

WRITING A LIFE: COLETTE AND FEMINIST BIOGRAPHY

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At first glance, Colette hardly seems the right choice for a feminist biography. Sitting side by side with her rich lover, the Marquise de Morny, didn't she tell a journalist sometime around 1910, 'Je ne suis pas féministe'? Didn't she claim repeatedly that she had no general ideas? Wasn't she married three times? And wasn't her only child raised by a nanny and sent away to boarding school at an early age? A prolific writer, Colette's career was not marked by the silences. Tillie Olsen found to be so characteristic of working class writers, self-educated writers, and above all, women writers.¹

Unlike some of the subjects of feminist biography, Colette is not a forgotten woman. Her novels, memoirs and short stories are still in print, and she herself, or rather the public persona she helped create, remains a pop culture icon, signifying femininity, women's wisdom and just plain sex. In France, where her literary reputation survives as well, a prestigious publishing house is in the process of reissuing her collected works, all 4,000 pages of them. And the number of

pages written about her exceeds even her own substantial output. In Colette (1988), Nichole Ward Jouve protested that her subject has been the subject of altogether too many biographies. Such a disproportionate interest in the life obscures a woman's artistic achievements, she argued, and puts the focus on the body rather than the mind. '[I]f you were to look at the percentage of biographical studies to criticism in various writers, Colette would turn out to have the highest number of 'lives.' Not only that, but she would also turn out to have the highest number of photograph albums. If we look too insistently at the artist's life, she warned, we will come to see her merely as a beautiful passionate woman, as a piece of nature so we assume that she wrote so wonderfully about nature and love because it must have welled up spontaneously in her.'²

Colette's dual career as a performer and writer complicates any attempt to read her life story and, I believe, her work as well. After a decade as a writer, she trained as a music hall mime. Many of the lessons she learned in theater work were

applied to her writing career as well, so that over her lifetime readers, critics and publishers came to know her public persona as intimately as they knew her books, newspaper columns and short stories. As Jouve noted in exasperation, critical approaches to Colette have most often been biographical. By my count, there are a dozen biographies and ten 'life and works.' Then too, there are the photograph albums, at least six of them, which show her baring her breasts and facing up to blood-dripping daggers in music halls, acting in stage versions of her novels, posing with her famous bulldogs, her famous husband, her famous writing desk and bedside lamp, and posing in a schoolgirl's uniform to publicize her first book.

This apparent insistence on representing the/her self in various guises and situations extended to her oeuvre too, for Colette was a prolific memoirist as well as a novelist. As a novice writer, she showed a distinct preference for the confessional mode and in her published fiction, which included novellas and prose poetry, she frequently, though not always, chose to write in the first person and structured her novels like chronicles or diaries. Later, the essays and memoirs she published in the 1930s and 40s often took the form of journal entries or chroniques. For these and other reasons, which have to do with the dynamics of a literary history that is mainly written by and for men, much of Colette's fiction has been read as

transposed fact and many of the novels as romans a clef. In the eyes of Colette's contemporaries, her work was rarely uncoupled from her life. Should it be today?

The author herself sometimes commented obliquely on the readiness of others to read her life into her work and, at least at the beginning of her career, to confuse her with characters she created. Perhaps taking a cue from the fin de siècle comic writers among whom she lived and worked, she initially embedded mocking criticisms of this interpretive practice in her fiction. Thus, in a short story called "Le Miroir" (1908) a narrator named Colette confronted the already well-known Claudine (the main character in a series of novels issued pseudonymously from her husband Willy's literary workshop) and exclaimed: "What! You, my twin? Aren't you fed up with being paired with me? . . . It's all getting a little boring, don't you think?"¹³ Two decades later, in La Naissance du jour (1928), the writer resurrected her second husband Henri de Jouvenel, a man whom the bonds of marriage held only lightly, to lecture the novel's narrator, also a middle-aged writer, on the narrowness of her range. "How wise one of my husbands was when he remonstrated: 'But is it impossible for you to write a book that isn't about love, adultery, semi-incestuous relations and a final separation? Aren't there other things in life?' If he had not been in such a hurry to get to his amorous

rendezvous--for he was handsome and charming--he might perhaps have taught me what can take the place of love, in a novel or out of it. But he went and I continued obstinateX covering that same bluish paper . . . Was this lifelong self-referentiality merely a witty play of mirrors, evidence of women's incontrovertible narcissism? Or did it serve as a metaphor affirming the dense, complex relation she perceived between the lived and the written?

