

## SPACE AND SALVATION IN COLETTE'S *CHÉRI* AND *LA FIN DE CHÉRI*

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When critics judge and defend Colette's work, they frequently settle on her journals and the novels that are most nearly autobiographical. These choices imply that what is finest about her writing is her own highly charged and spiced life, and that her most authentic characters speak directly for her. It is true that people in her world generally feel rather than think their way to clear and telling perceptions: Yannick Resch observes eloquently that they "discover the world and others through their bodies."<sup>1</sup> There is, however, a rich and complex communication among characters who seem at first to exist only to bemuse us. When we find that sensations and the objects or spaces that evoke them may replace language—spoken and thought—then these fantastical figures take on shades of force and pathos and become Colette's most vital creatures.

In *Chéri* and *La Fin de Chéri*, which together form arguably Colette's most ambitious and finely worked novel, living spaces assume a compelling role as voice and catalyst of people's experience. It is essential to discuss these works as one: A separation of Chéri and his mistress Léa and its repercussions in their lives is central to both novels; furthermore, each aspect of their relations to their world and to each other that is introduced in *Chéri* is resolved in *La Fin de Chéri*.

In *Chéri*, Léa, a twentieth-century courtesan, chooses to conduct her last affair with the son of her friend. Chéri is an adored princeling in his mother's demi-mondain circle. After five years with Chéri, during which Léa teaches him about love and indeed grows to love him, she relinquishes him to a marriage with the young and colorless Edmée; she then flees to the Midi to recover from the loneliness that is

witness to a deeper love than she had suspected. Chéri rushes to her after a six-month separation, but, suddenly aware of her aging, leaves her again.

*La Fin de Chéri* picks up the story of these two lives after the First World War. Chéri is a hero, but finds himself a passive and ignored figure, lost in the excitement and vulgar bustle of his wife's post-war social causes. He returns again to Léa, seeking the rich, closed world he had once created around them both; however, in the meantime she has become an old woman, resigned to a jolly asexuality. Chéri, left with no place to hide or nurture a new life, tries desperately to recreate life with Léa in a mouldy room plastered with photographs of her golden days. When this imagined world fails to conjure up his lost Léa, he shoots himself.

Chéri and Léa have radically different understandings and reactions to their places in society. While Chéri, as passive center of his world, waits for people and sensations to act upon him, Léa attends to her living spaces as extensions of her identity. In his book *Colette and Chéri*, André Joubert assigns to places—and specifically the “privileged place” of Léa's bedroom—a catalytic role in the defining and dissolution of people's relations with one another: “. . . in the framework of privileged places, the ballet of the characters in relation to each other is reflected in the play of alternating distancing and rapprochement of their mutual living spaces.”<sup>2</sup>

Colette's world is an anthropocentric one; she, in her autobiographical writing, and her “survivor” characters in fiction find themselves at the living center of a world they must master—by self-isolation or by direct challenge—in order to survive. People who have no clear apprehension of this active and independent role of space in their lives are seen as victims of their surroundings.

If, as Georges Poulet maintains in *Les Métamorphoses du cercle*, “The human being is a center where outside reality converges and synthesizes itself,”<sup>3</sup> then Chéri's sense of reality is an insubstantial creation, based on his muddy perceptions of the world as a series of stage sets arranged in deference to his beauty and his needs. We see him posed in a series of spaces: Léa's pink boudoir, his bizarre and luxurious house, moonlit gardens. It is clear that he is defined by the way he responds to and chooses spaces and by others' perceptions of him within those settings. Once chosen, a space becomes an active element of Chéri's life; he responds continuously to his surroundings, happy and secure only when they seem to be unassailable, unchanging sets. He is a passive occupant of space, animated by his violent

and inarticulate reactions to changes in his world, especially Léa's body and her gloriously ego-reflecting apartment.

