

Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

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30. Louise Colet

15 August 1810–9 March 1876



Fig. 30. Louise Colet, by F.X. Winterhalter. Photo by Guise (2021). Wikimedia, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d1/Louise_Colet.jpg, CC BY 4.0.

Mementos

Journal

Paris samedi 14 juin 1845

Pourquoi commencer ce journal aujourd'hui plutôt qu'il y a dix ans quand je suis arrivée à Paris, quand, pleine d'enthousiasme, curieuse de tout voir, de tout connaître, j'avais encore des illusions sur les grands hommes, sur les sentiments, sur la gloire ! Oh ! c'est qu'alors ma vie était trop pleine, mes espérances trop vives, je voyais ma carrière (littéraire trop belle), je n'aurais pas perdu un instant à réfléchir, à quoi bon ? il fallait marcher au bonheur, aux succès qui m'attendaient. Aujourd'hui, tout m'a fait défaut. Je vais écrire chaque soir mes impressions et mes

actes, non pour me distraire, c'est impossible, mais pour que ce journal (document informe) me serve dans ma vieillesse (si je vieillis) à rédiger la confession de ma vie. Ce sera le seul roman que je pourrai bien faire et qui vaudra la peine d'être lu. Dans tous les ouvrages de ce genre que j'ai essayé d'écrire, je sais que le souffle de vérité a manqué. Ce n'est pas le courage et la franchise qui me manquaient pour décrire les sentiments et les événements, tels que je les avais éprouvés ou observés dans la vie, c'était le courage du cœur exigeant qui se refusait de descendre de l'idéal à la réalité. J'en cite un exemple, le dernier roman (ou plutôt nouvelle) que j'ai écrit ou que j'écrirai jamais, il est encore inachevé en ce moment, c'est *Eudoxie Mallet*. J'écrivais ces pages sur l'empire du sentiment que je voulais y peindre, sentiment en réalité si incomplet, si inférieur à l'amour de Frédéric et de Diane que mon cœur souffrait mille tortures tandis que je forçais mon récit à exprimer non ce que j'exprimais à XXX mais ce que j'aurais voulu qu'il fût pour moi. Ecrire la vérité de ma faiblesse et de mes déceptions pour les livrer au public sous une forme littéraire était au-dessus de mes forces, c'était bien amer de le subir.¹

Louise Colet, née Révoil was born in Aix-en-Provence in 1810 and died in Paris in 1876. In 1834, she met and married Mouriès Hippolyte Raymond Colet, a professor of composition at the Conservatoire de musique in Paris, following him there. A year after her arrival in

1 Louise Colet, *Mementos*, ed. Joëlle Gardes (Paris: Kimé, 2018), pp. 15–16.

Translation: Diary Paris Saturday 14 June 1845

Why begin this diary today rather than ten years ago when I arrived in Paris, when full of enthusiasm, curious to see everything, to know everything, I still had illusions about great men, about sentiments, about glory! Oh! it is that then my life was too full, my hopes too lively, I saw my career (in letters too beautiful), I would not have lost an instant to reflect, what's the use? one had to walk to the happiness, to the successes that awaited me. Today, everything has let me down. I will write each evening my impressions and my acts, not to distract me, that is impossible, but so that this diary (formless document) serves me in my old age (if I grow old) to set down the confession of my life. It will be the only novel I can well write and which will be worth the trouble of being read. In all the works of this genre that I have tried to write, I know that the breath of truth has been lacking. It is not courage and frankness that I lacked to describe sentiments and events, such as I felt them or observed them in life, it was the courage of the demanding heart which refused to step down from the ideal to reality. I give an example of this, the last novel (or rather short story) that I wrote or will ever write, it is still unfinished at the moment, it is *Eudoxie Mallet*. I wrote these pages on the empire of sentiment that I wished to paint there, a sentiment in reality so incomplete, so beneath the love of Frédéric and Diane that my heart suffered a thousand tortures while I forced my tale to express not what I expressed at XXX but what I would have wanted it to be for me. To write the truth of my weakness and my disappointments to deliver them to the public in literary form was above my strength, it was quite bitter to experience that.

Paris, Colet published her poems, winning a 2,000-franc prize from the Académie française. She went on to win three further prizes from that institution. Her literary salon was frequented by Hugo, Musset, Vigny, Baudelaire, and many painters and politicians. In 1840, the journalist Alphonse Karr attributed the paternity of her coming child to Victor Cousin. Furious, Colet attacked him with a knife. Karr, who escaped with a small wound, decided not to press charges, to the great relief of Cousin.² In 1844, Colet published a translation of selected works by Tommaso Campanella. In the 1840s and 1850s, she won more prizes; she also met Gustave Flaubert, a young unknown, in the sculptor James Pradier's studio in 1846. He was twenty-five, she was thirty-six. They became lovers, though the liaison did not last. She left her husband in 1847, writing at speed to meet her financial needs and maintain her independence. Several Fourierists frequented her salon, such as Leconte de Lisle. She died in 1876 and was buried in Verneuil-sur-Avre. In 2016, her tomb stood abandoned: despite fame and multiple awards in her lifetime, Colet had vanished from history in the ensuing century except as an appendage of Flaubert. Flaubert took it upon himself to attack her work after their breakup, in distinction to Victor Hugo who admired it. Reeditions since 2014 have belatedly changed this situation.

In 1845, year of this first memento by Colet, she was a prize-winning author in her mid-thirties, friend of Cousin, known enough in Paris for Karr to slander her in the press, and still a year away from her encounter with the unknown Flaubert, eleven years her junior. She had one prize under her belt from the Académie française, with three more yet to be awarded to her, alongside a prix Lambert from the Institut in 1857, the year *Madame Bovary* was published. Colet was literally a writer of distinction. How then did she come to be so forgotten that her gravesite was abandoned in 2016? The answer may partly lie in her relationship with Flaubert, who was unsparing after their breakup.

Possibly the most striking aspect of this extract is its apparent lack of confidence. Why did she not begin ten years ago, she opens, when she was full of enthusiasm? "Aujourd'hui," she writes, "tout m'a fait défaut." She wonders whether she will grow old; she remarks that in all her writing, "le souffle de vérité a manqué." What she lacked, she notes,

2 Francine du Plessix Gray, *Rage and Fire. A Life of Louise Colet Pioneer Feminist, Literary Star, Flaubert's Muse* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), pp. 79–84.

was “le courage du cœur exigeant;” she finds that lack in what she calls ‘the last novel she will ever write.’ This is deeply depressing reading, from a young writer already honored by the Académie française. The extract ends thus: “Ecrire la vérité de ma faiblesse et de mes déceptions pour les livrer au public sous une forme littéraire était au-dessus de mes forces.” History has remembered Colet as Flaubert’s muse; it might be equally fair, if not more so, to say that Flaubert was the older (and far better-known) Colet’s muse, and an extremely unfortunate one at that. His reputation visibly did not suffer; hers most assuredly did. It might be interesting to return to her novel *Lui* (1860) and to their correspondence with this viewpoint in mind.

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