In any era, literal-minded, biographical readings of works of fiction can be dismissed as naive. Nowadays, those who delve too deeply into the lives of artists risk being labeled essentialist and their work exiled far from the cutting edge.⁵ But texts have histories just as people have life stories, and the conditions under which an artist worked, the traditions which nurtured or excluded her, and the audience for whom she wrote, painted, composed or danced make all the difference in the world. Like the work of any artist, Colette's bears the mark of its maker, who wrote for and in a specific community of readers. It also bears traces of the particular circumstances of its production, as all artworks do. To give just one example: whether or not a writer has a patron or publisher may influence the mode she chooses to write in; it certainly determines whether the work will reach the public in her lifetime. And women, along with working class artists, self-educated artists and Black artists,

among others, generally have been excluded from cultural production or pushed to the margins of it: small presses or struggling galleries, long silences between publications, lack of time or tools to pursue an artistic career, and degrading dependence on critical favor or patrons. So that the possibility of a particular person's ability to make art is of real, material consequence to an understanding of the work she eventually produces.

Along with a work's past history, readers' present experiences of a text have to be considered as part of the living, dynamic process of art production. Readers have their own personal and social histories, their own 'flt' into traditions of reading, writing and the making of meaning.

With each successive generation of readers, a writer's work acquires an additional set of meanings. What those meanings are and how they are made is a central question in feminist analyses of culture.

To begin to answer these questions, a feminist biography of an artist would not only chronicle the events in her lifetime, but would also explore the 'writing' of the artist's life story in her work. That is, it would include a critical reading of her oeuvre. As Rachel Blau DuPlessis observed in her discussion of new, feminist biography, this investigation would be guided by such questions as: "How are . . . biographical and material conflicts, issues and resolutions inscribed or encoded in individual texts: in image, plot, character, narrative

movement, resolution, and in choice of modes (poetry, novel, memoir)?⁷ Thus, the conception of a feminist biography is not a naïve act, nor is its result an impossible imitation of life. Instead, new feminist biography, like that of years past, most closely resembles a social history which views the world, its actors and artifacts through women's eyes. The distinction which DuPlessis has drawn is this: new feminist biography is informed by a particular sensitivity to the complex relations between linguistic (or aesthetic) acts and social ones.

Writing about a life is therefore a way to explore issues of gender and authority in and outside of texts. In addition to this, it serves a more general function for feminist writers and readers. There is a positive need to continue documenting our struggle for cultural survival in the "malestream" (to us Susan Mann Trofimenkoff's word), which seeks to exclude us. Giving serious attention to past conditions of women's work and life, contributes to this effort. We need to affirm that a tradition for women's self-defined practice exists, that contemporary feminist writers and readers have antecedents, and that gender matters. We still know very little about the communities of lesbian readers, Black readers, immigrant and working class readers and writers who built their own and contributed to our present day culture. Clearly, much of women's literary history remains to be written.

How is this to be done? In

1979, Gerda Lerner sketched out the parameters of a feminist approach to history. Even though her analysis concerns historiography in general, it can be applied to the specific practice of literary history as well. She emphasized that the writing of women's history involved the rethinking of traditional categories and the inclusion of a new one: gender. Filling in the gaps, or, in her words, writing the "contributory history" of women is not enough because women's development, as a group and as individuals, does not correspond to that of men. They experience periods of economic decline, wars, revolutions, and technological change differently.⁸ For cultural historians, this phenomenon of 'uneven development' may help to explain why some women artists (not all, since women's experience is particularized by race and class, among other things) seem not to fit into standard literary periods or appear to lag behind artistic movements. In addition, women's history, as Lerner envisioned it, would take epistemological change into account to "contain not only the activities and events in which women participated, but the record of . . . shifts in their perception of themselves and their roles."¹⁰

Writing a biography has often been compared to painting a portrait and the biographer's goal defined as rendering an accurate likeness. Leon Edel explained, "As the portrait painter uses 'pigments' and brushes so the biographer uses documents and facts.

