

# Journey of an Exiled Daughter

## An Interview With Poet Colette Inez

By Mary Dalton

Colette Inez came to national attention 30 years ago with her prize-winning poetry collection, *The Woman Who Loved Worms*. Early on she avoided the confessional excesses of many of her contemporaries and focused instead on developing her craft through a wide range of poetic styles and themes. That choice has kept her presence vital on the poetry scene long after other voices have faded away.

The recipient of numerous awards and fellowships, Inez has published eight additional volumes, most recently *Spinoza Doesn't Come Here Anymore*. Dorothy Baumwoll described her work in *West Branch* (Issue 18, 1984) as “a complex blend: filled with sentiment but never sentimental, it intones a sentient sensualist, a romantic realist. Like Sexton and Dickinson, she is both awestricken and impious, unique and common, and above all a rebel.”

Yet even a skimming of Inez' poetry reveals a deeply personal narrative thread, one she returns to again and again. The daughter of a French scholar and an American Catholic priest, Inez spent the early part of her life in a Belgian orphanage. Subsequently given to a troubled Long Island foster family, she spent years searching out the truth of her origins. While her poems offer brief glimpses into the emotional turmoil of that period, she tells her story in depth in a new memoir, *The Secret of M. Dulong*, due this coming September from the University of Wisconsin Press.

For Inez, writing is an act of self-possession in the literal sense, finding personal identity and understanding through language. A longtime resident of New York City and married to the writer Saul Stadtmauer, she continues to explore the past and present in a voice that is uniquely, fittingly, her own. This interview took place in spring 2005.

**The Bloomsbury Review:** *You came on the poetry scene fairly late in life—at least in terms of publishing. What was the impulse that led you to work seriously as a poet?*

**Colette Inez:** Well, I was 40 when my first book of poems was accepted, but I had often appeared in little mags during my 30s, and my first collection, *The Woman Who Loved Worms*, singly submitted, took five years to be pub-

lished. It was not so much impulse as personal events in the early 1960s that let me take on the mantle of poet. I'd won a poetry contest at Hunter College that fueled my confidence, and married my present mate, Saul, who proved a steadfast cheerleader. I was an acolyte of poetry, but worked at it during weekends in fits and starts.

**TBR:** *As someone who's spent most of her adult life in New York, were there any circles you gravitated toward?*

**CI:** In 1965 I studied with Denise Levertov at the 92nd Street Y, my first and only poetry class. I admired Denise, a consummate poet, but felt lost in the class' competitiveness, and stopped writing for a while, but not for long. I also attended meetings of the Poetry Society of America, became a member, and enjoyed submitting poems to their monthly contests.

**TBR:** *Interesting that you took only one workshop. How, then, did you go about learning your craft?*

**CI:** I read books of poets and poetry magazines, the “littles” and the respectable quarterlies, attended poetry readings at the 92nd Street Y and at cafés and hang-outs in the Village. I subscribed to poetry magazines, swapped poems with a few

trusted poet friends, kept a journal, entered contests (they didn't dominate the scene as they do now). I put myself through a sort of poetry apprenticeship. And I wrote and rewrote.

**TBR:** *Did you ever have a particular awareness of yourself as a woman writer?*

**CI:** No. I thought of myself as a writer. I read and admired the poetry of May Swenson, Muriel Rukeyser, and Adrienne Rich, and was grateful for the gutsiness of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. I felt liberated by their daring to take on menstruation, bedlam, and childbirth as subjects for poetry. The women's movement inspired me, and I liked appearing in women's anthologies. Being published made me feel visible and important.

