



# Translating the Self: Colette and the “Fatally Autobiographical” Text

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## Translating the Self: Colette and the “Fatally Autobiographical” Text

### Prologue

At the time I learned that Rosemary was retiring and was going to be “translated” from Indiana to Australia via Cambridge, I was miles away. Working on a chapter about Colette’s maternal resurrections in *La Naissance du jour*, I was, in the process, laboring under the strain of the tricky commute between art and life that Colette imposes on readers of her autobiographical novels. Reversing that earlier focus today, in honor of Rosemary’s art and life, I’ll be sharing some thoughts on translations between life and art in Colette, and the problems they pose to reading for the mother.

### Exergue

I’ll begin with an anecdote that came to my attention through Judith Thurman’s biography of Colette. Thurman recounts a childhood memory related to a journalist by Colette’s daughter. The adult Bel-Gazou remembers a vacation with her parents when she was five. It was 1918; her father was arriving home on furlough. “She and her mother, she recalled, had been waiting anxiously for Henry to arrive, and she had been dressed up to greet her father. While running down a flight of stone steps, she tripped, took a bad fall, headfirst, and scraped her face. Colette rushed over, but not to offer comfort. ‘Her irritation expressed itself with a pair of slaps and this sentence: ‘I’ll teach you to ruin what I’ve made!’ ”<sup>1</sup>

To open a literary talk on *La Naissance du jour* with this biographical anecdote is to flout my best critical sensibilities and intents, but I do so with a sense of necessary perversity. The illegitimacy of my appropriation is compounded by its triple embedding, four times removed from Colette and unrelated to her writing: operating as a literary critic, I borrow from a

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<sup>1</sup> Judith Thurman, *Secrets of the Flesh: A Life of Colette* (New York: Knopf, 1999), p. 274. Thurman gives as archival source BN 18718.

biographer a journalist's recounting of a childhood memory of maternal handling related by Colette's adult daughter. I mean in this way to emblemize the challenges and risks of reading (for) the mother in any of Colette's three mother-centered novels, which have traditionally been assimilated by critics and biographers to Colette's own life story. Fiction and autobiography, biography and correspondence, indiscriminately bundled for decades by Colette's biographers and critics, have become virtually indistinguishable in the secondary work. If the establishment of such a continuum between the books and the life was encouraged and arguably launched by the efforts of her first husband and most zealous publicist, Willy, producer of a large-scale Colette industry<sup>2</sup>, this was due to his extraordinary talents as reader of cultural mythology. His gifts included an intuitive grasp of a convention I call the feminomorphing of women's books (reading books by women as if they were themselves women),<sup>3</sup> a convention Colette herself would refer to as "l'oeuvre fatalement autobiographique de la femme"<sup>4</sup>—a phrase which provided my title, and to which I will return.

Like Colette (like a certain Colette), I'd like to resist this life/work stew. I'd prefer to remove from my reading of *La Naissance du jour* the insights that come from interviews, correspondences, and biographies, to exclude them as lateral information, beside the literary point, in order to read Colette as I do the work of other writers: as a fine and precious artifact, apart. I say Colette: I mean the writer, the writing, the text. But before I know it, I find myself caught up with the remains of the woman, the living, the life—particularly when reading *La Naissance du jour*, whose wily snares wind us in novelistic filaments that defy an untangling of

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<sup>2</sup> Colette acted the character who dominated her early work, Claudine, on stage and in town; she was (often by design) confused with her character, which led to the marketing of a panoply of signature objects: Claudine dresses and hats, glace Claudine, gâteau Claudine, cigarettes Claudine (etc.). See Elaine Marks, *Colette*, Rutgers, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1960, p. 73.

<sup>3</sup> Lynne Huffer rightly applies to Colette, Mary Ellman's observation that "books by women are treated as though they themselves were women." Huffer, *Another Colette*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992, p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Colette, *La Naissance du jour* in *Oeuvres III*, ed. Claude Pichois, Paris: Gallimard (Pléiade), 1991, p. All references to this novel will be to this edition and will be provided in the text.

fictional from autobiographical and biographical threads.<sup>5</sup> I catch myself on the other side of a Möbius strip, having slipped inadvertently out of fiction, into autobiographical narrative and on into letters and life. I don't believe that the legitimacy of such a continuum can be assumed, and I don't know which was the first false step, or even if I'm responsible for taking it. Sido and Colette are just two of a number of commuting characters in Colette's works, figures who wind their way between fiction and autobiography. The case of *La Naissance du jour* is especially complicated: historical figures such as the artists André Dunoyer de Segonzac and Luc-Albert Moreau sit down to dinner with Colette and her creatures of fiction, Vial and Hélène, while her mother's ghost hovers nearby and her real-life letters—rewritten—collaborate with Colette's text.<sup>6</sup> So we follow a sinuous trail that leads to questions at every bend.

