

A close-up photograph of a woman's face in profile, looking down and smelling a bouquet of light-colored flowers. She is wearing a dark, textured hat. The background is softly blurred, showing some dark, thin branches or stems. A red rectangular box is overlaid on the upper part of the image, containing the title and author information.

**THE PURE AND
THE IMPURE**
COLETTE

INTRODUCTION BY
JUDITH THURMAN

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS
CLASSICS

THE PURE AND THE IMPURE

SIDONIE-GABRIELLE COLETTE (1873–1954) was born in the village of Saint-Sauveur-en-Puisaye, where she spent an idyllic country childhood. At the age of twenty, she married Henri Gauthier-Villars, known as Willy, a genial Parisian man of letters and a notorious man about town, under whose name she published the Claudine novels, titillating accounts of a young girl's coming of age, which enjoyed a scandalous success. Separated from Willy in 1905, Colette supported herself as an actress before establishing her own reputation as a writer. She was celebrated in later years as one of the great figures of twentieth-century French life and letters, and was the first woman to be accorded a state funeral by the French Republic.

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THE PURE AND THE IMPURE

Colette



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I N T R O D U C T I O N

THE PURE AND THE IMPURE is an investigation into the nature and laws of the erotic life. It takes the form of a classical dialectic—a series of dialogues, interspersed with narrative and commentary, between a truth seeker named “Colette” and a series of informants whom she describes as “restless ghosts unrecovered from wounds sustained in the past when they crashed headlong or side-long against that barrier reef, mysterious and incomprehensible, the human body.”

Though Colette drafted the work in late middle age, and rewrote it a decade later, her “ghosts” belong to the last *fin de siècle*, the period of her high youth, and of her coming of age as a writer. This was an era of fairly

hysterical misogyny, when male authorities from the most reactionary to the most avant-garde were haunted by the specter of an “emasculating” and “virilized” New Woman—a figure who, with two other impure subversives, the Jew and the homosexual—threatened to corrupt the old fixed categories of national identity and gender at a moment when all kinds of other sacred “truths” were being discredited.

Colette was never a political revolutionary, and certainly not a feminist, though she would describe herself proudly, in her final memoir, *The Blue Lantern*, as “an erotic militant.” Her militancy took the form (in life as in art) of a revolt against any normative standards for desire, and against all sentimentality in the carnal domain. “Charlotte,” the older woman whom Colette encounters in a Parisian opium den at the beginning of *The Pure and the Impure*, and who—“heroically,” in Colette’s view—fakes an orgasm for the benefit of her frail young lover, sums up the author’s view concisely: “I’m devoted to that boy, with all my heart. But what is the heart, madame? It’s worth less than people think. It’s quite accommodating. It accepts anything. You give it whatever you have, it’s not very particular. But the body . . . Ha! That’s something else, again.”

Probably no one knew more than Colette about the

predicament of a servile heart that selflessly pumps life through an imperious body, and she asks us to read *The Pure and the Impure* as her definitive word on the subject—"my personal contribution to the sum total of our knowledge of the senses." But that intriguing if rather grandiose instruction needs some perspective.

If Colette's militancy is limited to the boudoir, she is also one of the first modern writers to suggest that "male" and "female" are subjective assignments, and that a society which grants the privilege of "doing" or "being done to" exclusively to one sex or the other warps its young. A child of either sex, she perceives, has urges to penetrate, devour, and possess; to be cherished, dominated, and contained. The sexual predators, slaves, casualties, altruists, and impersonators whom she describes in *The Pure and the Impure* (and throughout her *oeuvre*) have been forced to deny or renounce the forbidden aspects of themselves—which are, put simply, their impure true feelings.

Purity and impurity would have been Christian notions for Colette, especially as they apply to women, but she defiantly interprets them in her own pagan terms. At one point, she admits that she doesn't understand the meaning of the word "pure" at all, though "in the

pictures it evokes, I construct a refuge for myself."¹ But from other sources, one infers that purity, for Colette, is a prelapsarian state of harmony enjoyed by wild animals, flora, birds of prey, certain sociopaths, and by ordinary humans only as fetuses. To be pure means to be unhindered by any conscious bonds of need or dependence, or by any conflict between male and female drives.

Since Colette also believes that there is no authentic androgyny in our fallen world, there can be no wholeness, and for a woman no autonomy, no personhood—a male privilege—without an unacceptable erotic sacrifice. "How to liberate my true hope?" she asks in an early novel. "Everything is against me. The first obstacle to my escape is this woman's body barring my way, a voluptuous body with closed eyes, voluntarily blind, stretched out full, ready to perish. . . . I'm she this woman, this brute beast so stubborn in her pleasure."

