures.

Colette's characters thus reflect less the two-dimensional figures populating conventional allegorical literature, and rather values promoted during the French Third Republic, particularly in the context of children's education. As historian Patricia Tilburg notes, from 1870, 'an active and rich imagination was seen as a crucial acquisition of the new secular soul'.⁵⁴ This attitude in Colette's novels is evidenced by the confidence with which, as a child, she climbs over the garden wall to freedom—with her mother's blessing—knowing she can return 'aux prodiges familiaux' when she chooses.⁵⁵

This link between the countryside and personal freedom is reflected in the passage where a young Colette walks alone into the woods, confident 'ce pays mal pensant était sans dangers'.⁵⁶ Colette writes how on that deserted way, at that exact moment, 'je prenais conscience de mon prix [et] d'un état de grâce'.⁵⁷ The fact that she records becoming self-aware as directly related to her being alone and in a half-wild country setting speaks to the value she places on solitude. In Colette's novels, the countryside—and in particular the reduced sense of being monitored that such space can afford—offers individuals an opportunity to cultivate a sense of self. Colette's depiction of the countryside is therefore one of freedom. This is notable given that rural, unpoliced spaces were and still are to some extent associated with threat, especially for women and children

39 Tim Farrant, *Introduction to Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (Bloomsbury 2007) 135.

40 Baker (n 4) 8.

41 Colette (n 1) 65. English translation: 'tied up one of its feet tightly and was atrophying it'.

42 Colette (n 7) 74. English translations 'two savages'; 'demand catastrophes' or 'demand disasters'.

43 *ibid* 71, 73.

44 *ibid* 20. English translation: 'little murderess'.

45 *ibid* 90. English translations: 'the gentlest of creatures'; 'ferocious beast'.

46 Colette (n 1) 88-9.

47 English translation: 'My mother and the beasts'.

48 Colette (n 1) 48-9. English translation: 'chain of cats suckling one another'.

49 Colette (n 7) 29. English translation: 'exchanged one day, as a game, their infants/nurselings'.

50 Romanowski (n 30) 72.

51 Colette (n 1) 106.

52 Colette (n 7) 37, 52. English translation: 'humour, spontaneity' and 'malice'.

53 Colette (n 1) 113-5. English translation: 'The Laugh'.

54 Patricia A Tilburg, *Colette's Republic: Work, Gender, and Popular Culture in France, 1870-1914* (Berghahn Books 2009) 61.

55 Colette (n 7) 15. English translation: 'to the familiar/domestic wonders'.

56 *ibid* 13. English translation: 'this ill-thinking country was without dangers'.

57 *ibid* 15. English translation: 'I became aware of my price/value [and] of a state of grace'.

(‘safe spaces’, for example, are typically figured as being indoors). From an ecocritical perspective, too, the metaphor of ‘land-as-woman’—a metaphor supported in Colette’s work through Sido’s alignment with the natural world—lies ‘at the root of our aggressive and exploitative practices’, many of which are evident in classic literature.⁵⁸ In her passage emphasising self-discovery, Colette thus subverts associations of wilderness with threat, offering both a modern interpretation of such spaces and a narrative in which women are less frequently positioned as victims.

Granted, the countryside in *Maison* and *Sido* is no feminist utopia. For all it offers some characters freedom, it also generates social and political restraints. Colette’s narratives ‘take place in a world that has a clear economic dimension’.⁵⁹ La petite Bouilloux, for example, is made aware of her exceptional looks—and this emphasis on her exceptionalism contributes to her gradual self-isolation as well as to her peers alienating her. Colette presents hers as a tragicomic moral tale: la petite Bouilloux ‘attendait, touchée d’une foi orgueilleuse’ that has her believe that, as a great beauty, her destiny lies beyond the village.⁶⁰ However, no handsome stranger arrives to spirit her away; she refuses marriage proposals and ultimately finds herself aged, alone, and embittered. Colette’s recount, for all its perspicacity regarding human nature, lacks sympathy for the woman’s situation. In another time or place, la petite Bouilloux could well have married into wealth. As it is, her personal tragedy is that of living in too small a village that she now disdains, with no great personal wealth or means of accessing a wider pool of suitors. As such, she is reminiscent of tragic figures like Emma Bovary: making poor decisions, but also a victim of romantic hopes combined with a too limited countryside reality.