Joubert claims that Léa's room tells nothing of her inner life or identity: ". . . this dwelling is limited in its evocations almost to the exterior signs of the demi-mondaine's success and to the setting of amorous intimacies. Léa's moral personality doesn't divulge itself there" (p. 60). Léa is, however, sensually, even morally, aware of her living space. She perceives her apartment, bedroom, and body as an intricately constructed and maintained series of containers for her self. She is continuously examining the surfaces, textures and lighting of these spaces, calculating their strengths and losses. Each layer of space—her skin, lingerie, the apartment walls and draperies—reflects the metamorphosis of its center. There is a continuous reciprocal activity between her self and her spaces.

Léa's room is her setting and her second skin, an old-fashioned nest of rosy clouds of gauze, veils and shades that glows in response to her body, "white tinted with rose": "The noontime sun entered the pink room, gay, over-decorated and dated in its luxury, doubled laces at the windows, rose-petal silk on the walls, gilded wood, electric lights veiled in pink and white, and antiques upholstered in modern silks" (C, p. 18).<sup>4</sup> This hermetic space of reflecting, enveloping colors and lights seems to lend life to Chéri by its mere evocation. About to return to Edmée after a three-month desertion, he finds himself dreaming of lovers' trysts "chez Léa":

He tried to evoke the morning games, at Léa's, certain afternoons of long and perfectly silent pleasure, at Léa's,—the delicious sleep of winter in the warm bed, and the cool room, at Léa's... But he could see in Léa's arms, in that daylight the color of cherries that flamed behind Léa's curtains, in the afternoon, only one lover: Chéri. (C, p. 108)<sup>5</sup>

Fortified by this identification of himself with that Léa-world, he returns to Edmée in triumph; he is confident of regaining at will that nurturing, identifiable space in Léa's arms.

Chéri makes no effort to alter his world; space is for him an unapprehended force. He perceives place as a strangely animated and self-willed entity that acts upon him and so propels him through life. When life and society move independently and randomly by him, he is overcome by that unregimented and chaotic force. In *La Fin de Chéri*, he confides this sense of alienation to Edmée, who is deter-

minedly nursing wounded veterans and adorning her own salon with post-war *arrivistes*:

For you, it's obvious, you are accomplishing a sacred mission. But for me?... If you were forced to spend every day in the upper rotunda of the Opéra, I wouldn't see any difference. That would leave me just as... just as apart. And the ones I call your remnants, well, they're wounded, too. Invalids a little luckier than some others, by chance. I've got nothing to do with them, either. With them, too, I am... apart. (FC, p. 169).

When Chéri returns to Léa after his marriage, he announces, "I'm home!" (C, p. 134).<sup>6</sup> This is his home, his place, in far more significant ways than the gaudy palace he shares with Edmée. He takes possession of Léa's bedroom with an urgency that tells of his need of it. The next morning, he wakes in Léa's bed, filled with a sensation of joy and plenitude that is transmitted by light, and represented by it:

He didn't move. He was afraid that his stirring would crumble a remaining joy, an optical pleasure that he tasted in the ember pink of the curtains, in the steel and copper scrolls of the bed sparkling in the colored air of the room. His great happiness of the night before seemed to him hidden, melted and very small, in a reflection, in the rainbow that danced on the side of a crystal decanter filled with water. (C, p. 144)

Léa's created world represents her to Chéri in a more satisfying and "real" form than she herself can now muster. One is given to understand that Chéri would willingly spend his life in that womb, sensing Léa in the colors and perfumed air around him. Indeed, in *La Fin de Chéri*, he attempts—and fails—to replace Léa with a room that evokes her presence by old photographs peeling from its dingy walls. His imagination is not rich enough to fulfill him without sensual enhancement of the objects, colors and textures of her apartment.