If we're reading Colette's memoirs and autobiographical novels for the mother's traces, can we legitimately seek supporting evidence in, for example, the Claudine novels, which are widely accepted as thinly disguised (if salaciously embroidered) autobiographical accounts of Colette's adolescence and young womanhood? If not, how about *La Maison de Claudine*, a series of autobiographical vignettes that significantly are not, however, called *La Maison de Colette*? Does the name of Claudine in the title (strictly irrelevant to the content of the text, and surely commercially motivated) serve to fictionalize the memoir-like character of the text? Or to remind us that life transferred to writing can at best lie within a genre fluctuating between biography and fiction?<sup>7</sup> What about the fictions? Can we reconstruct the mother using

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<sup>5</sup> Colette herself referred to *La Naissance du jour* as a novel in her correspondence. See Jerry Aline Flieger, *Colette and the Phantom Subject of Autobiography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 24. Questions about how art and life relate to each other, which are intrinsic to all literature, are intensified in Colette's text by her self-conscious play with them.

<sup>6</sup> I will have more to say later about these letters, written by Sido but rewritten by Colette.

<sup>7</sup> autobiography ( ) autofiction ( )

descriptive or anecdotal details from the novels—and if not, what about scenarios of desire and loss continuous with the memoirs and the letters?<sup>8</sup>

Like all of Colette's critics, like Colette in her flirtation with them, I can't always keep her life and art pure. That is why, perhaps again like Colette, I'll play with the conventions that confuse the two. And that is why I open with everything I'd like to banish from my own reading of Colette. To open with this cast-off material is, in other words, to put it *en exergue*, from the Greek, *ergon* «œuvre», through the Latin, *exergum*, « espace hors d'œuvre », as the *Petit Robert* tells us.

*Mettre en exergue*: to place outside my work, as if by ritual purging, by an abjection of what threatens to contaminate it. I put *en exergue* all that I'd prefer not to consider, all that I want to exorcise from my text. I concentrate it, encapsulate it, cordon it off in that space *hors-d'oeuvre*. But that outlying region is also a primary space, a privileged place that comes ahead of the rest of the text. An *hors-d'oeuvre* with all the attendant ambiguity of that phrase: a place of exile, an outer darkness—but also, an *amuse-gueule*, an appetizer, a seductive foretaste of what's to come. What is outside the work also precedes the work; what is rejected is potentially the most influential part, by virtue of its position of primacy. The *hors-d'oeuvre* comes to coincide with the *chef-d'oeuvre*: etymologically, the work at the head of what follows, the leading work.

By the classic logic underlying hierarchical thinking, what I marginalize spatially in my approach to Colette cannot effectively be excluded from it, because it is symbolically central to my thinking about her.<sup>9</sup> A pattern of conflictual representation dominates contemporary literary critical and biographical accounts of Colette, following her own ambiguous self-presentation,

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<sup>8</sup> Flieger calls such continuities “a phantasmal network,” something like “an obsessional myth in Mauryon's sense of the term.” (p. 20).

<sup>9</sup> See Peter Stallybrass and Allon White's analysis, via Hegel's *Phenomenology*, of symbolic extremities of high and low in European cultures, in *The Politics & Poetics of Transgression*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986, especially pp. 5-6.

and scars my own thinking as well: that is, her life is ostensibly subordinated to her work, distinct from it, suppressed by it, only to re-emerge within it, in unexpected forms and spaces. We can pluck from the daughter's memory of her mother, Colette, some threads to lead into the text of *La Naissance du jour*—as we simultaneously call attention to the questions of legitimacy and authenticity posed by letting auto/biography intrude, in just such a way, into fiction's text.

But let's pause to acknowledge the shock value of the anecdote. It provokes a visceral reaction on the part of the reader, eliciting sympathy for the doubly wounded child, and horror for the mother's aggression.<sup>10</sup> It may be helpful here to step back and think about just what cultural notions of the mother, the maternal, and mother-love are implicitly invoked as they are radically subverted to the point of engaging our emotions. What sort of mother would rush to her hurt child's side to offer reprimand and punishment instead of consolation and comfort? (In the grown daughter's words, "Une bonne tape fut le premier de mes pansements."<sup>11</sup>) What mother would make of her child a means by which to woo her man rather than an end in its own fledgling self? What mother would treat a child's injury as a blow to her own narcissism and a threat to her own integrity? And for what kind of mother is a child's subjectivity reconfigured as an objet d'art? Cultural expectations would have the "good mother" steadily at her child's side, offering encouragement and succor.<sup>12</sup> A "good mother" keeps the erotic and the maternal

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<sup>10</sup> I should make clear that since we are always situated as readers, I am speaking first of—and as—the contemporary American reader, operating within a child-centered culture, and with all the cultural assumptions that position entails, and which no doubt intensify the perturbing effect of the story. (See Raymonde Carroll, *Cultural Misunderstandings: The French-American Experience*, trans. Carol Volk (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988). As Anne de Jouvenel also reminds us in her preface to *Colette, Lettres à sa fille 1916-1953*, Paris: Gallimard, 2003, "l'éducation des enfants était différente à l'époque—les enfants n'avaient aucun droit—sauf celui de se taire et d'obéir... faire honneur à la famille" (p.8).