'Fact and fiction--they are not always easy to distinguish,' a character in a novel of Graham Greene remarks--and the entire task of the biographer is a search for the distinction. The biographer's art does not allow for idealized reconstructions; instead it involves a patient, close reading of the archives. 'The demand is for a studied likeness: no prettying up, no retouchings, softenings or hardenings, no pastiche . . . The writer of lives observes a great deal, reads his [sic] documents, studies photographs, maps, texts with close attention . . . The biographer must also be aware of her emotional connection to the work. 'From the moment a biographer responds to 'a secret need in his own nature' he is tangled in his emotional relationship with his subject--he is in trouble . . . It is precisely the hidden feelings . . . which can betray and this is why . . . a biographer must be more sympathetic than empathetic--although a certain quantity of aesthetic empathy

is inevitable. If historical accuracy, respect for the subject, and a critical awareness of subjectivity are basic tenets of traditional biography, what then distinguishes feminist practice?

Drawing on Lerner's descriptions of the goals of women's history, Susan Mann Trofimenkoff proposed that feminist biographers should not only take a new look at history but should try to alter the contours of . . . biography itself. Because a feminist's approach to history explicitly recognizes gender as

a social category, she must write self-consciously and critically against the current of traditional thought':

When so much of our cultural heritage has stressed women's passivity, feminist biography allows us to see women as actors. When that same cultural heritage declares the category female and all its attributes as natural givers, feminist biography allows us to see them as historical constructs. And when so much of our cultural heritage makes the category female into a symbol of permanence, feminist biography gives us glimpses of the changing forms of femaleness over time.¹²

How to change the form of women's biography? First of all, this involves adopting a new point of view, shifting biography writing from an exclusive focus on the life of an isolated individual to writing from the

perspective of social history. Second of

all, a feminist biographer looks at her subject's development through various stages of the life cycle and explores the emergence of her self-consciousness as a woman and her engagement (or lack of it) in women's political struggles:

The . . . vantage point of the life cycle seems obvious . . . but an awareness of gender makes all the difference: the childhood, adolescence, work experience, familial relations will be quite

*distinctive depending upon the sex of the subject. And if . . . the subject happens to be a feminist . . . the biographer wants to know many things about the stages of her life cycle. What was particular about the stages of her life cycle. What was particular about the stages that caused her to emerge as a feminist? Or, did she, as a feminist, experience some of these stages differently from other women? Might her feminism in fact have changed across the stages? And in light of that, can one explain the varying reactions to her during her lifetime?*¹³

Finally, a feminist biographer looks at relationships and identifies the mentors, subcultures or communities that nurtured her subject or guided her in the search for self-definition and autonomy. This focus on relationships gives us insight into the options open to individuals at specific moments in history and recognizes--as traditional biographies and histories do not--the collective character of women's struggle. "Be they familial, friendly or political, with males, females, parents or children . . . relationships . . . define a person . . . while attitudes to various relationships will certainly distinguish that person. Changes in relationships . . . also alter circumstance, limiting or enhancing what an individual can do."¹⁴

In this perspective even historical figures like Colette, who are commonly considered exceptional, can

be seen as coming out of a tradition. During their lifetimes, they existed in a web of relationships; they were guided by mentors and nurtured by specific communities. For this reason, feminist biographers need to examine the doctrine of exceptionalism critically. Exceptional women in traditional history are symbols of permanence. Conventional biographies of those deemed to be exceptional often obscure evidence of psychic struggle or change. As the story is usually written, exceptional women do not undergo apprenticeships or apply domestic skills to artistic endeavors. Unlike ordinary women, they seem to have been born with a special gift, which through some lucky accident was uncovered or discovered, generally by a man. (In Colette's case, this gift was labelled her "genius" as a "natural writer," and the person who uncovered it was said to be her first husband, Willy.) Exceptional women in biographies are rarely shown expressing the need to struggle to escape the social and psychic constrictions of womanhood; they are frequently depicted as denying or not recognizing such limitations because they did not see themselves as women. So the reasoning goes.

