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Balzac, Proust, and Colette in the Garden: “a question of climates . . .”

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To introduce these oddly assorted gardens and enter these gardens from the directions that suit me, I'll ask questions and then answer them myself. Why choose these three authors? How do their gardens grow? What is “climate”? I chose Balzac, Proust, and Colette because I love to read their books. And the three of them—Balzac long gone and therefore the passive member—form a mutual admiration society. Colette and Proust exchanged books and accolades over the years, and they both plunged joyfully and repeatedly into Balzac's *Comédie Humaine* from their childhood.¹

The answer to “How do their gardens grow?” is less flip than the question. Each garden that we enter is a mediator: between a person and nature, between inner and outer worlds, between imagination and reality, between untamed and thoroughly domesticated feelings. They are, all three, meeting grounds for paradoxes: their domesticity appears limiting but instead invites fantasy; their walls seem to bound vision but instead nurture it. Each is a place where strong things flourish: love, ambition, a cleaving to what is real *and* to what is dreamed. They are admirable places for literature to produce vision, set apart from the rest of the world, yet contiguous to it and rooted, literally, in it.

I'll quickly answer my last question, and then enter a very odd garden indeed. Climate is defined as the combination of temperature, precipitation, and winds characteristic

of a locality or region over an extended period of time. I and my three writers would agree, and this definition should acquire resonance in the course of my discussion. I propose another definition. Climate is, for today and for these gardens, the combination of sensation, movement, and communication characteristic of a locality during a privileged (that is, extraordinary and significant) moment in time. I propose that these two climates coexist with extravagant success in Balzac, Proust, and Colette's gardens.

Le Père Goriot, by Honoré de Balzac, was published in 1835. It is a novel about Paris, its lures and allure for a young man, and the man's acquaintance, often painful, with its extremes of passion, obsession, ambition, success, and failure. The young man, Eugène de Rastignac, and many of the other important characters, are lodgers at a drab boardinghouse in Paris, the Maison Vauquer. The novel opens with a description of this establishment. Balzac engineers our approach—our descent—into the novel in a dramatic, even cinematic way. In the first paragraph, he tells us that an “almost penniless girl” lives here; he then speaks in an aside to his imagined reader, a well-to-do young woman, and warns her that his “drama is neither fiction nor romance.” “All is true,” he says, and he says it in English, as if to insist on the remarkable quality of this observation. Only then, touched by this suggestion of limitless truths to explore, do we move toward the Maison Vauquer.²

We progress as a camera might, first through the *quartier* of the city, then on to the street, where we find ourselves inspecting the facade of the house. We open the gate, cross the garden, enter the house, inspect its rooms from bottom to top, from the most comfortable to the most impoverished and pathetic of the lodgers. At this point, the reader realizes that the penniless girl, so dramatically spotlighted in the opening paragraph of the novel, has taken her place among the other characters; she will concern us no further today. This novel is not about just the people and things that it seems to be precisely about; its scope is at once cosmic and microcosmic, ranging from Balzac's image of Paris as a teeming and unfathomable ocean to an obscure individual's most fleeting emotion. How does Balzac choose to have us enter this world? He brings us through the garden of Madame Vauquer's boardinghouse.³ This garden is a transitional space between the outside world of Parisian intrigue, where characters will do battle, and the Maison Vauquer, a veritable well of secrets, passions, and denouements. The garden is at once our last view of the outside world, as yet uncolored by what we will learn within, and our most complete sampling thus far of what *is* within. What do we learn as we contemplate the garden of the Vauquer house? First, what do we see? There is a sign reading “Maison Vauquer, Lodgings for Ladies, gentlemen and others”; a wicket gate through which we walk; “a green marble arch painted by local talent”; and within this

“imitation shrine” “a statue representing the God of Love,” whose “chipped scaling surface makes it look like a patient for one of the nearby hospitals, and provides an allegory for those who are fond of symbols.” There are picturesque ivy-covered walls, two paths that flank a bed of artichokes, some cone-shaped pruned fruit trees, a small clump of lime trees with a table and chairs beneath them.