**TBR:** *How old were you when you finally met your mother? You've written that she made you promise not to reveal your relationship with her to anyone. Was your poetry directly influenced by this strange pact?*

**CI:** I met my mother in Oxford, England, in the winter of 1953, at the end of a backpacking trip through Europe. I was 21 and full of fantasies of a mother who had been looking for me, hungry for a daughter in her life. Understandably, I was inhibited by her

### A Colette Inez Book List

*The Secret of M. Dulong: A Memoir*  
(University of Wisconsin, October, 2005)

*Spinoza Doesn't Come Here Anymore*  
(Melville House Publishing, 2004)

#### *Clemency*

(Carnegie Mellon University Press, 1998)

#### *The Woman Who Loved Worms*

(Carnegie Mellon University Press, 1997)

#### *Family Life* (Story Line Press, 1988)

*Getting Under Way: New and Selected Poems*  
(Story Line Press, 1993)

*Eight Minutes From the Sun* (Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture)  
(Saturday Press, 1983)

*Daze of the Week* (Poetry in Public Places)  
(Poetry in Public Places, 1979)

*Alive and Taking Names* (Ohio University, 1977)  
*Naming the Moons*

With John Wheatcroft & Florence Putterman  
(Press of Appletree Alley, 1994)

In 1965 I studied with Denise Levertov at the 92nd Street Y, my first and only poetry class. I admired Denise, a consummate poet, but felt lost in the class' competitiveness, and stopped writing for a while, but not for long.

words and feared alienating her; she could have stopped writing to me at any time. But the obsession to know the story would not let me go. Even when later writing hard-won autobiographical poems, I still had qualms about betraying my mother, that I might be found out in some way. And I felt constricted by shame: Somehow I wasn't deserving her acceptance. That against her wishes I was airing her private sorrows.

I also remained uneasy with the anger I kept in check, an anger that seethed in the mother poems of my first books. But as a writer, I could imagine her dismay and isolation in an out-of-wedlock birth. The 1930s were an unforgiving time, and her disgrace was made all the more scandalous by the profession of her lover, my father, a Catholic priest.

**TBR:** *Did she ever read any of the poetry you wrote about her?*

**CI:** No. My mother would have been appalled that I had exploited her in this way. I did send her *Eight Minutes From the Sun*, a book of nature poems, but she commented that she didn't much like modern poetry.

**TBR:** *In one of your poems, "My Father in a Garden," you talk about looking at a photograph of him and yearning for connection. Did you ever have a desire to establish contact with him?*

**CI:** I tried several times to contact my father's family in California, but was ignored each time. I imagined their lawyer counseling them not to answer. I've been to my father's grave twice and kissed his stone.

**TBR:** *You published three volumes of poetry before achieving a kind of breakthrough—in terms of your poetic voice—in Family Life. Can you discuss the origins of this book and what you feel changed in your writing?*

**CI:** I gathered poems for *Family Life* with a heightened self-confidence. My Guggenheim Fellowship in 1985 had supported a trip to France to see my mother after an absence of 32 years. Her elder sister, with whom she did not get along, had died unaware of my birth. My husband and I drove through a countryside of rivers and plateaus to Gascony and paid our respects to an aging lady who asked me not to contact her dwindling family in Paris. What I would do after her death was freely up to me. She was cool and self-possessed when she spoke, conveying the thought ... could I not wait?

I got the idea for arranging this book from three photographs that paralleled chapters in my life: a sepia-colored snapshot of the Institute of Puericulture, the Catholic Children's Home in Brussels, Belgium, where I was taken at the age of 10 days, followed by the melancholy-looking Long Island house of my adoptive American family. For the last section of *Family Life*, my husband went up to the roof of our building and caught a transcendent view of the sky over Central Park. The book's cover was assembled from pictures of my mother, father, and myself as a child, and so we were uniquely united.

**TBR:** *You've remarked that your later book, Clemency, touched on issues not explored in Family Life. What was different?*

**CI:** I divulged my identity to my [mother's] cousin, and in 1994—two years after my mother had died—he invited me to

visit him in Paris. In his apartment, a museum of family curios and photographs, I was told anecdotes of my mother as a girl, shown pictures, books, and letters of my family's maternal side, and their history to which I was an outsider. And yet again as a writer I was able to claim them and share their story. *Clemency* allowed me to meditate from various angles of vision on the transformation of a bewildered child to a spirited woman who at last gets her say.

**TBR:** *You've been fairly adamant in not wanting to call any of your work "confessional" writing. What do you feel is the difference in what you've tried to do?*

**CI:** I guess I didn't want to label myself a this or that poet and preferred not to think of my work as confessional. That word calls up confession to the priest, old vulnerabilities and mea culpas. But the idea of giving clemency gives me command. Like a pope, I give pardon to my tormenters.