In reading biographies of Colette, I have been struck by two things: 1) the number of 'scandals' in her life and biographers' readiness to use the word, and 2) the conflicting accounts of how she came to be a writer. Both of these are related to her

image in history as an exceptional woman. And like many of the books on Colette, this essay focuses on her days as a novice writer, not because I believe that "the beginning determined the middle or end of her career, but because I think that a look at competing versions of this oft-told story will help to illuminate some of the issues involved in analyzing women artists' relation to the dominant culture.

Biographers' enduring fascination with her early years as a writer is due in part to the way her first husband made books which commodified sex in a manner quite familiar to us today. Their

interest in her publishing history is often coupled with an equally vivid, if unstated, curiosity about the emergence of her specifically lesbian sexuality, for during their marriage Willy also dreamed up a number of publicity stunts which fixed an image in the public mind of his wife as a lesbian and a confessional writer. In a number of scholarly and popular biographies the two histories are in fact conflated, giving new life to what was originally a hoax. Skillfully playing on the overtones of the Genesis story in his tale of the making of a writer, Willy awarded himself the role of mentor-manager in his wife's career, and thus, symbolically kept her

potentially disruptive sexuality within certain bounds. His public relations campaign is a telling example of how an able huckster can capture the attention of the reading public and speak to the anxieties of an era.

As Elaine Marks has observed, the turn of the century fascination with lesbianism in French arts and letters was spurred on by an emerging women's movement and the presence of an active lesbian arts circle in Paris, among other things.¹⁵ Popular writers seized on the theme of love between women; the best-selling Claudine à l'école (1900) (Colette and Willy's contribution to the sub-genre) was among a dozen or so published before the war. Rather than seeing the couple's literary lesbianism as a reflection of social and political currents and of trends in the marketplace, however, most biographers have tended to interpret it along purely personal lines. This in fact echoes Willy's version of the origin story, since he claimed to have discovered Colette's writing talent when he unearthed an account of her schooldays, too racy to publish unedited. Privately and publicly in many modes and places, the story he sketched out in letters to influential critics, featured in his gossip column, planted in items in various newspapers under his own and others' pen names, and finally confessed in a memoir commissioned near the end of his life, emphasized that the work he published (and of which he pocketed the profits) was indeed Colette's true confessions.

By 1906, the writer had left her marriage, was touring the music hall circuit and living openly with Mathilde de Morny. Her account in Mes apprentissages (1936), though equally well-known today, has had less of a

hold on the critical imagination over the years; perhaps because the tale of internalized oppression and domestic struggle is less heroic than her husband's, its figures expressed in the humble idiom of the fairy tale rather than in the familiar mythic structures of the mighty *Book*. "A prison is indeed one of the best workshops.

I know what I am talking about: a real prison, the sound of the key turning in the lock, and four hours' clausturation before I was free again.

'Show me your credentials!'

What I had to show were so many well-filled pages.' This account contains no echoes of *Genesis*, no momentous discoveries of raw talent, no instantaneous commercial triumphs.

Instead, it chronicles the slow coming to consciousness of an isolated woman. "I am aware that these details of a routine jailing do me little honor, and I do not enjoy looking like a shorn sheep. But their somewhat Gothic flavor and the respect due to freakish truths give them their place here. The window after all was not barred, and I had only to break my halter. And so--peace be upon the hand, now dead, that did not hesitate to turn the key! It taught me my most essential art, which is not that of writing but the domestic art of knowing how to wait, to conceal, to save up crumbs, to reglue, regild, change the worst into the not-so-bad . . . What I chiefly learned was how to enjoy . . . almost every secret flight, and also to compromise and bargain and finally, when the 'Quick! My God! Quick' fell upon me,

to hint, 'Perhaps I could work faster in the country.'"⁶

Following Willy's lead, as most literary historians have done, Paul d'Hollander investigated Colette and Willy's literary partnership in Colette, *ses apprentissages* (1978) to find that her first novels were in fact confessional. His insistence that they recorded and revealed her sexual life was, however, contradicted by the evidence he so painstakingly accumulated. The textual analyses, the reconstructions of hand-written drafts and typescripts, and the comparisons with other books in the workshop's once thriving line point the reader in another direction, toward a recognition of those scandalous first novels as the product of two different hands.