The Pure and the Impure tracks the course of the forbidden desires which go underground, to resurface as perversions, and the search of a fragmented self for another, symmetrically fragmented, to complete it. Colette conducts her research like the bold and scrupulous re-

1. She goes on to explain that these images of lightness and transparency are the substitutes for "isolated" places—childhood, innocence, wholeness—beyond her reach. In the final revision of the text, those "isolated" places are not just remote, they have become "imaginary."

porter she was (and if she had never written a word of fiction, she would still be remembered as one of the greatest French journalists of the century). She struggles admirably with her own biases, discerning the sadist's honor, the parasite's vitality, and the pervert's gallantry, along with their pathos, folly, and delusion. But her conclusions are not heartening. "This is a sad book," she told a friend, "it doesn't warm itself at the fire of love, because the flesh doesn't cheer up its ardent servants."

According to her third husband, Maurice Goudekot, Colette began writing *The Pure and the Impure* in July of 1930. She was fifty-seven, he was forty-two, and they were cruising the Norwegian fjords on a yacht aptly named the *Eros*, which belonged to their friend Henri de Rothschild. It is tempting to imagine that the setting had some influence on her working title: a decadent love boat sailing through icy and pristine northern waters past cliffs of incorruptible grandeur. Colette was experiencing the phenomenon the Scandinavians call *lyse natter*, "white nights," for the first time, although in French the same expression has a different meaning: the feverish sleeplessness induced by passion, anxiety, or both.

By September, she was back in France, searching for a new and less Cartesian title, and telling her friends, typically, that the book was going very badly.

Colette's work—nearly eighty volumes in all—invariably went “very badly.” It is a common though false impression that she wrote, as Henri de Montherlant put it, “as naturally as she breathe[d].” “I’m toiling like an ant,” she tells a confidante. She also speaks of “vomiting up” her last pages, and she finished the text she had by now renamed *Ces Plaisirs . . .* (“*ces plaisirs qu’on nomme, à la légère, physiques*”—these pleasures that are so lightly called physical) “in nights and days of despair, as usual.”

But as usual, too, Colette was a prodigious workhorse of Olympian vitality. *Ces Plaisirs . . .* was ready by the autumn of 1931, but in that same period of about fifteen months, she had also managed to adapt a novel for the stage, edit her travel writings for an anthology, launch a beauty institute, and break her leg—an injury which contributed to her physical decline, leaving her vulnerable to the excruciating arthritis of the hip that eventually immobilized her.

As Colette always lived hand to mouth on a rather opulent level and was chronically short of cash, she liked to serialize her work in some lucrative periodical before publishing it in book form. Money was a particular worry in 1931, with the Depression gaining momentum and Maurice, a broker of pearls, bankrupt and out of work. She sold the rights to *Ces Plaisirs . . .* to her friend Joseph

Kessel, literary editor of *Gringoire*, a popular journal of politics and culture which was not yet, though it would soon become, a pro-Nazi propaganda vehicle. After only four of nine projected installments had run—and apparently in response to the outrage of certain conservative readers—the publisher of *Gringoire*, a Corsican named Horace de Carbuccia, abruptly cut off Colette’s text in mid-sentence with the word “*Fin.*” It was an astounding insult to so eminent a writer, and Colette was livid. Nevertheless, five years later, she either found it in her heart to forgive Carbuccia or swallowed her pride (funds were again low), and sold him two of her finest novellas. And in 1941, she serialized her only novel from the Occupation, *Julie de Carneilhan*, in a *Gringoire* that was now rabidly fascist and anti-Semitic.

That same bleak year of 1941 also brought the six-week internment of her beloved Maurice in the concentration camp at Compiègne. Colette had been calling him “the Jew who doesn’t know he’s one,” though he knew he was one the morning the Gestapo knocked at their door. A month before his arrest, and despite the Nazi persecution of homosexuals, and a climate extremely hostile to any work of art deemed “decadent,” she published the substantially revised and definitive version of *The Pure and the Impure*, restoring the title

she had used for her first draft.² It was not a moment to insist coquettishly on *plaisir*. By now—two years shy of seventy—obese, bed-ridden, racked with pain, and dependent on a hunted man—Colette had finally accepted that there could be no escape from the contradictions, limits, and demands of her woman's body.

Having married two incorrigible philanderers in a row—first Willy, in 1893, then Henry de Jouvenel, in 1912—Colette had long been fascinated with (attracted to and tormented by) the character of the sexual predator. As early as 1908, she had considered writing a play about Don Juan as a vehicle for her friend Edouard de Max, the leading actor of his day, a famous seducer of men, and a flamboyant personage of the gay demi-monde. There would be no play, though in 1921, having finished Proust's *Sodom and Gomorrah*, Colette sent him a passionate fan letter confessing that she, too, had wanted to write a “study on the homosexual” and that “those pages of yours . . . are exactly what I was carrying within me, with the incapacity and laziness to bring them forth. . . . I swear that no one after you, no one

2. It was, in principle, a risky proposition, although her publisher, Louis Thomas, was a collaborationist in good standing with the Occupation authorities. He had taken over the house of Calmann-Levy, whose Jewish owners had fled abroad, and rechristened it Aux Armes de France.

except you, will be able to add a thing to what you've written."