<sup>11</sup> Colette de Jouvenel, *Colette de Jouvenel* (Paris: Société des amis de Colette, 1982), p. 25

<sup>12</sup> In interviews, a grown-up Bel-Gazou reflects variously on the ways in which her mother did not correspond to the cultural norms of the maternal. For example, as Anne de Jouvenel relates: "On lui demandait souvent quelle sorte de mère était Colette, elle répondait: 'Si je devais dire que Colette était une mère maternelle, au sens où on entend cela ordinairement, ce ne serait pas exact. Une mère *maternelle* est censée vivre penchée sur son enfant. L'enfant étant le centre de tout, et parfois peut-être jusqu'à l'excès. Non, ma mère n'était pas cela.'" Preface to Colette, *Lettres à sa fille 1916-1953*, p. 18. Just as Colette was intensely aware of the tension she would call, in *L'Etoile Vesper*, "la

distinct. A “good mother” is instinctively aware of a child’s needs, and places them before her own. A “good mother” is not constantly away while her child is raised by a governess and by consignment to friends. A “good mother” is, of course, rarely also a “good writer,” if we take that to mean a reputed author with a strong publication record.

Is Colette then the proverbial “bad mother”?<sup>13</sup> Should such a question be raised, in the context of a literary discussion, and does it matter for our reading of her work? Author of texts taken as maternal odes and author-to-be of a *Supplément au Traité de l’Education des filles, de Fénelon* (it never materialized),<sup>14</sup> Colette might be likened to Rousseau, author of a treatise on education, and far from a model father.<sup>15</sup> And yet I wonder if Colette’s maternal shortcomings are not somehow more consequential to the reception of her work as a writer than the analogous paternal failings of Rousseau are to his.

I’m not alone in the temptation to include, in my reading of Colette, elements usually considered to be bad form in literary criticism: loss of critical distance, interference of life in art, gossip, emotional investment, and identification. Colette’s writing elicits very personal, idiosyncratic, dialogic, relational readings, especially (if not exclusively) from her female critics.<sup>16</sup> Nicole Ward Jouve begins an enlightening study with some confessional remarks that constitute her personal manifesto for reading Colette: “It was my own dialogue with Colette I

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compétition, livre contre enfantement,” her daughter in turn reflected on it from her own perspective: “Un enfant accepte mal de partager sa mère...il me fallait apprendre à partager avec une “oeuvre”. Une oeuvre...Pouvait-on, pouvais-je lui demander d’avoir toutes les vertus? Celles d’un écrivain qui composera soixante volumes et celles de la mère poule qui m’aurait dédié le plus clair et le plus chaud de son temps?” Cited by Claude Pichois and Alain Brunet in *Colette* (Paris: Editions de Fallois, 1999), pp. 346-47.

<sup>13</sup> Speculations about Colette’s failings as a mother are legion in the biographies and literary criticism. Some commentators link her maternal shortcomings directly to her success as a writer, as if one were a consequence of the other. Michel Del Castillo distinguishes himself from most critics by separating the woman from the opus. (Del Castillo, *Colette, Une Certaine France* [Paris : Stock, 1999])gg

<sup>14</sup> Announced by the Editions du Trianon, in 1927.

<sup>15</sup> [note; references]

<sup>16</sup> See Castillo’s *Colette, une certaine France* for a personally invested account on the part of a man (who was a friend of Colette de Jouvenel’s).. An unexamined world exists in the interstices between Colette’s texts and her readers. There is a reading of readings of Colette (and especially of *La Naissance du jour*, with its embedded reader, Vial) to be done that would help enormously to elucidate her work.

wanted to recount. ...Immersed for months in Colette studies, and in Colette's own works, I had so wanted to yield, be taken over. ...To have any chance of saying anything relevant about Colette, I must face up to her as I am, for what I am worth. Thus I start from what I can deduce from my experience of Colette."<sup>17</sup> Jouve's words are representative of many women's responses to Colette, including my own. Colette's writing resists me, but won't let me go. Her sentences elude me, and dare me to pursue. Her poetics of self and other challenges me to participate in an analogous poetics and politics of reading, to reexamine my critical voice and my critical stance and to take the measure of my distance from her text. The aesthetic questions raised by reading Colette are entangled with ethical questions. What is at stake for women reading Colette? What do women want from Colette? How can women's reading desire legitimate Colette and, in turn, be legitimated, without violating the integrity of her writing and living self, or our own?

The problem of subjectivity and relation raised for me by the biographical anecdote recurs on the level of reader response to *La Naissance du jour* as we seek Colette (the writer, the woman) among her constructs, and ourselves among her embedded readers. Which Colette are we reading? Which reader are we? These questions are uncannily shadowed within the novel, which is, among other things, a meditation on recognition and identification. A host of related puzzles ricochet in the space between biography and literary text. Here is one example.