Colette’s father suffers similarly in the countryside. Politically ambitious and a ‘citadin’ at heart, his country existence is loving but constricting: the environment stifles him and he is described as ‘réduit à son village et à sa famille’ (my emphasis).⁶¹ He is an ‘outsider’ in both the countryside and his family, ever ‘relegated to the sidelines’ in Colette’s memories and her retelling of them.⁶² He never fulfils his dreams of becoming a writer, his unwritten works present in his imagination but intangible in reality, much like his phantom limb. This renders even more powerful the fact that Colette eventually takes her father’s name as her pen name. Through signing her works thus, she effectively conveys upon her father the closest realisation he will ever achieve of literary immortality.

Nostalgia and Memory

For all Colette projected a self-assured persona in life, *Maison* and *Sido* reveal a self-conscious, even doubtful side to their author. The books are hyper-aware of their exploration of memory, and that memory can be subjective and incomplete and constantly evolving. As Colette explores in *Maison*, memory is fragile: she is aware that even in attempting to recreate memories with her own daughter, she risks the re-creation of that which is already ‘à demi évaporé’ appearing poor and void of enchantment.⁶³ Remembering and

illustrating her childhood in the countryside thus becomes a fraught exercise, with nostalgia and interrogation of memory colouring the outcome. ‘Tout s’élançait, et je demeure’, she reflects.⁶⁴ This sentiment encapsulates the wrench of recognising that memory can never be wholly re-created, or moments perfectly captured.

This awareness renders much of her writing bittersweet. By the end of vignettes, for example, characters often appear frozen in place. Colette leaves her mother in the garden on multiple occasions, literally and well as figuratively, writing about imagining her still being ‘à cette même place’.⁶⁵ She also writes of her father being frozen in his library, where he resides in her memories ‘à jamais’, and laments not having known him better beyond this limited context.⁶⁶ Such moments make evident the limitations of Colette’s ability to conjure up the past. When she appears confident in her ability to recreate scenes, these are typically of a more static variety revolving around the set dressing of her memories. She writes of her childhood garden being before her eyes, for example, and of being able to evoke the wind, ‘si je le souhaite’.⁶⁷ However, other passages make painfully clear that she can only re-create what she already consciously remembers. When trying to recall the end of a conversation with her mother, for instance—one with great meaning for her adult self—she writes, dismayed, that ‘La suite de cet entretien manque à ma mémoire’.⁶⁸ While she can recreate the past’s scenery, those populating it can exist only within the scenes she remembers. Such is the limitation of memory and writing about it; for without the autonomy of their being alive, these characters and their depictions can never truly satisfy the adult writer.

This paradox inherent to recounting the past forms one of the most intriguing aspects of Colette’s writing. As her descriptions of the countryside make clear, she is all too aware of her capacity—as well as that of her readers—to embellish the past. Her writing is modern in terms of her feminism and humour. Yet she appears comfortable exploiting the countryside as a subject matter to appeal to urban readers; her Claudine novels, after all, originated as a money-making venture.⁶⁹ She was likely influenced by pastoral literary conventions and their marketability, at least early in her career. However, the distance she creates between herself and her childhood through the insertion of her adult self into her books, reflecting on the scenes, makes clear her ultimate disbelief in her books’ capacity to capture memories in a way that feels truly alive.