Rivalry, however, was always a mainspring of Colette's genius, and in *The Pure and the Impure* she both sets about and succeeds in amplifying Proust's portrait of the "invert," focusing with particular lucidity and eloquence on that Belle Époque "Gomorrah" she had known so well as a music hall artiste; as a lover of Natalie Barney and a friend of Renée Vivien; and as the consort of "Missy," the Marquise de Morny, the aristocratic, lesbian transvestite ten years Colette's senior with whom she had lived between 1905 and 1911.

Yet *The Pure and the Impure* is not only a penetrating treatise on homosexuality, promiscuity, misogyny, and the ancient enmity between the sexes, it is a meditation on the way human beings eroticize—with tragic consequences—their primal, affective bonds. As the "restless ghosts" confide their secrets of the flesh to a sympathetic listener who is trying to conceal her own "frightful passivity of the senses," a pattern begins to emerge from their confessions. All of them have lived their lives starved for an essential nutrient, and unable to renounce the fantasy of meeting the Provider who will fill this "void" once and for all. The sex act tantalizes them with a fleeting taste of completeness, but they blame the deficiencies of their partners for their

inevitable relapse into the void—and so move on to the next warm body.

Colette looks closely at the different strategies by which these famished creatures—lovers and rivals of both sexes in every combination—seek to master their voracity. The strong take the offensive: they attempt to recover an illusion of wholeness through domination, and they become the sadists and seducers of both sexes. The weak experiment with some form of defensive self-starvation: asceticism, celibacy, anorexia, but most commonly masochistic submission. This voluntary privation feels superior to the original hunger of the infant, which was suffered helplessly.

In 1941, and several times thereafter, Colette declared *The Pure and the Impure* to be her finest work, and the one most likely to endure. The judgment is just, I think, although it is far from being the most accessible or best known of her books. It is not only deeply melancholy and pessimistic, it is intensely personal, and because Colette is never more reticent than when she is being most revealing, the style, at times, is maddeningly elusive. Her own resistance to and anxiety about the carnal truths explored in *The Pure and the Impure* show in the baroque syntax and the ubiquity of suspension points, of obscure references, and of contradictions that make the

text, in places, an exasperating experience for the casual reader—and certainly for the fans of her voluptuous, heartwarming paeans to food, flowers, motherhood, animals, and country life.

Yet *The Pure and the Impure* comes closer than any other of Colette's books, memoir or fiction, to revealing the "mysterious nature of [her] being," as Natalie Barney put it, which she guarded so fiercely, even from her intimates. She explores her own sensual torments, admits her failures, flaunts her powers, confesses her weaknesses, and sums up the three kinds of passionate attachments she herself has known. The first is with those on whom she has "lavished" her gifts, and these include children, animals, and her sexual rivals.³ The second is with those whose "riches" she still has the strength to plunder. And the third is with that tiny company of "heroically" frivolous and amoral souls whom she calls her fellow "survivors," and who have, like her, been "cast upon a rocky coast by their dismasted vessel"—whose name is Eros.

A perfect union, Colette suggests in *The Pure and the Impure*, would be one in which both partners could give

3. Colette was in the habit of cultivating a complicity with her sexual rivals: making them friends and even dependents, supporting their careers, feeding them, counseling them, charming them, lending them her houses, and, in some cases, trying to seduce them (and often succeeding).

and take mutual satisfaction. But her exhaustive survey of erotic possibilities turns up no equals. There are the stoical givers like Charlotte and La Chevalière (Missy). And there are the boastful and greedy takers, like her Don Juan (Damien), or her friend Renée Vivien, or the old courtesan, Amalia X, counting their conquests on their fingers.

Ironically, however, Colette conceived *The Pure and the Impure* at a moment when, after half a century of romantic disenchantments and betrayals, she had found a partner—a man fifteen years her junior—whose virile constancy had disarmed her mistrust. Maurice Goudek enjoyed her bullying, but they made a game of it, becoming accomplices and playmates rather than victim and oppressor. Their bond wasn't pure, and it certainly wasn't equal, but the devotion and the desire were both mutual.

"It is only when one is better that one discovers one wasn't very well," she once told Maurice. And this great ode to emptiness was written by a woman who felt full.

—JUDITH THURMAN