Bel-Gazou bedecked in her finery for Henry, torn and undone like a gift whose wrapping has been ripped before ever reaching its recipient, spoils the surprise, shames the giver, and shifts the reader's interpretation from a maternal to an erotic register. The scene has other biographical resonances, and also literary counterparts. It anticipates a scene in *Sido* in which the child Minet-Chéri is wrapped in blue and tied with a ribbon, then sent with an ornament of flowers to Sido's best friend, the seductive Adrienne, as emissary, though one might say also as offering, as gift: a

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<sup>17</sup> Nicole Ward Jouve, *Colette*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987, pp. 4-6.



message of love. Minet-Chéri, herself seduced by Adrienne's wild charms, lingers, arouses Sido's jealousy: extends the mother's message, rewrites her text. Minet-Chéri, like Bel-Gazou, dispatched as a love letter, becomes a text that overflows its borders, a Frankensteinian creation, Colette's monster: a Galataea that begins to breathe on her own. This scene evokes another from the life narrative. Colette's stepson Bertrand, who was also her young lover in the early 1920's, was originally sent as emissary by his cunning mother, Claire de Boas, who sought to use her charming sixteen-year-old boy to convince her ex-husband, through Colette, to allow her to continue to carry his name. Bel-Gazou wrapped by Colette for Henry, Minet-Chéri adorned by Sido for Adrienne, Bertrand dispatched by his mother to Colette, who is charmed more than was perhaps intended<sup>18</sup>: here are the same crossed threads of nurturance and seduction that structure *La Naissance du jour*, which juxtaposes mothers and lovers.

Following attempts to purge biography from my critical text, I found the *hors-texte* already within. In parallel fashion, I discovered that *La Naissance du jour* is a work that endlessly recontains its own outer bounds in Borgesian or Escheresque fashion, evacuating and then reabsorbing its apparent other. Have I come full circle at the point of entry into the literary text? Does art always mirror life? Does life necessarily produce art's legend? No: I do not want to imply that Colette's fiction is autobiographical. On the contrary; I propose that all her life's a book, and that life is her most extravagant work.

According to most accounts, Colette was less than a devoted mother. Her intense absorption in her work and life seemed to preclude the assimilation of a child's world into her own, and she quickly consigned her daughter to a governess. Colette, who spoke lucidly of the incompatibility of maternity and authorhood, regarded herself as essentially an author and

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<sup>18</sup> At least one commentator, however, has suggested that Claire de Boas knew exactly what she was doing when she asked Bertrand to intercede on her behalf, and that the Colette-Bertrand affair was engineered to take revenge on her ex-husband, Bertrand's father and Colette's current husband. See ??????????

accidentally a mother.<sup>19</sup> Late in life she would acknowledge her bias in a letter to her daughter: “Y eut-il jamais mère si peu maternelle? Je suis ton vieux gratte-papier, qui fut trop souvent obsédé de soucis matériels.”<sup>20</sup> The words play on a material split, the *maternel* ceding to the *materiality* of writing. The adult Bel-Gazou spoke often and plaintively of her mother’s dual loyalties: “Non, on ne pose pas de questions à une mère qui travaille. Je me retenais. Et c’était le plus dur...Ce que je ne devinais pas, c’est que la plupart des réponses à toutes mes questions informulées, elle était occupée à les écrire. Non pour mon seul profit, pour le profit de beaucoup de gens...”<sup>21</sup> The daughter’s jealousy of the mother’s books culminates in her sense of their mutual exclusivity: “Elle qui chaque jour enfantait, pouvait-on demander qu’elle mît au monde chaque matin des jumeaux : son travail et son enfant ?”<sup>22</sup> This rivalry is the counterpart of the conflict Colette later referred to as “la compétition, livre contre enfantement.”<sup>23</sup> Colette, whose favorite work of fiction was Balzac’s *Le Chef-d’œuvre inconnu*, surely knew—in art and life—the precarious equilibrium, if not to say the radical incompatibility, of art and life.<sup>24</sup>

Colette seems to have resolved the problem of incompatibility, rhetorically at least, by assimilating her daughter to her work: my daughter, my text, the work of art I have made, punished for aesthetic flaw. “I’ll teach you to ruin what I’ve made!” The filial opus defiled reappears in illness as aggressively defective: “ Je me tourmente quand tu perds ta bonne mine, et cela me rend...un peu méchante. Quand tu es malade, c’est comme si tu m’avais fait quelque

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<sup>19</sup> “Quand j’étais jeune, si je m’occupais, par exception, à un ouvrage d’aiguille, Sido hochait son front divinateur: ‘Tu n’auras jamais l’air que d’un garçon qui coud..’ Ne m’eût-elle pas dit : ‘Tu ne seras jamais qu’un écrivain qui a fait un enfant.’ Elle n’aurait pas ignoré, elle, le caractère accidentel de ma maternité.” Colette, *L’Etoile vesper*, in *Œuvres*, ed. Claude Pichois, Paris : Gallimard (Pléiade), 2001, IV :876.

<sup>20</sup> Letter of 27 October 1952 in Anne de Jouvenel, p. 514.

<sup>21</sup> Anne de Jouvenel, pp. 18-19

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* p. 19.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 876. In the extended citation it becomes clear that one must choose between mediocre writing and mediocre mothering : “ Mon brin de virilité me sauva du danger qui expose l’écrivain, promu parent heureux et tendre, à tourner auteur médiocre, à préférer désormais ce que récompense une visible et matérielle croissance : le culte de enfants, des plantes, des élevages sous leurs formes diverses.”