For Chéri, Léa's place and body come to be one being. At the beginning of *La Fin de Chéri*, he has not seen his mistress during the five years of the war, and appears to be absorbed in his life with Edmée. Edmée casually mentions one day that they should purchase a country house, and Chéri suddenly sees in his mind's eye Normandy as Léa had shared it with him during their first summer together. He

actually faints, as he struggles to “re-read” that space that she had created for them, redolent of ripe fruits, exotic color and light:

. . . he didn't hurry to regain full consciousness. He retreated, behind his eyelids and lashes, to the heart of the green domain that he evoked at the moment of his seizure, a flat land, rich with strawberry plants and bees, with white water-lilies hemmed by warm stone . . . . When his strength returned he kept his eyes closed, thinking: “If I open my eyes, Edmée will read in them all that I see . . .” [.] (*FC*, p. 200)

Just as this marvelous re-creation of a country idyll resuscitates a specific place shared with—and indeed created by Léa—the evocation of Léa's apartment revives for Chéri the image of his own Léa, his “Nounoune.” He hears one day during idle conversation that Léa has a new apartment, “small, but it's charming” (*FC*, p. 189). His reaction is instantaneous, almost instinctive: “Chéri clung to these two words . . . . When invention failed him, he painfully constructed a rosy decor, threw in the vast ship of gold and steel, the great bed rigged in laces . . . .” (*FC*, p. 189). The new apartment is hereby transformed into a dreamed version of the old.

Chéri cannot conceive of any alteration in Léa and her apartment because together they form the womb-like center and container of his own identity; he himself has remained an unaltered figure amid the post-war upheavals around him. Since his world has no meaning or form without Léa, he expresses his despair at losing her through an effort to find her in every aspect of his surroundings: “A door that opens, it was Nounoune; the telephone, it was Nounoune; a letter in the garden box: perhaps Nounoune.... Even in the wine I drank, I looked for you . . .” (*C*, p. 152). It is important to note that he searches for Nounoune, his private creature, rather than the real woman Léa, distinct and independent.

His immense sensitivity to all that surrounds her is balanced by the lifeless and repelling spaces of his own house. The garish and opulent colors there reflect only themselves, and seem to flatten people rather than define or orient them:

Of weak invention and banal proportions, the dining room owed its luxuriousness to a yellow paper sprinkled with purple and green. The white and gray stucco-work of the walls threw too

much light on the guests, already stripped of all shadow by the light that fell on them, unshaded, from the ceiling. (*FC*, p. 245)

Chéri's mother describes the house to Léa: "Sinister... Sinister! Violet carpets! Violet! A black and gold bathroom. A salon without furniture, full of Chinese vases as big as me!" (*C*, p. 122). As she speaks, she and Léa are sitting in Léa's salon, a calm and welcoming space that reflects and enhances Léa's own charm: "A normal, familiar light bathed the salon and played in the draperies" (*C*, p. 120).

The bedroom Chéri shares with Edmée is at the heart of this collection of elegant but impersonal spaces. The room is Chéri's creation: "It was as he wanted it, blue, fragrant, consecrated to repose" (*FC*, p. 184). This "repose" is an escape from sensation, Chéri's fumbling attempt to deaden the pain of losing Léa. He retreats here as to a lair, a blind and blinding hole in the midst of a world that will not offer him a stable and identifying place. It is a set piece, artificially lit, "blue and somber like night on a stage" (*FC*, p. 239). The room evokes the vital forces that are absent in his marriage:

. . . he drew back with an inexpressible repugnance before the idea of living, paired off, in a domain [marriage to Edmée] that wasn't governed by love . . . . And as he walked beside Edmée toward the room that would witness neither reproaches nor kisses, he felt himself to be penetrated by shame, and he blushed at their monstrous "understanding." (*FC*, p. 252)

Chéri sees that the places in the world shared with Edmée are deadening elements, which absorb and flatten his sense of identity, his apprehension of his place and function in society. In one pitiable effort to be a part of the bustle of Edmée's life, he visits "her" hospital to see the wounded veterans:

Too much white fell from the ceilings, glanced back from the floors, erased the angles, and he pitied the recumbent men to whom no one offered the charity of shadow . . . . "Give them shadow, give them a color that isn't this white, always this white..." [.] (*FC*, p. 187)

Here is the threatening force of space that erases people, allowing no contour, no intimate or secret facets in daily existence. Chéri fears

these destructive aspects of space, without either defining or defying them.