In this sense, the adult Colette and her depictions evoke above all her father’s slightly desperate, performative love for the countryside: it fills him with enthusiasm, ‘mais à la manière d’un noble décor’.⁷⁰ This phrase effectively emblematises a significant tension and subversive thread in Colette’s novels: that they acknowledge that nostalgia and appreciation of the pastoral can be performative, and that professing love for something which is itself a construct can be absurd or even embarrassing. The young Colette and her siblings, who feel genuinely moved by the countryside, grow only more taciturn as their father speaks—‘nous qui n’accordions déjà plus d’autre aveu,

58 Cheryll Glotfelty, ‘Introduction’ in Harold Fromm and Cheryll Glotfelty (eds), *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (The University of Georgia Press 1996) xxix.

59 Diana Holmes, *Women Writers: Colette* (Macmillan Education 1991) 66.

60 Colette (n 1) 84. English translation: ‘waited, touched by a proud faith’.

61 Colette (n 7) 41-2. English translations: ‘townsman’ or ‘city dweller’; ‘reduced to his village and to his family’.

62 Fliieger (n 27) 67.

63 Colette (n 1) 151. English translation ‘half-evaporated’.

64 *ibid.* English translation: ‘Everything takes off, and I remain’.

65 Colette (n 7) 31. English translation: ‘at/in this same place’.

66 *ibid.* 37. English translation: ‘forever’.

67 Colette (n 1) 51. English translation: ‘if I wish’ or ‘if I wish it’.

68 *ibid.* 58. English translation: ‘The rest of this interview fails my memory’.

69 Françoise Mallet-Joris, ‘A Womanly Vocation’ in Erica Mendelson Eisinger and Mari Ward McCarthy (eds), *Colette: The Woman, The Writer* (The Pennsylvania State University Press 1981) 9.

70 Colette (n 7) 43. English translation: ‘but in the manner of a noble décor’.

à notre culte bocager, que le silence'.⁷¹ They are thus exactly like the characters populating Colette's retellings of her memories: ultimately silent, because they cannot exist beyond the limits of what they have already said and done. Moreover, Colette is restricted in the knowledge that they do not—and cannot—authentically exist if she fictionalises or ventriloquises them into performance. They no longer have the potential to evolve or surprise of their own accord.

Conclusion

In her depiction of the countryside, Colette seeks to record memory, perhaps even in a bid to know its subjects better. She is driven by 'le prurit de posséder les secrets d'un être à jamais dissous', all the while aware that her retrospective perspective and then-modern values render her depictions of the past a form of commentary and of re-creation, rather than of unselfconscious representation.⁷² Recording memories is, for her, an inherently bittersweet act owing to her awareness of its limitations.

To some extent, her writing succeeds in its goal, enshrining people and places with a loving faithfulness that is, if not necessarily factually accurate, at least truthful in its depiction of adult Colette's nostalgia. Her writing conveys a distinctly modern subtext regarding the freedom and feminine empowerment linked to certain country spaces. This also subverts the more common depiction of rural spaces in literature of the time as being peaceful, morally simple counterparts to the turbulence of urban France. Colette's self-insertion in her books and commentary regarding the act of remembering also adds another layer to her depictions.

Ultimately, *Maison* and *Sido* are strikingly modern for texts so dedicated to commemorating the past. Their self-referential tendencies make them enduringly relevant and thought-provoking for readers and memoirists, as do their humour and frequent impiety. They also offer insights into how constructing images is much like reconstructing memories: deeply selective and subjective. Colette was aware that the countryside she wrote into being was itself a sort of ideal and a fantasy, even when she used it to puncture traditional imagery and conservative ideas. Analysing her writing—which contains her own thoughts on its creation—can therefore not only engender greater appreciation of its modern aspects, but also encourage further reflection and investigation into image formation, in particular in the context of French culture.

71 *ibid.* English translation: 'we who already granted no other admission, to our bocage cult, than silence'.

72 *ibid.* 60. English translation: 'the pruritus of possessing the secrets of a being forever dissolved'.