<sup>24</sup> During the time Colette and her stepson/lover Bertrand de Jouvenel revisited her childhood haunts, which led to the writing of her first mother-book, *La Maison de Claudine*, they read and reread Balzac’s *Chef-d’oeuvre*.

chose de mal.”<sup>25</sup> Small wonder if Colette expressed her daughter’s shortcomings in terms of wounding imperfection, and failed art, for she would always represent herself from Sido’s perspective as masterpiece.<sup>26</sup> If Colette’s daughter in turn presents herself to interviewers as a failed masterpiece, a lesser work, in her mother’s eyes, the letters let us understand just why, for Colette often addresses her daughter there as a creation who did not live up to her creators’ inspiration, an unfinished work unworthy of her makers.

Bel-Gazou becomes an *oeuvre manquée* for reasons that Colette charges to a lack of originality or uniqueness. “Bavarder, rire... ce sont des choses banales. Une élève dissipée est une élève qui ressemble à cent, mille autres élèves. Tu ne te singularises pas...Au contraire, tu deviens ce que j’ai toujours dédaigné: quelqu’un d’*ordinaire*.”<sup>27</sup> Elsewhere she chides: “Nous ne t’avons pas mise au monde pour cela. Ton père et moi nous sommes en droit d’exiger que notre fille...soit *quelqu’un*.”<sup>28</sup> This daughter failing to bring glory to her creators is routinely labeled “quelconque.” Yet in a letter to her friend Germaine Patat, Colette suggests at least a fleetingly more nuanced understanding of the ordinary as it operates in her family’s rather extraordinary psycho-social universe: “Quelle fichue situation d’être la fille de deux *quelqu’un*. Elle a un sacré besoin de s’appeler Durand, ma fille.”<sup>29</sup> Striving, in response to her mother’s criticism, to distinguish herself, to transcend her relegation to the ordinary, the child attempts to write pithy, remarkable letters worthy of Colette, only to feel herself inevitably backsliding into banality: “C’est aujourd’hui ton anniversaire n’est-ce pas, maman? Je te souhaite un très heureux

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<sup>25</sup> Anne de Jouvenel, mars 1922

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 1923, p. 59.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 1923 p. 59.

<sup>29</sup> Anne de Jouvenel, p. 13.g

anniversaire... J'aurais voulu t'écrire une lettre sensationnelle pour ce jour, mais il suffit que je veuille pour immédiatement pondre une banalité qui...ne traduit pas mes sentiments."<sup>30</sup>

Might we connect childhood associations with creative ineptitude to the adult Bel-Gazou's abandonment of a career in journalism to open an antiques store, located on the Impasse de l'Écritoire? Could we speculate on Colette's preoccupation, in *Naissance*, with being the daughter of her mother, leaving her own maternal subjectivity largely unvoiced? It is tempting to wonder whether she would have been able to articulate her identifications and dissociations with her own mother without having first acceded to maternal subjecthood. Colette's avowed disinclination to speak of her daughter in *La Naissance du jour*, and the silence in which she shrouds her there, similarly invite interpretation.

Yet I hesitate to proceed. At risk is my literary critical voice. With Colette, reductiveness looms in each sentence I write. I question my critical ethics, the critical ethos in which I was formed, and more specifically, the place and position of criticism in relation to a literary text and its author: its *orientation*, in the full etymological sense of relation to the orient, the rising sun, the privileged source. If literature is that sun, am I not Icarus, if not Prometheus, flying too high, presuming too much, raiding the gods' own light? What is criticism's appropriate stance, its place, its route, in relation to the literary text? What is its geographical metaphor? How near to, how far from a literary text should a critic stand; how closely embrace, how distantly examine the writer?

The dialectic of distance and relation intrinsic to any epistemological undertaking in which a subject speaks of or for an object (a dialectic especially prominent in a narrative text) is exacerbated in Colette because of the whirling dynamic of self and other that she sets in play. As

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<sup>30</sup> Anne de Jouvenel 26 janvier 1928, pp. 140-41. See Michael del Castillo's commentary on the fate of Colette de Jouvenel's writing, "suffocated" by her mother. Anne de Jouvenel notes that when Colette de Jouvenel (her aunt) abandoned journalism and became an antiques dealer, her address was "Impasse de l'écritoire."

her would-be critic (her commentator or interpreter), I am sensitive to the danger of becoming her effective critic (her evaluator or judge), and I worry about a potential “critical imperative” model. Must literary criticism work under a latent doctrine of “manifest destiny”? Does it share with other modern intellectual disciplines a colonizing birthright from which it borrows its textual authority?<sup>31</sup> Reading Colette makes me increasingly reluctant to follow these critical conventions (the conventions of patriarchal criticism). I recognize in my work on Colette, with some uneasiness, a reactive (some might say feminist) intimacy with Colette. It is like Jouve’s desire “to yield, to be taken over” (by Colette’s text), or an extreme form of Ruth Behar’s “vulnerable observer” version of anthropology’s “participant observer” model.<sup>32</sup> Even as I applaud the concept of vulnerable observer as antidote to cold or distracted observation, I recognize the potential for vulnerable observer to slide into something like an “observant wound”: a subjectivity that registers little but its own emotivity or affective complicity, and risks a rude slap in the face: “I’ll teach you to ruin what I’ve made.”