Chéri's and Léa's places in the world are created from two fundamental and opposing reactions to their surroundings: flight in Chéri's case, and ultimately, penetration in Léa's. He flees any space that doesn't envelop and protect him in an immobilizing and dependable security. His constant movement away from the places of his world—whether a physical flight through the streets, his three-month desertion of Edmée, or a dreamy evasion of surrounding activities—produces a progressive loss of consciousness of his relation to the events and people around him. He has found no person or inner resource to replace the welcoming and healing refuge created by Léa before the war, and he is increasingly portrayed as a disoriented, disinherited figure in a rapidly changing, oblivious world.

Society assaults his sense of stability and identity. He faces every day as a long wait in which each event recedes without significance into an undefined distance: "Each day, awake early or late, he began a day of waiting" (*FC*, p. 185). Unable either to captivate Edmée by his glamorous languor or to join her in her buzzing social activity, he subsides into the role of still observer, disconnected from all around him:

He got into the habit of sitting in the garden in a wicker armchair, as though he'd arrived at a hotel garden from a trip, and he watched, astonished, the approaching night annihilate the blue of the aconites, and substitute instead a blue in which the flowers' form melted, while the green of the foliage persisted in distinct masses. (*FC*, p. 190)

He sees these transformations without responding to them; indeed, his own still figure seems to be an element of an impressionist painting. He takes pleasure from this sensation of floating in time and space: "On his own property he tasted the pleasure of a passerby seated in a square, and he didn't wonder how long he rested there, leaning back, his hands dangling" (*FC*, p. 190).

Léa never allows herself to relinquish her living spaces. She knows—as Chéri never will—the value of an equilibrium sought and carefully maintained: between flight from failure or disillusion, and between acceptance or penetration to the heart of such difficulties. What release she seeks always replenishes her energies and percep-

tions. Public spaces, such as the fresh air and the view from a window, streets, or long voyages, clear her head and reinforce her will to know and to affirm herself.

Enmeshed as they are in their private world, Léa and Chéri turn to the outside, at least momentarily, when faced with drastic changes in their lives. Yannick Resch remarks incisively that windows open onto a space that breaks the too-intimate bond between a woman, her inner life, and—usually—her lover. The window provides respite from illusion: "The link between two universes, it is the privileged object that attaches the person to the exterior world and thereby symbolizes in moments of crisis, evasion, liberty" (p. 145). Whereas Léa makes use of the spiritual hiatus gained from turning to an open window, in order to strengthen her perception and control of a situation, each of Chéri's "flights" takes him further from any mastery of people and events.

Resch points out that Léa finds no fantasy escape from her involvement with Chéri. An open window allows her rather to recover her pride and equilibrium in the world existing beyond their affair. In the last, violent scene of *Chéri*, she realizes that he has discovered her age. Almost frantic with a desire to reach out to him before he can leave her forever, she turns instead to her window, to hide a lust that would seem grotesque to his young eyes. This evasion is itself the result of a profound understanding of herself. When Chéri leaves, Léa's world closes in about her, leaving her alone at its center, solely responsible for her own sanity and survival. Space has been her accomplice in this parting, offering a way to hide her aging face, disguise her despair, and invent the shade of the admirer who may arrive at any moment in the courtyard.

Chéri, too, seeks refuge through open space from the crises of his marriage and Léa's aging, but his energy and self-image are dissipated rather than reaffirmed by the distracting activity of the outside world. In the midst of an unproductive and querulous exchange with Edmée, he turns to a window open to the night air in order to marshal his arguments before confronting her with their marital failure. He finds the strength to speak, but never to argue or resolve their difficulties.