What may we infer from what we see? Harry Levin has observed that in Balzac’s work, to *see* is to *know*.⁴ What we have seen holds messages for us. First, I remark on the otherness of this world. Balzac affirms that there is no separation between fiction and reality here; “All is true.” This otherness is not science fiction, either, for Balzac has assured us in his opening paragraphs that we may recognize elements of this drama in our hearts and lives. Consider the sign reading “Pension bourgeoise des deux sexes et autres.” A literal translation from French gives us “The two sexes and others.” People in this novel are so possessed and inspired by their passions, of all sorts, that at times their behavior surpasses or bypasses human qualities.

Now we look at the disintegrating statue of the god of love. All may be true, and this may be—is—the beginning of a great adventure, but in the most drear surroundings, vulgar and dilapidated, and in his musings on the statue, Balzac suggests decadence as well. The nearby hospitals of the time treated syphilis, certainly the malady of

love from which the statue suffers. So we may infer a love story—several, as it happens, corrupt as well as unhappy. Balzac has told us that all is true; I take this to mean that truth can exist in many guises. The love story suggested by the young girl (Victorine Taillefer) is only one of many, and a relatively obscure one, and the loves of this book are of many sorts indeed. All the other details, of crumbling walls, lime trees, and table, help us to be familiar with the geography of this place, its atmosphere and character. At this point, a few pages into the novel, we *think* we have some understanding of the Maison Vauquer.

All of this seems a useful introduction to the novel, warning us of strangeness, passion, and a certain squalid milieu. Is this all the garden offers? Several pages later, after we’ve toured the rooms and met the inhabitants, we emerge briefly to the garden again. For Madame Vauquer, we read, “this little garden, which silence and cold, infertility and damp, made vast and featureless as a steppe, was a smiling grove.” This is a fantastic statement. (I mean “fantastic” in the sense of grotesque, wildly fanciful, unreal). Setting aside quickly Madame Vauquer’s loving and certainly violently biased view of her property that could allow her to see her dusty clump of lime trees as a smiling grove, however could this walled-in, obscure, crowded, and dingy corner by “made vast and featureless as a steppe”? This garden is a mystery and part of the vaster mystery that comprises the novel and Paris itself for Balzac and

his characters. The truth is here, but submerged. Signs are given that seem to lead nowhere for the moment. Balzac has presented a microcosm, whole and significant in itself, in a small way. This tiny world resonates, to the reader who finishes the novel, with all the vast drama to come.

The inhabitants of the Maison Vauquer, privileged to stroll in its garden, are all transients; some are runaways, even fugitives, cut off from their origins and therefore rootless. In Proust’s garden (and we shall see, Colette’s as well), lives a woman firmly bound to its plants and soil, physically and in spirit. “Combray” is part of the first volume (called *Swann’s Way*) or Marcel Proust’s immensely long novel *A La Recherche du Temps Perdu, In Remembrance of Things Past*. This first volume appeared in 1913; the whole work had been published by 1927, five years after Proust’s death. Again, we are at the threshold of a gigantic enterprise, in size and in vision, when we walk into this garden. The narrator of this part of the novel is the middle-aged Marcel, who soon steps aside in his memories to allow his childhood self to observe and interpret. This child, also called Marcel, and in many ways a reflection of Marcel Proust, tells of his beloved grandmother walking in her garden in Combray. The fictional Combray is Illiers in the real world, the home of Proust’s aunt and uncle Amiot, and its garden is certainly drawn from gardens that Proust knew as a child: the Amiot’s house garden in Illiers; their far more elaborate