While d'Hollander, in spite of himself, portrayed the novice writer as an apt pupil in her husband's workshop, Margaret Crosland, the author of two popular English-language biographies, *Madame Colette, a Provincial in Paris* (1953) and *Colette, the Difficulty of Loving* (1973), chose to depict her as an innocent abroad. In keeping with the times in which she wrote, Crosland approached Colette's sexual history gingerly, explaining that in both art and life the young woman just didn't know what she was doing.

The fact that Colette wrote these books under orders from Willy seems to have made very little impression in France . . . There are a great number of

people who consider that she must have been far more closely and personally involved with lesbianism than anyone is likely to know . . . All the grivoiserie of Claudine was included at Willy's special request and under his guidance. For reference material he had a fine stock of obscene books . .

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Similarly, her -explanation of how Colette and her lover, Mathilde de Morny, came to star in a lesbian playlet at the Moulin Rouge a few years later, rests on the assertion that Colette was a country girl who had no idea what she was getting into. "Although she has never set out to gain publicity, the fact that Colette has always done what she liked . . . has often brought her into unexpected situations. This again marks her as a provincial . . . It never occurred to Colette that she might shock people." Her description of the opening night brawl, known in literary history today as the Moulin Rouge scandal, is charming and bears repeating:

When she and Madame de Jomy, the former Jarquise de Belboeuf, played in the mime drama . . . they had to perform a prolonged kiss, which the first night audience found shocking . . . a disturbance began, the audience began "to throw things at the performers, and all ladies with

*umbrellas began to attack those who had not got umbrellas.*¹⁸

This incendiary kiss was one of many incidents involving Morny and Colette which made their way into the press in the years 1905-1911. If they are read in the context of other related events--the private interviews the couple gave and the photos they posed for in top hat and tails (Morny) and evening gown (Colette), Colette's heated letters to the editor about their right to do as they damn well pleased, the marquise's lawsuit against a columnist who mocked her transvestism and her character--these 'scandals' can be understood partly as publicity stunts and partly as genuine, public declarations of their love--a love of self, of the other and of their sex.

For Joanna Richardson, the author of Colette (1983), the unconventional behavior which Crosland interpreted as child-like and innocent became a symptom of a deficient superego, a lack of civilization and self-control. Her book emphasized Colette's exhibitionism and lack of education and though extremely detailed in its treatment of Colette's relations with contemporary writers and theater people, it rarely took into account the author's status as an outsider in literary Paris, and her growing skill in exploiting her maverick role. Richardson's discomfort with the self-made writer was betrayed in statements like "Colette might be charming, but she was not always

qualified to lecture [on literature]" or "[her] letters were touching and they were well-written, but they were not wholly sincere; their moral tone was suspect, coming as it did from the woman who had been [her step-son's] mistress."¹⁹ Like Crosland, Richardson subscribed to the doctrine of exceptionalism in her own way--in the expectation of specifically classed and gendered behaviors from a woman who seemed at times to ignore such distinctions.

If Colette was innocent of the ways and means of the literary marketplace, as Crosland suggested, or if she was congenitally uneducated and crude, as Richardson saw her, how then did she come to write a best-seller on her first try? Further, how did she manage to survive as a professional writer for fifty years? The question of who can write and under what conditions is not a simple one. In Colette's case, having neither money, rank, nor connections in the early years, she used other avenues to bring her work to the public and herself to the attention of the men who would publish her. One of these alternate routes was scandal.