When Chéri and Léa venture outdoors, they are disconnected from their private spaces and thrown into confrontation with an oblivious—and thereby treacherous—world. Outside, we see how little Chéri knows of himself, and how much Léa is forced to confront. Chéri often plunges into the night, to walk aimlessly, savoring his

detachment from others' concerns. In *Chéri*, he finds himself walking to Léa's apartment after six months of marriage. As he approaches, he feels a sensual quickening:

At the end of the avenue, he deliberately inhaled the vegetal odor that came from the Bois on the heavy moist wings of the west wind, and hurried toward the Dauphine entrance . . . "I walked too fast," he told himself. (C, p. 91)

Léa's concierge reports that she has not returned, and Chéri retreats into the dark, exhausted by the disappointment of his anticipation:

He stumbled twice and almost fell, like people who feel eyes staring at them from behind. At the metro railing, he leaned on his elbows, over the black and pink shadow of the underground, and felt crushed with fatigue. When he straightened up, he saw that they were lighting the streetlamps on the square and that night was turning everything blue. "No, it isn't possible?... I am ill!" (C, p. 93)

Typically, he makes no conscious attempt to link this ominous change in his evening stroll with Léa's absence; he simply allows the fatigue of his long walk to obliterate that real source of his misery.

After a longer absence—the duration of the war—Chéri again escapes into the night, now fleeing Edmée's new and unrelenting social activity that seems to exclude him. He fades into the dark, walking like a cat: "All of his senses quickened, freed from thought" (FC, p. 163). Sound translates into image for him, as for a cat: He passes invisibly by two murmuring forms, and imagines the amorous soldier as he hears and identifies the soft clink of a swordbelt.

These night walks reinforce Chéri's alienation from his established place in the world. On a humid, luminous fall night, he again stalks away from one of Edmée's blaring dinner parties. He is absorbed by the dark, metamorphosing into a shadowy, cat-like figure. In this half-world of fading identity, he feels himself accompanied by another lost soul, the new, aged Léa. He longs for a familiar and sheltering space, but even Chéri has finally come to feel that no space can hold static the life he requires for himself, and he is haunted by the image of Léa as she has become:

"Ah, a good hotel room; a good, pink room, nice and ordinary, nice and pink..." But wouldn't it lose its banality at the moment

when, with the light out, total night would allow the weighty and teasing entrance of that long, impersonal jacket and that thick gray hair? (*FC*, p. 255)

A rose-colored room can never be neutral for Chéri; it evokes Léa-Nounoune, his cradled existence with her, and their loss.

Faced with so overwhelming a sense of his loss of place, Chéri must consciously consider his plight, but never for long or deeply. In one dramatic instance, as he walks toward the Bois de Boulogne, the forces of nature and the sensations they elicit do stir his sense of dissolution:

A blurred light over regions that had been stagnant and hardly perceptible until that moment, began to show him that purity and solitude are a single and identical misfortune . . . He stopped to watch a herd of low clouds above the Bois, of an elusive pink, that a gust of wind buffeted, grabbed by their misty hair, twisted, dragged over the lawns, before carrying them off to the moon.... Chéri contemplated familiarly these luminous enchantments of a night that those who sleep believe to be black. (*FC*, p. 256)

Here his union with natural forces is so strong that he confronts Léa's disappearance almost consciously. The pathetic fallacy has a savagely ironic function here. Jolted by the strange wildness of that moment, Chéri is for once forced into an insight brutal in its pragmatic finality: " 'For me,' concluded Chéri, 'I really think that everything has been said' " (*FC*, p. 257).

Not all of Chéri's flights from crises—or Léa's confrontations with them—are figurative. Each flees Paris when life seems to reach an impasse, and each returns with a new course of action revealed. Chéri's resolution will again follow from a passive, sensual apprehension of the world; Léa's provides her with the energy for both a new assault on Chéri's love, and a response to the demands of old age.