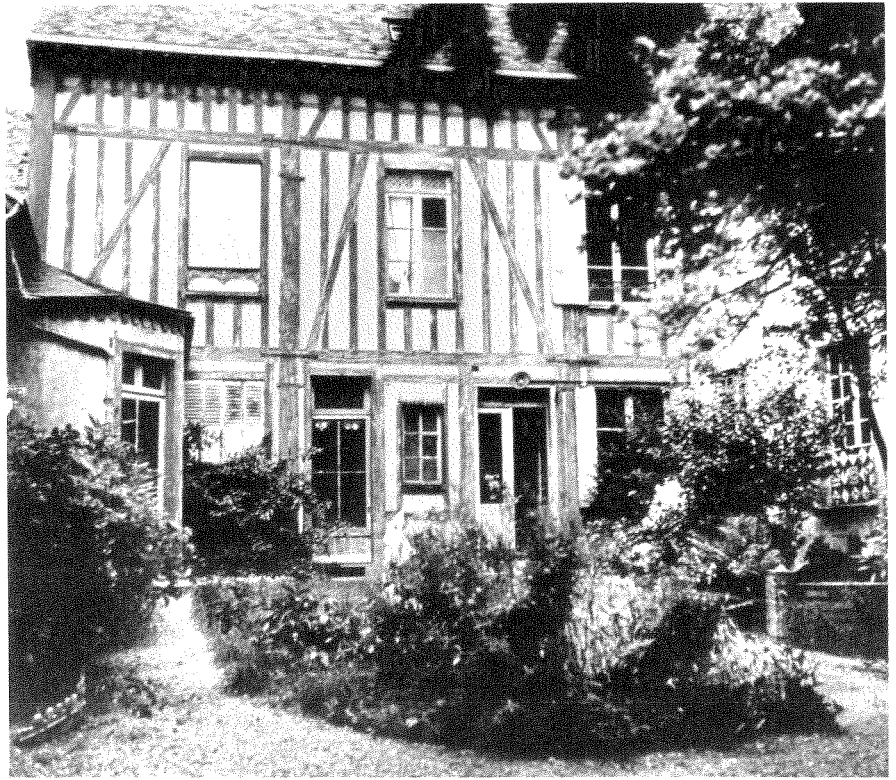
pleasure garden just outside of town; and perhaps also his uncle Louis Weil's garden in Auteuil, a suburb of Paris. It seems likely that the pleasure garden, grander in scale and design than the one in town, became mostly M. Swann's garden, where young Marcel first sees and instantly loves Swann's daughter Gilberte. I include the Amiot pleasure garden because it is a beautiful photograph and because it is perhaps easier to imagine Marcel's grandmother walking its paths than in the very restricted space seen in the photographs of the Amiot garden in Illiers.

Marcel describes here the moment of anguish in his day, after dinner, when the adults repair to the garden (or the parlor if the weather is bad) and he must part with his

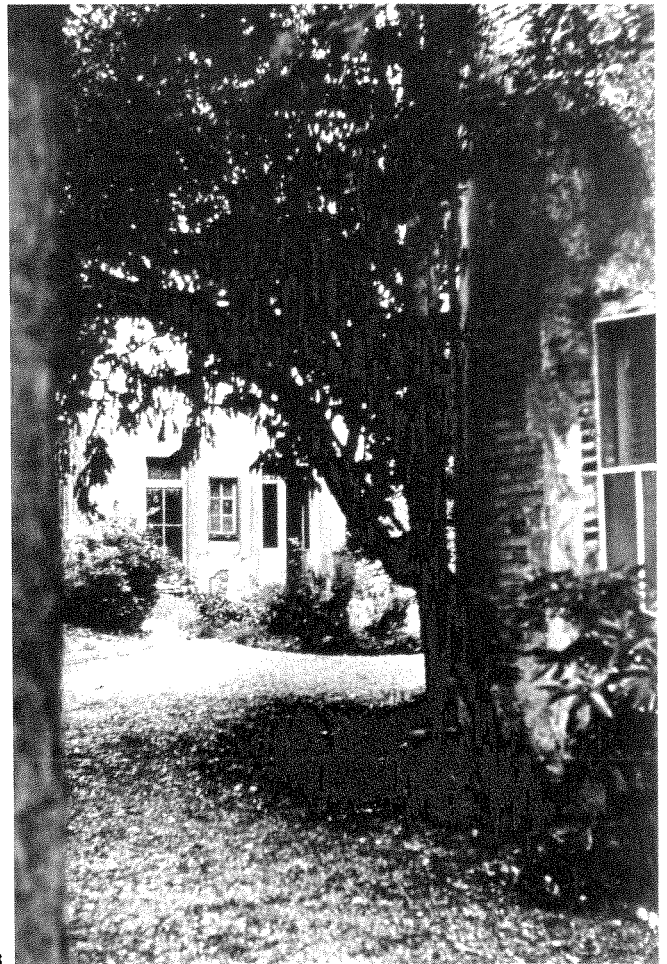
mother for the night. The passage is so woven that each observation is the thread of a separate but related experience. We, however, are concerned only with the grandmother, who clings to her garden walk even when rain keeps the other indoors:

But my grandmother, in all weathers, even when the rain was coming down in torrents and Françoise (the cook, housekeeper and ferocious protector of her family) had rushed the precious wicker armchairs indoors so that they should not get soaked, was to be seen pacing the deserted rain-lashed garden, pushing back her disordered grey locks so that her forehead might be freer to absorb the health-giving draughts of wind and rain. She would say,

I **Pleasure garden** of Proust's uncle Jules Amiot on the outskirts of Illiers. Photograph courtesy of Roger-Viollet.



2



3

“At last one can breathe!” and would trot up and down the sodden paths—too straight and symmetrical for her liking, owing to the want of any feeling for nature in the new gardener, whom my father had been asking all morning if the weather were going to improve—her keen, jerky little step regulated by the various effects wrought upon her soul by the intoxication of the storm, the power of hygiene, the stupidity of my upbringing and the symmetry of gardens, rather than by any anxiety (for that was quite unknown to her) to save her plum-coloured skirt from the mudstains beneath which it would gradually disappear to a height that was the constant bane and despair of her maid.⁵ [pp. 11–12]

This is all. Here is no minute description and, indeed, no description of any kind of the vegetation or the character of the garden. In the Vauquer garden, we moved inward, deliberately led by the narrator, the way marked by things that had significance, often immediately.

In Proust’s garden there is only the grandmother walking on muddy paths through pouring rain. How can we interpret this scene? How can we see the garden in the most rewarding way? Physically, there isn’t much. We find ourselves studying an established relationship between a character and a garden space. What does go on between Marcel’s grandmother and her garden? How does Marcel perceive and interpret, use the scene to

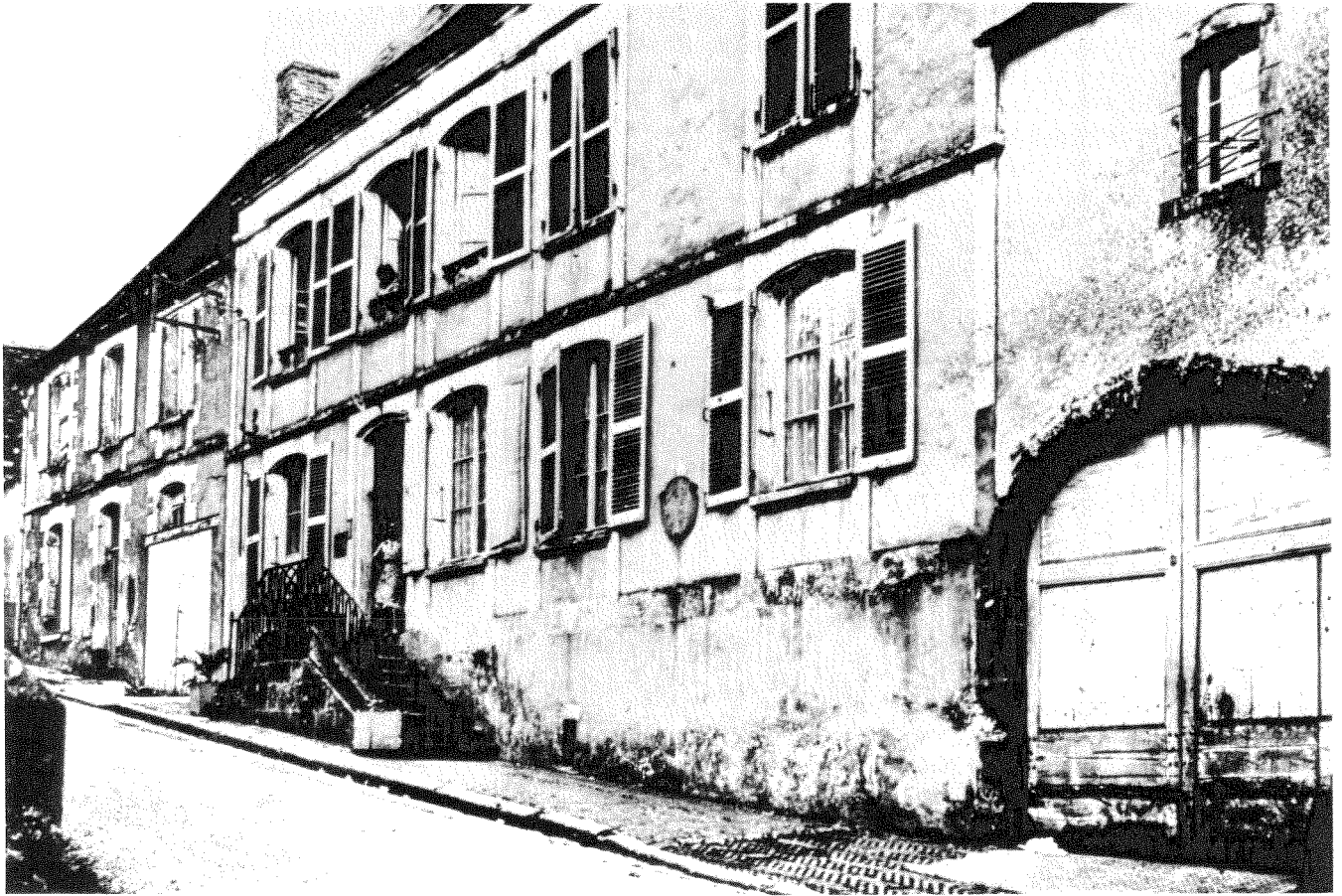
understand his grandmother? In Balzac’s novels, things that are contemplated deliver up their significance forthwith (recall the god of Love statue). Not so here. For Proust, vision is often inaccurate or incomplete; one must penetrate further into a scene he paints to finally “see” something new.