I want to speak of Colette with neither authority nor complicity. Deleuze articulated a similar dilemma: “My ideal, when I write about an author, would be to write nothing that could cause her sadness, or if she is dead, that might make her weep in her grave. Think of the author you are writing about. Think of her so hard that she can no longer be an object, and equally so that you cannot identify with her. Avoid the double shame of the scholar and the familiar.”<sup>33</sup> I’m taking a few liberties in my translation of Deleuze. I’ve feminized his author pronouns, and I’d like also to propose collapsing the “double shame” of which he speaks—that of the scholar and of the familiar—into a shame that, though double, isn’t partitioned in two: a shame that may well

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<sup>31</sup> See Behar, p. 4

<sup>32</sup> Jouve, p. 4; Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1996; subsequent references will be provided in my text.

<sup>33</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Dialogues* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), p. 119. I am grateful to Claire Lyu for the reference and the conversation.

be the scholar's double burden. For the dual temptations of distance and identification (attributes of the scholar and the familiar, respectively, for Deleuze) describe the double specter haunting my own approach to Colette.

I'd like to stand safely between authority and intimacy, less concerned with a critical approach or method than with a critical stance or ethos. I seek a criticism that is a return to reading: reading that is at once an interrogation of the text *and of the self*, an engagement of the self in a dynamic bilateral process, a process of critical relationship. Such a reading would involve a different kind of writing, one that would let a reader speak about a writer's work without needing to feel shame, without risking the violation of knowing the author's work or her person too well. A writing that would let a reader love a writer's work and yet speak words that would not eclipse the work and could not eclipse themselves. A writing that would not attempt to fill in ellipses more articulately left as blanks, that would not "see" where the author was prophetically blind, but that might instead register a process of change, *of being oneself changed* by the reading process. A writing that would neither make a dead author "weep in her grave," nor, in the more likely Colettian scenario, let her have the last underground laugh.

Reading for the mother in Colette risks either engaging the reader in a dialectic of fusion and separation with the (literary) mother, or engaging Colette in a typically masculine "fatally autobiographical" reading. "Homme, mon ami," warns Colette, "tu plaisantes volontiers les oeuvres, fatalement autobiographiques, de la femme" (p. 316). Addressing herself here to a male reader, she plays with conventions that assume any writing by a woman to be transparent, true, and autobiographically correct. Colette's phrase, "les oeuvres, fatalement autobiographiques, de la femme"—only half-rendered in the McCleod translation as "women's writings [which] can't

help being autobiographical”<sup>34</sup>—owes its force to its compounded ambiguity. To call women’s works “fatally autobiographical” means, on the one hand, that they are doomed to be autobiographical—but does “autobiographical” refer to writing or to reading? It means, on the other hand, that they are fatal *because* autobiographical. Lethal writing. Who, or what, is the victim? As in the expression *la femme fatale*, which lends its force along with its potential reversibility to the notion of fatal feminine autobiography, the ostensible purveyor of death (the woman writer, her text) may well be the victim instead.

Certainly Colette felt misread, attacked in her status of author, when the journal *Femina* changed the title of her essay “Maternité” to “Impressions de maman. Les premières heures” in order to represent it as a woman’s autobiographical text.<sup>35</sup> Here is an excerpt from the letter she wrote to the editor in angry dismay: “Que je sois mère, cela ne regarde pas le lecteur. Je lui donne une œuvre que je souhaite littéraire, c’est *l’auteur* qui paraît devant lui, ce n’est pas la femme, et s’il a le droit de me juger comme écrivain, son droit s’arrête là.” Colette’s rage at being misrepresented and misunderstood—*méconnue*: taken for someone else, which is to say, confused with herself—is clear. What is murkier is Colette’s role in obscuring the distinction between fiction and autobiography in the text of “Maternité,” which begins with a confirmation of pregnancy from “un médecin que je connais à une de ses clients que je connais mieux

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<sup>34</sup> Colette, *Break of Day*, trans. Enid McLeod (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux), p. 63.

<sup>35</sup> *Femina* also added this introductory caption to Colette’s text: “*Femina* est heureuse de signaler à ses lectrices le début de la collaboration de Colette, l’éminent écrivain dont les romans et les articles, profondément humains et qui révèlent une sensibilité si aiguë jointe aux plus précieux dons du style, sont unanimement admirés. La belle page que nous publions est un véritable poème de la maternité ; seule une plume féminine était capable d’une description et d’une analyse aussi justes, relatant avec autant de délicatesse le réveil émouvant de la jeune mère qui, au sortir du lourd sommeil artificiel, va contempler enfin le cher petit visage inconnu de l’enfant nouveau-né ; nous sommes certains que nos lectrices comprendront toute la pure beauté de ces lignes remarquables. N.D.L.R.” My source for this information as well as for Colette’s letter is Claude Pichois and Alain Brunet, *Colette*, Paris: Editions de Fallois, 1999, pp. 260-61.

encore.”<sup>36</sup> We’re familiar with this kind of double entendre from the pages of *La Naissance du jour*: as an artificer of autobiography, Colette presents a “me” who is not quite me.<sup>37</sup>