Soon after Chéri's marriage, Léa joins her old circle of friends in Chéri's mother's salon. She escapes the gathering, horrified by those spectres of her own future self when her age will finally begin to betray her: "Which one of the three will I resemble, in six years?" (*C*, p. 69). She decides at once to reaffirm her independence and vigor by a triumphant trip to the Riviera, in full regalia, with car, chauffeur and mountains of luggage. Her trip is no idyll, however, but a confirmation of realities that can no longer be sealed off by her apartment walls.

Visions and intimations of aging women surround her as she unpacks in Paris:

It's horrible. And after those [women encountered during her trip], as before them, others, others who will resemble them. There's nothing to be done about it. It just is that way. Maybe everywhere there's a Léa, those Charlotte Peloux types, those LaBerche and d'Aldonza types, will spring from the earth, old horrors who used to be beautiful young things, people, impossible people, impossible, impossible... [.] (C, p. 111)

These phantoms are "impossible" because they have been young and beautiful, seemingly indestructibly so, and are no more; and furthermore, they are as real as Léa. It follows that she will soon be one of them.

Armed with that sure knowledge of both her present and future resources, Léa prepares to face Chéri and his world once more as a desirable and independent woman. She and Chéri have one final night of passion and renunciation; Léa's voyage has readied her for both aspects of that encounter.

Chéri's flight is in troubling contrast to Léa's—an aimless and sterile circling of the outskirts of Paris, where the hot August air offers no replenishing sensation or revelation. He begins to bring the aged and frightful *Baronne de La Berche*, "virile companion," on these nighttime escapes, because she is silent and because he feels that she is as alone as he. On a particularly blazing evening she suggests that they spend the night in the country, and return to Paris in the cool dawn. Chéri refuses, too quickly; is he subconsciously wary of playing a travestied love scene with the crone—a shade of what Léa must become? *La Baronne* responds immediately with as brutal and penetrating an analysis of Chéri as any that Léa supplies for herself: "Yes, yes. You will run around all day, but you return to the pen every night. Ah! you are well-kept!" (FC, p. 192). His home is no castle, but an increasingly solitary prison. He abandons any illusions of a real married life and slides into a reflective, inner world: "...he existed, innocent, walking, tranquil inside of his freedom like a prisoner in the depths of his cell, and chaste as an animal brought from the Antipodes, who doesn't even search for a female in our hemisphere" (FC, p. 196).

After he sees Léa for the last time, an aged, jolly hulk in her stolid old lady's world, he seems to move almost joyfully in a space that holds no place for him:

He went toward a Paris that he had forgotten. The crowd jostled his paradoxical equilibrium that required a crystal emptiness and the routine of suffering. . . . He thought that a certain interior floating, which he compared to a grain of lead bouncing in a celluloid ball, was provoked by hunger, and he took refuge in a restaurant. (*FC*, p. 282)

That "floating" is more than hunger; it is the sensation of being washed away from any enduring or definable contact with people in the outside world.

That feeling of floating signals danger to Léa, a weakening of her control and consciousness of her world. After the Riviera trip, she deliberately chooses a new persona that will separate her from Chéri. Wearing a new costume, bulky tweeds and sturdy walking shoes, she strides out to take her first walk as an elderly lady. The outside world does not adapt itself to her act, which springs from no authentic self-perception. Léa is caught off balance, out of a framework that could enhance this new image of herself. Twice, she hears a footstep, recognizes a gesture that must be Chéri's, and panics: "If I must meet him, I'd prefer that he see me otherwise, he who could never stand brown, first.... No... no, I'm going home, I..." (*C*, p. 128). The young man—who resembles Chéri not at all—steps into a taxi and disappears.