Like her scandalous public persona, she inherited one of her preferred fictional modes from Willy: first person narrative. At least, she practiced it for a decade under his tutelage and, as an independent writer, continued to write almost exclusively in it for years. She eventually extended her repertoire to include other types of

prose and other forms of narrative, yet the language she used--reported speech and the pronoun 'she' instead of 'I,' for example--often made it unclear whether she was speaking directly of her own experience or of her observation of others. This sort of discursive ambiguity was one way she represented her self and her sex to her readers, and was a technique employed in the more overtly autobiographical ... essays and memoirs of her maturity, such as the celebrated tour of the sexual underground, Le pur et l'impur (1932), and the memoir Mes apprentissages.

After she became an established writer, Colette lived as a celebrity in the glare of press attention for many years. She was also an author who seemed to write often and insistently about herself. Yet despite her apparent openness in word and deed, many of her biographers found her to be a difficult subject. Those who met her in person, like Margaret Crosland, complained that the woman seemed to be constantly playing a role. The search for the 'real' Colette preoccupied a number of her biographers. Did she ever drop the mask? Did she ever stop being 'Colette'? In one sense, this search for the 'real' Colette reflected the unsettling nature of her public persona, which claimed the authority of marginality because it spoke as a lesbian/sexual woman. But her oeuvre was provocative as well. Because of its woman-centered content and its

representation of erotic love, it raised the issue of cultural authority, of the possibility of women defining culture and making art in their own image, while drawing on specifically female sources of creativity.

Among the many old and new biographies of Colette, three take an essential step--they examine the oeuvre and the public persona critically by seeking to elucidate the links between the two. By tracing the development of her writing and the successive recreations of her public image in the context of the historical Colette's life, these studies fulfill DuPlessis' criteria for feminist literary biography as the others briefly surveyed here do not. The three, which have slightly different focuses and strengths, are Michele Sarde's *Colette, libre et entravée* (1978), Margaret Davies' *Colette* (1961) and Elaine Marks' *Colette* (1960). Sarde's, a full-scale biography, is by far the most detailed, while Davies' and Marks' studies are shorter, with more of an emphasis on literary analysis of individual works in the oeuvre.

Still, a definitive feminist biography of Colette has yet to be written, one which would elucidate, among other things, her relation to the two communities which nurtured her during the years she emerged as a writer: the world of the performing arts and the Paris lesbian community. But up to now the traditions, rituals and everyday life of many in lesbian circles and among theater folk, especially music hall artists, have been hidden

from view. As more archives are opened, documents unearthed, photographs restored and research published on these marginal artists' and women's cultures, our understanding of Colette and other men and women of her time will be expanded and the history of Colette's life rewritten. No longer viewed in isolation as an exceptional woman, restored to her context among her peers, we may be able to read the 'real' story of her life for the first time. We will undoubtedly discover that like all of us, she had an ordinary life, an extraordinary life, a woman's life.

ENDNOTES

1. Tillie Olsen, *Silences*. (New York: Laurel, 1978).
2. Nichole Ward Jouve, *Colette*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) p.13.
3. Colette, *Oeuvres complètes* vol. 1 (Paris: Gallimard, 1984) p. 1030, my translation.
4. Robert Phelps, ed. *Earthly Paradise* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1984) p. 267.
5. See Barbara Christian's eloquent arguments in "The Race for Theory," *Feminist Studies* (14,1) Spring 1988, p. 67-80.
6. This point has been made regarding

another twentieth century woman writer, Zora Neale Hurston. See Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (New York: HBJ, 1983) p. 83-93 and Robert Hemenway, Zora Neale Hurston, a literary biography (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980) p. 273-319.

7. Rachel Blau DuPlessis, H.D. The Career of the Struggle, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. xiv-xv. My analysis of new feminist biography is greatly indebted to hers. See also DuPlessis, 'For the Etruscans,' in Elaine Showalter, ed. The Feminist Criticism (New York: Pantheon, 1985). 14. Trofimenkoff, p. 6.

8. Gerda Lerner, The Majority Finds Its Past, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979) p. 160.

9. Gloria Hull's call for a redefinition of the Harlem Renaissance is an example of this understanding of literary history informed by women's history. See Hull, *Color. Sex and Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) p. 30-31.