Colette elaborates on the autobiographical conundrum by describing her writing as a kind of *constructed* autobiography: “ce que je sais de moi, ce que j’essaie d’en cacher, ce que j’en invente et ce que j’en devine” (p. 315). Women’s writing, she suggests, is false autobiography (we might say today “autofiction”), a cunning proffering of amorous confidences and half-truths that serve to hide deeper, less “sexy” truths: “En les divulguant, elle sauve de la publicité des secrets confus et considérables, qu’elle-même ne connaît pas très bien. Le gros projecteur, l’œil sans vergogne qu’elle manœuvre avec complaisance, fouille toujours le même secteur féminin, ravagé de félicité et de discorde, autour duquel l’ombre s’épaissit. Ce n’est pas dans la zone illuminée que se trame le pire...” (pp. 315-16). Colette is suggesting that there’s an entire (novelistic) world to explore outside of the love plot.

By suggesting that sexual and romantic revelations in her writing are not coextensive with truth, and in fact, divulge no real secrets at all, Colette is combating not only cultural assumptions about women and writing, but also a philosophical tradition that equates sex and truth (a truth generally taken to be more accessible through women). Janet Malcolm points to the triviality of sexual “truths” in her essay on Chekhov:

As if the documentary proof of sexual escapades or of incidents of impotence disclosed anything... The letters and journals we leave behind and the impressions we have made on our contemporaries are the mere husk of the kernel of our essential life. When we die,

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<sup>36</sup> Colette, “Maternité,” in *Paysages et portraits*, in *Œuvres complètes de Colette*, ed. Claude Pichois, Paris : Club de l’Honnête Homme, 1973-76, V :316.

<sup>37</sup> Philippe Lejeune in fact excludes Colette from the French autobiographical canon because she doesn’t adhere to conventions of authorial sincerity. [see laurie corbin mother mirror pp5-6]



the kernel is buried with us. This is the horror and pity of death and the reason for the inescapable triviality of biography.<sup>38</sup>

But the triviality of sex-based biography is amplified for Colette by the gender factor at the crux of her autobiographical protest. What's at stake in Colette's text is *women's art*, or the right to the artfulness of art when its maker happens to be a woman.

Colette's narrator/character, Colette, complains bitterly, as she distances herself from the attentions of Vial, of his attempts to know her through her books: "—Nous n'avons que faire de mes livres ici, Vial." I certainly don't want to be another Vial, confusing Colette with Colette. I'm reminded of Proust's insistence that when we think of an author, it is the books, and not the life, that matter, that "a book is the product of an other self."<sup>39</sup> This is perhaps what Colette had in mind as well when she wrote the initial epigraph (later discarded) for *La Naissance*, which she adapted from Proust: "ce 'je' qui est moi et qui n'est peut-être pas moi..."<sup>40</sup>

Yet the narrative of *Naissance* thickens even as the plot thins. Speaking of her renunciation of love, Colette (the narrator/character) mentions her earlier works, and how she has moved away from their focus on love: "Je m'y nommais Renée Néré, ou bien, prémonitoire, j'agençais une Léa. Voilà que, légalement, littérairement et familièrement, je n'ai plus qu'un nom, qui est le mien" (p. 286). Since my impulse is to read *La Naissance* as Colette calls it—as a text to be dissociated from her life—I wonder how to read Colette's newly-found writing identity: "je n'ai plus qu'un nom, qui est le mien" (p. 286)? It is hard to avoid hearing an

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<sup>38</sup> Janet Malcolm, *Reading Chekhov: A Critical Journey* p. 35.

<sup>39</sup> "Un livre est le produit d'un autre moi que celui que nous manifestons dans nos habitudes, dans la société, dans nos vices. Ce moi-là, si nous voulons essayer de le comprendre, c'est au fond de nous-même, en essayant de le recréer en nous que nous pouvons y parvenir." Marcel Proust, *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, ed. Pierre Clarac, Paris: Gallimard (Pléiade), 1971, pp. 221-22.

<sup>40</sup> Her source was a note preceding the publication of *Du Côté de chez Swann*. See Pichois's commentary in Colette, *La Naissance du jour* p. 275, n. 1.

invitation to an autobiographical pact.<sup>41</sup> This is the other side of Colette's fatally autobiographical writing: a writing that might be considered autobiographically-*entrapping*, from the perspective of readers caught in a house of mirrors.