Here, the watching child—who is also the narrator—becomes a part of the scene he relates. Marcel has described the rain and his grandmother’s words, as any one of us who had happened to be there could have done; and he has gone much further, inside her head where he imagines thoughts orchestrated by both her movements and those of the storm. Clearly, so far as Marcel is concerned, any being so tuned to her surrounding world could well absorb that world’s essences by her forehead, by her face lifted to meet it.

The garden is a mediator in the grandmother’s life, a refuge from the house and very proper family; a place, albeit irritatingly symmetrical, where nature intrudes on well-regulated bourgeois life; and a meeting ground for inner and outer exertion. Its character, which seems so unwelcoming—rain, wind, mud, unromantic tidiness—answers her needs for freedom, action, reflection.

A French reader of Proust, Gérard Genette, has observed that Proust’s descriptions are not so much descriptions of the object con-

templated as they are a narrative and analysis of the perceptive activity of the person—Marcel here—who contemplates a presentation of this person’s impressions, progressive discoveries, and perspective.⁶ Most interesting for those of us who push on to read all of this book is Marcel’s participation in the scene. He is not an omniscient narrator who chooses to unfold all that he knows in order to bemuse and amaze us; he discovers as he observes and at first knows no more than he observes. Here he has come upon an insight in a remarkable way; the garden has served to frame and reflect the inner life of one of his most cherished creatures; and in the course of this discovery, he has moved into the frame, too. His grandmother’s concerns, the grave as well as the everyday ones, find their voice in the climate where she places herself. The garden and its climate transcend their natural function and importance: they have come to contain, while illuminating, Marcel’s memory of his grandmother. This is our first glimpse of his profound love for this woman; this fascination that we first find in the garden at Combray unfolds in progressively more luminous and dramatic moments throughout thousands of pages of *In Remembrance of Things Past*. If it seems that I’ve labored mightily over one small passage, I would agree; but I suggest that in this garden we have watched its creator learn that his vision of the world will unfurl and blossom if he can bring himself to wait and to reconsider what he thinks he has seen.



4

4 **Facade** of Colette's childhood home in Saint-Sauveur-en-Puisaye. Photograph courtesy of Roger-Viollet.