**TBR:** *Is that one way you view the act of writing—offering clemency? I ask because I've always been struck by how direct and unsentimental your writing is on the one hand, and on the other, much less bitter than one might expect. Or am I misreading your work? Did you struggle to find a particular tone in your poetry?*

**CI:** Despite the title, I'm not concerned in giving clemency when I write my poems. The obsession to write them, to put imprint on the page, is what drives me, the desire not to disappear in the blur of anonymity. As for the tone, I aim to excise any hint at the woe-is-me stuff. Self-pity is really bad art. I find that aiming for a spare voice and weeding out adjectives help. I also like to play with a variety of tones: sensuous, somber, ironical, feisty, or frisky.

**TBR:** *What, then, led you to write a memoir?*

**CI:** I was no stranger to prose. I'd written some autobiographical essays all along, and in the late 1980s I was invited by The Gale Research Contemporary Authors Series to tell my story, accompanied by pictures. But the story wanted, *needed* to be expanded, given depth and detail. And I struggled with the memoir for years; despised returning to the old humiliations, that sense of helplessness I learned in childhood; then wrote and rewrote until it was done.

**TBR:** *What was your experience in trying to get it published?*

**CI:** I finished writing the memoir at Yaddo in 1996. After floating around for a year or so, the manuscript finally found a well-known New York agent who believed in the book. I thought my dream was coming true, but although highly praised by some publishers, the memoir was rejected.

Years passed, and I finally tried to sell it on my own, had one near acceptance, but the press had financial problems. In 2003 the University of Wisconsin Press accepted it, but delayed publication because of state budget cuts. Understandably, it will be a triumph to hold that book in my hands this fall.

**TBR:** *How do you describe this book? Did you write it more to explore your development as a poet or as a person? Or can you even say?*

**CI:** *The Secret of M. Dulong* ( I later changed the title from *Notes From an Exiled Daughter*) begins with my departure from

the children's home in Belgium before the outbreak of World War II, and ends in 1995 with my good-bye in Paris to cousin Maurice, the only family member to fully acknowledge me.

I expect I wrote the book to make sense of my life. My development as a poet really takes a subordinate role in the narrative.

**TBR:** *Aside from your family, what other themes have been central to your work?*

**CI:** I love to write about the world of nature, stars, birds. Lately, I've turned my curiosity toward artists and poets: Léger, e.e. cummings, D.H. Lawrence. Poetry forms like the pantoum, the ghazal, the tanka intrigue me more than they used to. These interests show up in my latest collection, *Spinoza Doesn't Come Here Anymore*.

**TBR:** *There's a huge range in Spinoza, in both themes and poetic styles. I noticed in particular the use of form. How do you feel about the use of form in poetry today? Some people believe it's becoming an important trend.*

**CI:** When I first started out as a poet, I wrote short poems, often quatrains in meter and rhyme, more off- and near-rhymes than pure, but after a while I began to feel rebellious toward what I called "hobbled artifice," and free verse allowed a wider stride in my writing.

In a review of *Clemency* poet Sydney Lea wrote: "The poems ... flirt with and resist regular formalism, such that they indicate the writer's concurrent longing for order and her ... skepticism at its likelihood." He caught a truth about me. Yet I've recently come to feel more open to closed forms, enjoy the intellectual play of working against limits.

I notice the pendulum is swinging toward a return to formalism among so many poetry voices that clamor for attention. I doubt that we'll see the stir of meter and rhyme, although the popular verse of slams and hip-hop certainly seems at ease with it.

**TBR:** *Do you see it as allowing you to say things in a particular way?*

**CI:** Yes. One is forced into discoveries and possibilities, but I still prefer working in a wide range of styles. I carry in me a theater of voices, perhaps from my past lives with Catholic nuns; of living with a discordant alcoholic family in Long Island; of spending time in Cleveland, Ohio, with a piano tuner and his eccentric family; of living in Paris and in Greenwich Village, and here with my husband in our rent-stabilized Upper West Side apartment. It's a jumble of rich- and plain-speaking worlds.

**TBR:** *At least one critic has remarked that you are very much a poet of New York. How do you feel about that distinction?*

**CI:** It's fine with me. I've lived most of my life in New York City, and I hate it and love it. At the same time I have begun to acknowledge its unique syncopations in my latest work.