Léa's new persona is crumbling around her, and she responds with brutal lucidity: "... Léa did not smile and had no further sigh of relief, she turned on her heels and went home" (*C*, p. 128). Her own world—one that she now knows she is not yet prepared to relinquish—is quickly put to rights: "A whim, Rose.... Give me my peach-blossom tea gown, the new one, and that big embroidered stole without sleeves. I'm smothering in this wool" (*C*, p. 128).

Back at the ordered center of her life, Léa can afford now to examine her momentary loss of stability. She has retreated from an inevitable metamorphosis, but only until she sees how to fashion her world to frame that new self. When she does re-make her surroundings, Chéri finds himself in a nightmare. Change signals deformation for him. His conception of space and its elements—color, odor, light, boundaries—extends to even more literal perceptions of the world. He associates the perfumes and rose tints of Léa's old apartment with her as though she were a world and the apartment a fixed atmosphere unique to her, "like the sea carries with it, when it recedes, the terrestrial fragrance of hay and flocks" (*FC*, p. 224).

Chéri cannot imagine that a new Léa exists quite independently

of—and grotesquely mismatched with—this rosy atmosphere. When he arrives at her new apartment, he is first shocked by the absence of her perfume in a blue and empty vestibule. The familiar rose-colored light floods over him as the maid opens the salon door, and he anticipates a miraculous resumption of his old existence in their shared, womb-like world. There stands, of course, the fat and elderly Léa, an alien in his cherished space, and a devastating trauma to his conception of how people and their surroundings are linked.

Chéri feels himself collapse into a hallucinatory world. Léa and her aged friend, interrupted in their gossipy tea, boisterously examine him as they would a show animal:

“I grant you the chin, which will fatten up soon. And the feet are too little, the most ridiculous thing for a boy who’s so tall.”

—There, I don’t agree with you. But I *have* noticed that the thigh is too long in relation to the back of the leg, from here to there.

They argued calmly, weighing and detailing the high and low points of the beast of luxury. (*FC*, p. 214)

So Léa reduces Chéri from bijou to beef, resisting any pitiable flirtation on her part, and thoroughly disorienting his tenuous perceptions of self and place. The room becomes for him a container of dreadful spaces and surfaces, each changing and threatening beyond his control. He feels his identity fragment, and watches with amazement one Chéri sitting arrogantly and even boorishly relaxed, while another kneels on the floor wailing incoherently at the destruction of his world.

In an effort to pull himself back into the comforting ritual of tea-time, he reaches for a cake. It, too, has become a distorted version of itself, the sugared surface hiding a poisonously transformed interior: “He chose from a plate a cake shaped like a curved tile, then put it down, convinced that if he bit, a silent cinder of rose brick would fill his mouth” (*FC*, p. 221). Surfaces betray him, hiding or destroying the sweet rosy interiors that had defined his and Léa’s world.

Finally, Léa’s body itself plays a spatial role, as victim and witness of the monstrous instability of life. The delicately nurtured, cracking shell of an aging courtesan becomes a wide and sturdy container for her new self. Chéri imagines this bulky lady to be a diabolical creation, a grotesque envelope in which his sleek Léa must be captive. Indeed, he catches glimpses of his own Léa:

The gray-haired lady turned, and Chéri received straight on the shock of her blue eyes. . . .

The great innocent laugh rang out again, and Chéri searched for the source of this laugh, here, there, everywhere except in the throat of the gray-haired woman ... [H]e told himself to be patient, with the half-formed hope that this first image would give way to a luminous remission. (*FC*, p. 211)

He has a hallucinatory urge to shriek at this "placid disaster," to force his Léa to reappear and to exist for him.