Colette wrote the novella *Sido* about her mother in 1929. Sido, Sidonie Colette, a tiny provincial woman who married twice and cleaved to her house and garden, lives everywhere in Colette's books. Sido's is the voice of maternal love, wifely love, the love of small creatures and plants, the love of looking, smelling, and touching the natural world. Colette calls to her and names her whenever she needs to evoke those loves in her work, in journals, articles, fictionalized, and unadorned autobiographical pieces. Sido is a central figure of her daughter's work, and Sido's own center is her garden, which we now enter by the street. I include this somewhat melancholy photograph of the facade of the Colette family's house in the Rue de l'Hospice in the Burgundian village of Saint-Sauveur-en-Puisaye; Colette herself called it "graceless." Keep this view in mind as you examine the extraordinary world that existed behind these walls, as Colette tells it. You see clearly that the houses run together and that the back gardens will therefore be contiguous and not large.

As in "Combray," we see here a beloved woman in her garden, observed by the child who adores her. For Proust, and for his narrator, the young Marcel, things and scenes have layers of meaning and value that may be discovered through time by the penetrating forces of memory and the senses. Colette requires less patience of us; we have but to listen and, above all, watch her mother in her garden, and we will find a new way of defining this world.

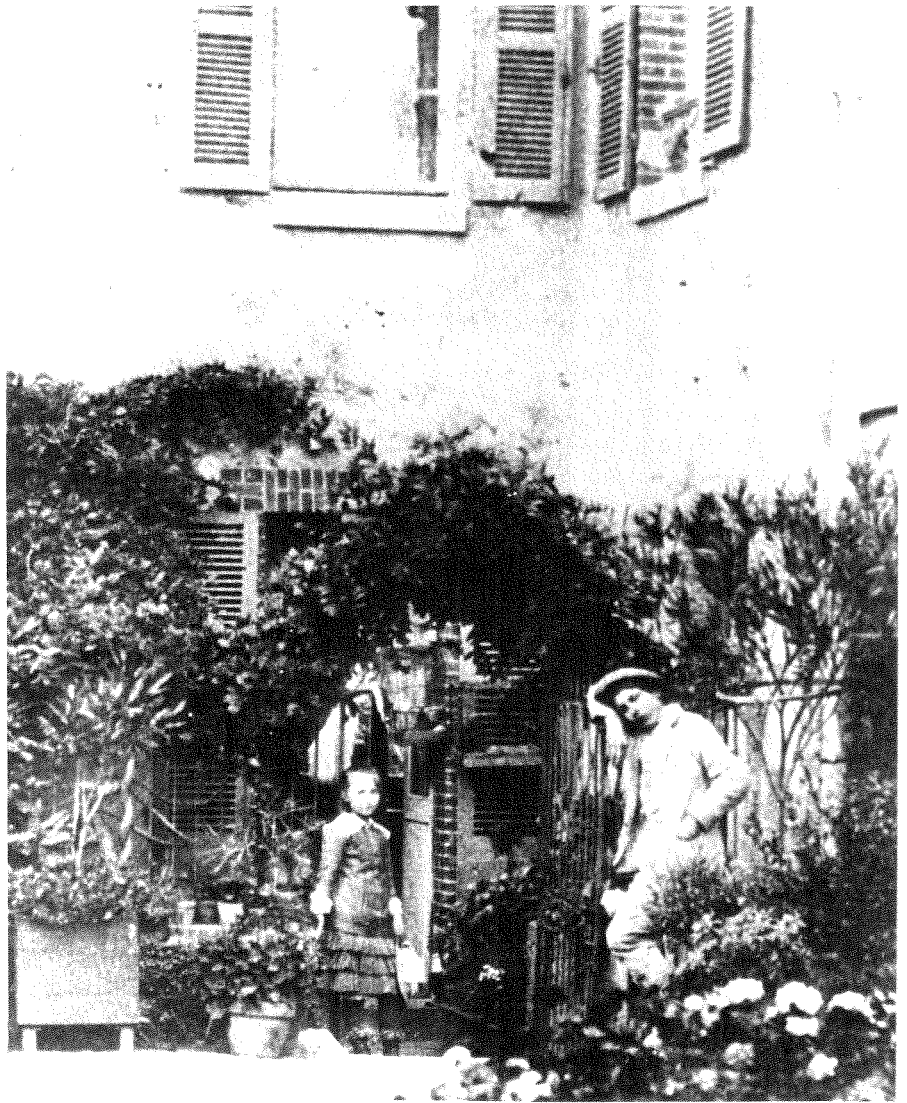
Here we find a harmony between Sido and her garden and a fantasy less dramatic than that of the vast steppes of Madame Vauquer's garden. There is an enduring magic at work here, nonetheless, and it is acknowledged not only by an imaginative child but by Sido's village neighbors, stolid country women, rooted in their daily provincial life. Colette speaks of the garden as the container of a mysterious plant life that holds and communicates her past by powerful sensual contacts: "the warm garden nourished itself in a yellow light, with trembling reds and violets, but I couldn't say if this red, this violet, came from, if they still come from, a sentimental happiness or an optical dazzle." This is an impressionistic description, the garden represented by light and color rather than very realistic details of plants and design. It is a place for dreaming and a place of dreams, and those dreamlike qualities are what have endured in its portraits that appear frequently in Colette's writing.