Colette had a tortuous relationship to mirroring and mimesis that can be traced through her fictions, letters, essays.<sup>42</sup> One might see her writing as a history of attempts to escape the mirror structure and aesthetic, and of subsequent slides back in. As Michel del Castillo and Nicole Ferrier-Caverivière have suggested, Colette's struggle for autonomy had incessantly to confront the expectation that she be her mother's reflection, a constraint succinctly articulated in Sido's correspondence with her daughter as "*Moi, c'est toi.*"<sup>43</sup> In the dynamics of her relationship with her own daughter, Colette would alternate between a similar mirroring expectation, and a recognition of her otherness. So, for example, she would write to Bel-Gazou words that echo her mother's claim on her: "*J'aimerais te voir te classer devant moi comme un petit miroir de moi-même.*"<sup>44</sup> Yet elsewhere she would deliberately recall her daughter's individuality: "*J'ai vu chez Lelong...de si jolis petits sweaters "jeunes" que je t'ouvre un crédit pour en choisir un... Il y en a un bleu... en Shetland, tellement aimable que j'ai faille (sic) te le prendre, mais!... n'oublions pas que les parents ne doivent jamais construire pour les enfants—même en Shetland!*"<sup>45</sup>

In her public writing, Colette more routinely proclaimed a politics and an aesthetics of determined distance and non-reflectivity. To her character Vial as to the editor who published "*Maternité*," Colette, we've seen, adamantly made clear that her text was not to be read as a

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<sup>41</sup> See Philippe Lejeune, \_\_\_\_\_ .However, as I noted earlier, Lejeune specifically excludes Colette from the autobiographical canon because he finds her deficient in sincerity.

<sup>42</sup> On mirrors in Colette, see Laurie Corbin, *The Mother Mirror: Self-Representation and the Mother-Daughter Relation in Colette, Simone de Beauvoir, and Maruerite Duras* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996).

<sup>43</sup> Cited from Sido, *Lettres à sa fille* by Michel del Castillo, in *Colette, une certaine France* (Paris: Folio, 1999), p. 97.

<sup>44</sup> Colette, in Anne de Jouvenel, fin novembre 1926, p. 113.

<sup>45</sup> Colette, in Anne de Jouvenel, début mars 1932, p. 235.

reflection of her life. In 1908, Colette had already constructed a parable of the dangers of literary mirroring, in a short text called “Le Miroir,” in which the narrator arranges a meeting between herself and her character, Claudine, and protests: “Je ne suis pas votre Sosie.”<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile, Colette went about in the world dressed like Claudine, coiffed like Claudine, confused with Claudine; she would later borrow Claudine’s name for her autobiographical house of fiction; and she would socialize, in her own name, with her character Vial in the pages of *Naissance*.

Like “Le Miroir,” *La Naissance du jour* is a work concerned with the inaccessibility of life to art, but which nevertheless inextricably entangles life’s tentacles in art, and so risks confusing and reordering—and symbolically dismantling—the mimetic hierarchy. The question of literature’s responsibility to life is doubled by the problem I raised earlier, of criticism’s responsibility to literature—a problem of reflection and identification that might be likened to a secondary mimesis, if criticism and literature are analogous in the sense of their impossible accountability to art and to life. Phyllis Rose describes the dual dilemma: “A translation, a reduction, a condensation, an approximation, a metaphor is the best that can be achieved in art, no matter how inclusive, as an account of life, and the same is true for criticism as an account of art.”<sup>47</sup> If we accept the analogy, it is clear that when literary mimesis is threatened, so too are traditional conceptions of criticism’s fidelity to literature.

I’ll conclude these remarks by raising a few questions they leave open. *La Naissance du jour*: a novel about mothers and lovers? Rather, a novel about the mother’s ghost and the lover’s shadow, mother and lover fading out to give center stage to a metaplot about finding another aesthetic, another ontology, another masterplot not reliant upon reflection and mimesis. How might this aesthetic be defined? Colette’s youngest stepson, Renaud de Jouvenel noted that he

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<sup>46</sup> Colette, “Le Miroir,” in *Les Vrilles de la vigne*, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard [Pléiade], 200 ), p. 1030.

<sup>47</sup> Phyllis Rose, *The Year of Reading Proust: A Memoir in Real Time* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1997), p. 30.

couldn't recognize himself in her letters because she was "emportée par...le besoin de tout transformer en matériau littéraire." Roughly translated, this means that Colette needed literature so that she could transform everything. Writing, for Colette, is a *metamorphic* exercise, to use Kristeva's term. It proceeds, like metaphor, but more so, by holding two opposing entities together *in passing* in an ephemeral relationship based neither in resemblance nor antagonism, but in change. I don't have time to develop my sense that Colette's writing is an extravagant experiment with an aesthetic based on change, but I'll point that way by adding the metaphor of "transposition" to that of "translation" with which I began to describe her travels between life and art. Life and art are two corresponding media for Colette, like painting and poetry; she transposes freely in both directions, challenging the reader to decipher and recode and make sense. In this she is not unlike Baudelaire's Dandy who, in Rosemary Lloyd's words, "gives him or herself to be read and seen as a work of art, constantly recreated... this is performance art raised to the level of high culture."<sup>48</sup>

I'll close with the sense of being myself changed by reading Colette, recast as reader and critic. I now know, that one doesn't read Colette to be held by the visions or embracing truths that warm us and fleetingly make us whole when reading Proust. Nor does one read her to pose as a reliable critical reflector. Reading Colette, anticipating resistance and resisting incoherence, one works to shape and hold meaning among the flickering nuances of her kaleidoscopic prose. I recognize the utter impossibility of resurrecting the mother in Colette, and Colette as mother. But still, I reread *La Naissance du jour* to be transformed by Colette's ungentle hand, as my own remakes her text.

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<sup>48</sup> Rosemary Lloyd, *Baudelaire's World*, Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 2002, p. 188.