The woman named Léa is therefore split in two by Chéri's refusal to recognize her. This dreadfully healthy, cheery old woman betrays a certain unease and shame for her new self, as she attempts to hide her huge neck under a wispy silk scarf. But Léa really has accepted her new body and values its bulk as a refuge when she must confront Chéri's horror and incredulity. He asks if he is keeping her from dressing for the evening, in a distracted effort to remain on the surface of convention, and she responds by laughingly asserting her new place in life: "Dress? And in what, in God's name, do you expect me to dress? I am dressed, definitively!" (*FC*, 225). The black skirt and stern white jabot are her new skin and they herald her new world. Color and texture simply encase Léa and signal her age; there is no further need for the play of surface color and texture to bemuse a lover.

Chéri has refused to acknowledge the altered frame for himself and his life. He is left one final space for retreat, where he can try to reconstruct—through confused daydreams—the life that Léa had given them both. An aged and impoverished courtesan, La Copine, offers him the use of her room, a veritable hole, "narrow, secret and black" (*FC*, p. 259). Its walls are covered with portraits and photographs of a past, goddess-like Léa, frozen in a series of poses, luminous, smooth and young. Here is a wall of Léas, each image a bit of the facade that obliterates a certain stout old woman and confirms Chéri's fading vision of his "Nounoune." Daily, La Copine croons through anecdotes of Léa's past, peopling and furnishing Chéri's dream world as she describes lovers, toilettes, the material of her dresses and the luxurious events of her days.

This act of re-creation does force Chéri into some understanding of his role in Léa's life; he realizes that he was, after all, one in a string of lovers. He doesn't grasp, however, that, as the last of that series, he was the most important of all. The resulting state of mind is a greater sense of alienation from this world. He nurtures this feeling of loss of place, aware that once emptied of memory and evocations of Léa's

world, he will be left without the resources or will to construct a life for himself:

Indistinct, that force that comes from dissimulation and resistance formed itself painfully, in the deepest part of him, and he tasted the excess of his detachment, with the vague foreknowledge that a paroxysm can be used and exploited as a tranquilizer, and that one can find in it counsel that serenity cannot offer. (*FC*, p. 227)

The young Léa is irrevocably lost, and with her the youthful, perfect Chéri, the only self he can imagine. The wall of pictures eventually begins to fail him; his reveries cannot recreate and repeople that womb-like past: "Already the like image inspired in him only a rancour, an ecstasy, a palpitation all diminished" (*FC*, p. 285). It is after this last glimpse of his ruined world that Chéri shoots himself.

Space as Colette exploits it is not a stage or setting where people may act out their lives freely and independently. It is rather a continually shifting reflector and container of individual lives; a shelter from external shocks at times, but also, ultimately, a witness to the struggle for identity and equilibrium against the shocks of age and disillusion. Colette's creatures struggle simply for a balance between possession and alienation of self, on a brutal, even visceral level.

Colette's protagonists find little occasion for transcendence of their world. Chéri's defeat ends in his suicide, Léa's in the loss of her gorgeously constructed world and—to Chéri—a grotesque compromise with age. In this world there is no explosion of creativity in the acceptance or forging of a space, but rather a simple, cruel and rare salvation: an acceptance of the incapacity to control one's living space, and the strength to apprehend the exterior world in accordance with the relentless exigencies of the inner one.

## NOTES

1. Yannick Resch, *Corps féminin, corps textuel: essai sur le personnage féminin dans l'oeuvre de Colette* (Paris: Librairie Klincksieck, 1973), p. 15. All quotations in this article are my translations.

2. André J. Joubert, *Colette et Chéri* (Paris: A.-G. Nizet, 1972), p. 131.
3. Georges Poulet, *Les Métamorphoses du cercle* (Paris: Ed. Plon, 1961), p. 82.
4. All quotations from *Chéri* and *La Fin de Chéri* are taken from the *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Flammarion, ed. Le Fleuron, 1949), VI. For clarity's sake I will indicate text references to quotations from the novels with the abbreviations (C) (*Chéri*) and FC (*La Fin de Chéri*).
5. I will single space Colette's ellipses throughout in order to distinguish them from mine.
6. The original French is "Je rentre!"