The garden is at once the source and continuing repository of Colette's childhood. She feels in retrospect, and perhaps sensed as a child, that her life has emanated from it and continues to bloom in her memories of it. "As a child, in my imagination and pride, I situated our house at the center of a rose of gardens, winds, sun rays, and no part of it completely escaped my mother's influence." (*Rose* in French is a flower and also a rose window, the kind we see in great cathedrals. Colette suggests here a structure both humble and

spiritually grand.) That extraordinary influence works in a reciprocal fashion, too, for Sido becomes an other-worldly creature when she moves about in her garden: "My mother regained her tranquil, her glorious garden face, much more beautiful than her worried *house* expression. In her dominion and her care, the walls grew taller, unknown lands replaced the enclosed space that I had so often and easily crossed over, jumping from wall to wall, from branch to branch."

The bond between Sido and her garden establishes a privileged world, where objects, creatures, and sensations are spellbound. Colette describes her mother standing in the garden, calling to her neighbors, unseen beyond the walls. This is no simple, neighborly exchange of garden tools and flowers but an almost godlike summoning of natural forces. A neighbor returns the picket and string that Sido has lent her to sow her seeds in straight lines: "Carried by dreams, fruit of a magical levitation, Sunday plaything, the picket, bound cone-shaped in its 10 meters of string, traveled through the air, fell down at my mother's feet . . ." The most ordinary enjoyment of colors, odors, and housewives' gossip is transformed into rites of life in Sido's garden, ringing with eerie, wailing, disembodied voices:

Other times, she sacrificed a fresh offering to her underling, invisible spirits. Faithful to the ritual, she threw back her head, as if consulting the sky: "Who wants some of my red double-



5

5 **Colette** and one of her brothers in the garden behind the house at Saint-Saveur. Photograph courtesy of Roger-Viollet.

flowered violets?” “Me, Madam Col-ê-ê-ette,” answered the unknowable voice from the East, plaintive and feminine. “Here, catch!” The small bouquet, tied together with a juicy jonquil stem, flew in the air, caught up with gratitude by the plaintive spirit of the Orient.

The neighbor on the other side of the east garden wall wails in wonder that *her* violets never smell so good as Sido’s. And the child Colette responds with an observation that I wish to have serve as a first answer to the transforming and visionary powers of Balzac’s and Proust’s gardens as well: “Naturally, I thought. And I almost added, ‘It is a question of climates’”

We have fetched up again at climate, for both meteorology and mood. Let me remind you quickly of *my* definition: the sensations, acts, and communications of a locality during a privileged moment in time. I wish now to look closely at sensations and movement in our three gardens to find how they let us accomplish the feat of *seeing* in new ways. The three authors have turned to nature to learn about or to explain the creatures who populate their fictional worlds. And yet, we are not in a renaissance of romantic literature, where an individual may find his emotions and identity reflected in nature. I will generalize about exceedingly complex and crafted, as well as crafty, pieces of writing: For Balzac, to be a realist was to be big as well as small. He may have made the Vauquer garden out of a collection of particulars,

but it is a vast, crammed, all-inclusive space, containing seeds and symbols of the three-hundred-odd pages that follow; it is more a garden of Eden—or, better still, abandoning my horticultural metaphor, an ark—than it is a backyard full of posies. The garden of the Maison Vauquer is, crudely put, a tool. Balzac feels no particular respect for this plot of ground, but consuming respect for the beginnings of adventure that it holds. Proust’s garden in the opening pages of “Combray” is not a tool but a key. His young narrator Marcel loves the garden because it has become, in his memory, a part of his cherished grandmother. Colette, simply, loves her garden, all the gardens of her life. Here is where the craftiness that I mentioned earlier comes in. Her prose is supple, appearing sometimes arch, sometimes ingenuous; it is never really the latter. She loves her garden, *and* she makes it work for her, to create a central image in her work.