10. Lerner, p. 160-161.

11. -Leon Edel, "Transference: The Biographer's Dilemma," Biography (7, 4) Fall 1984, p. 283-284.

12. Susan Mann Trofimenkoff, "Feminist Biography," *Atlantis* (10, 2) Spring 1985, p. 4.

13. Trofimenkoff, p. 5.
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14. Trofimenkoff, p. 6.

15. Elaine Marks, 'Lesbian Intertextuality,' in George Stambolian and Elaine Marks, ed. *Homosexualities and French Literature* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979). See also Lillian Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men (New York: Morrow, 1981) p. 267 ff.

16. Phelps, p.122-123.

17. Crosland, Madame Colette, a Provincial in Paris (London: Owen, 1953) p. 42.

18. Crosland, Madame Colette, p. 61.

19. Joanna Richardson, Colette (New York: Laurel, 1983) p. 56, 110.

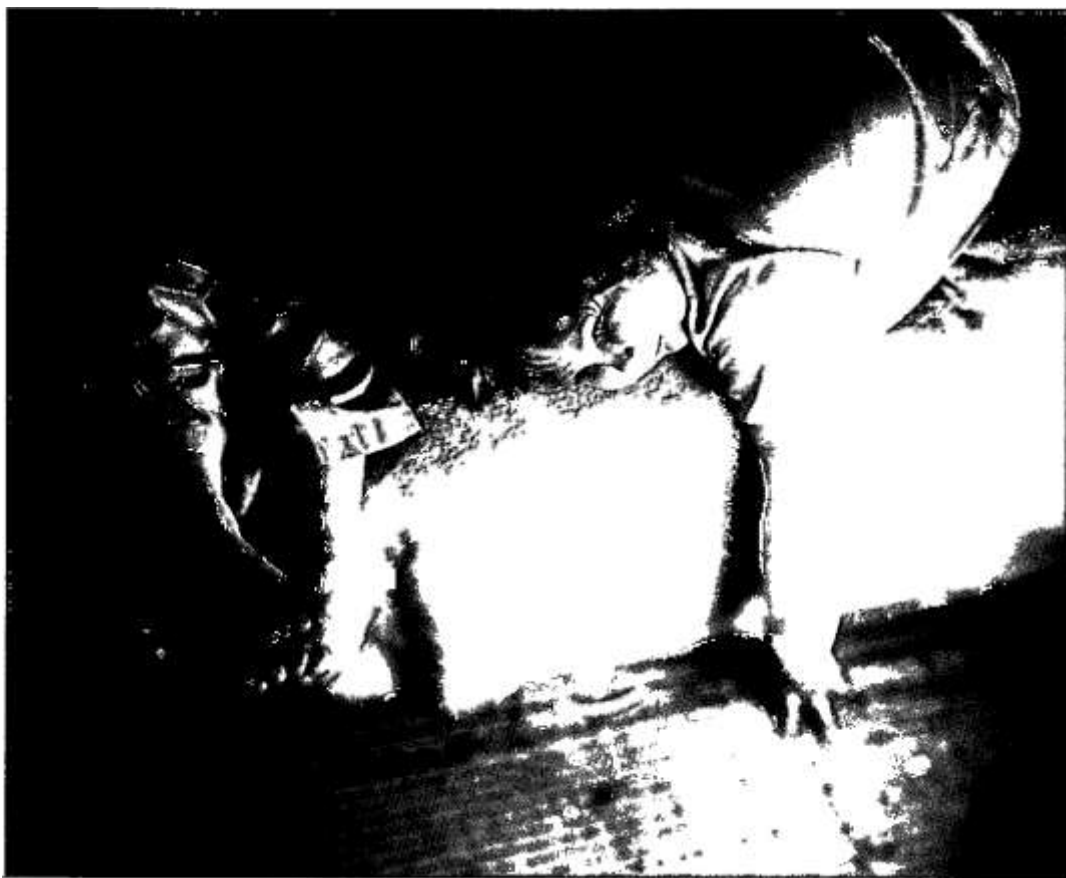


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