**TBR:** *Considering how much homogenization is taking place in American culture, do you think we can still have regional voices? Do you feel this is particularly important?*

**CI:** I don't really know. We've become a nation of Wal-Mart's

and Home Depots, yet happily, people shopping there may be writing poetry in Spanglish, and cowboys writing verse out of Wyoming and Montana, and English-speaking Southeast Asians concocting pantoums. Maybe we might hear the smooth cadences of African American street lingo. A heady stockpot of speech.

**TBR:** *Another thing that struck me about Spinoza Doesn't Come Here Anymore is that it's clearly the work of a mature writer—not just someone who's honed her craft but who finds herself moving back and forth in terms of subject matter. You still write about the past, but not just about your parents: There are poems to girls you knew from childhood, literary influences, figures from history. And even your poems about the present are more reflective, as if even these small moments are part of a much larger whole. How do you feel about your writing at this stage in your life as opposed to when you were a young writer?*

**CI:** I feel more intensely attentive to the past and moved by its treasure trove of details. And I'm more patient toward my poems, about looking for the right word, finding ways to conclude a work, avoiding glib surfaces. I'm willing to wait the poem out, although I've always been a stubborn, compulsive reviser. When I write I'm not conscious of the larger picture, "moments as part of a much larger whole," as you say.

Getting older has been my enterprise since birth, but it is a daunting prospect. At the same time, for me a braver sensibility has kicked in, a new courage to explore new material: historical figures, artists, other writers I admire. I feel my books have over these last years become more sure of themselves, deeper and more evocative.

And look at the company I keep. Among the seasoned women poets, some older than I am, some younger, are Marie Ponsot, Jean Valentine, Maxine Kumin, Adrienne Rich, Ruth Stone, Jane Cooper, Julia Randall, Carolyn Kizer. The list goes on.

**TBR:** *You teach at Columbia University, but you've also worked for a long time with private students. The latter I find particularly interesting. How is the teaching different when you're working alone with a person?*

**CI:** The laser beam of attention is on that one person, and it's easier than negotiating a large class of varying demands and needs. In private sessions, one student might want to organize a book of poems or talk about and edit individual work. Another may want to spend time discussing particular interests.

One of my regular poets is very knowledgeable about neolithic goddesses and travels to various countries in the world to honor them. Another, a doctor, writes with wit and a scientific leaning. Some come with a batch of poems collected over time and want publication tips. I usually have six or seven people visiting my apartment, some weekly, others once a month: a few crop up a couple of times a year.

**TBR:** *Dana Gioia raised a furor some years ago in his essay "Can Poetry Matter?" when he suggested that writing programs may be stifling the healthy development of young poets and producing a very stagnant era in poetry. Do you feel that criticism is valid in any way?*

**CI:** No. I admire Dana Gioia as a poet but couldn't disagree more. American poetry has never been more robust. Poetry readings, classes, and magazines of all stripes flourish. Good workshops provide community, poetry savvy for the beginner, valuable shortcuts to perfecting the art. I think I could have saved years had I found a sympathetic workshop when I was a young poet.

**TBR:** *What effect do you feel poetry like yours might have on a more universal level? You've spoken about what function it's had for you, but do you ever mull over this other question?*

**CI:** That's hard to answer, but yes, I do sometimes mull over what use my poetry has beyond my need to write it and to interpret my experience on the third rock from the sun. But I do like to imagine my poems after I've written them—here I paraphrase T.S. Eliot—as entering and adding to some wider territory of consciousness.

**TBR:** *You've said that you consider yourself a spiritual person, but not religious. Can you say what matters most to you?*

**CI:** Spiritual? Yes, but in a special sense, if we can somehow count our eternal presence as part of the substance of the universe. I also recognize Ernest Becker's *Denial of Death* and the great indifference toward our species by the cosmos. Yet there is that interconnectedness between ourselves and all that lives and endures. That moves me. As Samuel Beckett said: "stagger on, rejoicing." I can live with that. ■

---

INTERVIEWER: **Mary Dalton** is a Chicago-based writer and critic.