With these observations in tow, I’d like to return to the notions of sensation and movement, which will resolve themselves, in the garden, into seeing and knowing.

In the Vauquer garden, we find our sense of what reality *is*, stretched, made monumental, from dusty artichoke patches to vast and frigid steppes, from the gentle aside to a lady reader to a reference to venereal disease. These wonders are meant to be *sensational*, that is, causing unnatural emotional excitement. Now we as readers are

really ready to begin to comprehend the vastness of Balzac’s enterprise.

The Combray garden *plot* is prepared for very different plantings and growth; we find real weather here, the breath and texture and substance of it. And the inner weather of Marcel’s grandmother parallels this, as she feels in turn excited by the wind and rain, and stormy at the thought of Marcel’s too sheltered life.

Sido’s garden has its own life, for its own sake, and shares it with Sido and her daughter. We feel the real, horticultural sort of garden, with sensations of shimmering heat and light, a dazzle of color, activity, and happiness.

Movement is as different in its form and function in these three spaces as is sensation. Balzac frames his garden within the street that lies outside it; he calls the Rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève a bronze frame, hard, metallic, lifeless. The garden is unpopulated, a set piece or tableau. It is frozen, as a steppe, and literally motionless; only the narrator’s and our eyes move through it, like movie cameras.

Proust’s garden lives beneath the lashes of rain, drafts of wind, the pacing, trotting, and gesticulating of Marcel’s grandmother. These physical movements serve as the reflectors of similar inner disturbances within the story (that is to say, in the grandmother’s mind and heart) and beyond it, in the mind of Marcel, who observes as a child, and later recounts as an adult writing the book.

Proust's motion and action is complex and complicated. What goes on in Sido's garden is simple. Her garden grows. The flowers are not props, but real and even more than real, made better than the same flowers on the other side of the garden walls. This space reverberates with movement, people, and objects; the colors themselves tremble in the light, the walls grow, fabulous lands surge forth to replace its mundane dimensions, a child leaps among its trees, and garden tools and flowers fly through its most particular air. People raise their heads to the sun to call to one another, like other, larger flowers participating in what is very close to an occult experience, to hear Colette tell it. Finally, I return to the child Colette's explanation of her mother's extravagantly blooming

garden: "it is a question of climates," "C'est une question de climats." The garden is at once the most familiar and domestic spot where people meet and incorporate the outside world in their lives. The garden may also nourish a multitude of voices and ways of seeing and knowing. The garden is a place, a space, where climate, plot, and continual cultivation all have double meanings and where all can flourish.

NOTES

- 1 All translations from Balzac are from the Penguin Classics edition of *Old Goriot*, 1951. Proust translations are from the Random House edition, 1981, translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin. The translations of Colette are my own.
- 2 Nicole Mozet has done a pithy study of the Vauquer garden that is easy to

- visualize and therefore is extremely useful. See "La Description de la Maison-Vauquer," in *L'Année Balzacienne* (1972).
- 3 I have been unable to find any satisfactory illustration of this garden. I think, too, that for our purposes, an illustration is unnecessary. Unlike the gardens described by Proust and Colette, this one is entirely fictional, designed in all deliberation as a container of symbols and clues. Balzac constructs his garden with precisely the details that we need in order to decipher its code and apply its meanings and dimensions to the rest of the novel. It is itself a map, rather than the living, ambivalently fictional spaces that we find in Proust and Colette.
 - 4 Harry Levin, *The Gates of Horn* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).
 - 5 *Remembrance of Things Past*, Volume One: *Swann's Way and Within a Budding Grove*, Marcel Proust, translated by C. K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, New York: Random House, Inc., pp. 11–12.
 - 6 Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Ed. du Seuil, 1972), p. 136.