

**PURITY AND DANGER IN FIN-DE-SIÈCLE CULTURE:  
A PSYCHOHISTORICAL INTERPRETATION OF  
WAGNER, STOKER AND ZOLA**

Arnold Labrie

*Introduction*

What is purity? Why do people long for purity? The distinction between the pure and the impure is crucial in virtually all cultures. It is even questionable whether culture is possible without such a distinction. In *L'homme et le sacré*, Roger Caillois (1950: 37) writes: "Even from a broad perspective, there is hardly a religious order in the world in which the pure and the impure are not fundamental".

As a primal religious manifestation, the desire for purity was especially common in pre-industrial societies, where religion still figured prominently. Modern culture, however, is defined in opposition to such civilizations, which tend to be labelled as primitive. The interest of cultural anthropologists in purity is therefore far from coincidental. While a few studies about the desire for purity in modern culture have appeared in recent years, most associate this phenomenon only with nationalism and racism. In my view the distinction between the pure and the impure is particularly constitutive in bourgeois culture as well and surfaces in all walks of life there. The bourgeois desire for purity is manifested not only in nationalism and racism but also in our virtual obsession with hygiene and the pursuit of a pure art or a pure science. These manifestations obviously reflect considerable differences, which – especially given their ethical implications – are far from coincidental. On the other hand, they are parallel movements that invoke purity as an ideal in all cases.

Below I aim to show that the desire for purity is indeed an important feature in bourgeois culture. I will explore the specific role of this desire in modern society. This question requires considering the psycho-historical aspect, which has thus far been absent from studies about purity. Given the space available, I will highlight this psychohistorical dimension

by covering only three case studies, namely Richard Wagner, Bram Stoker, and Émile Zola. In addition to shedding light on the largely subconscious motives that underlie the desire for purity, their work reveals that this desire is still highly religious. In this respect, the gap between so-called primitive societies and modern bourgeois culture is probably narrower than members of the second group might care to admit.

*Richard Wagner*

Let us start with Wagner. Wagner was obviously one of the greatest composers of his day. Equally importantly, his artistic status enabled him to become a cult figure, whose views about the world deeply influenced German *Bildungsbürgertum*. This Wagnerian culture philosophy revolves around the notion of the *Reinmenschliche*. The *Reinmenschliche* is the ideal of the pure, aesthetic individual who is free of all political and social coercion. Achievement of this ideal affects all aspects of life. Wagner's hope is focused on an all-encompassing Rebirth that pertains to an Aryan, German-national plan of salvation and depends on a puritan lifestyle in which racial hygiene, chastity, vegetarianism, and anti-vivisectionism figure prominently.

The idea of the *Reinmenschliche* is based mainly on the contrast with the modern world. As Wagner wrote in 1851: "My entire policy is simply the bloodiest hatred against our whole society" (Wagner to E.B. Kietz, 30-12-1851 quoted in Schüler, 1971: 112). Modern society is unaesthetic and has rendered "these current European people unsuitable for art" (Wagner, 1956: 128). This erosion of the arts is part of a comprehensive degeneration process. Wagner directs his criticism mainly against capitalism, mechanization, and the power of money. The world of money is that of Schopenhauer's Will, where everyone is a wolf to the other. In this world the artist becomes a solitary genius who has lost his natural ties with the people, his true audience. Amid the modern chaos the image of the *Reinmenschliche* remains preserved solely in the art. The artist is almost a saint, whose tragic mission, based on "the conviction of his purest chastity", is to restore the lost ideal (*Ibid.*: 44).

From the depths of the modern society, Wagner appeals for a universal revolution, which he later describes as Rebirth or Regeneration. Art and the social revolution serve the same purpose:

This objective is a strong and clean mankind: the revolution brings strength; art brings beauty (*Ibid.*: 114).

The artist is a Redeemer. Composers, in particular, introduce their listeners to the *Reinmenschliche* thanks to "the purifying fire of musical idealism". The true artist is characterized by "virility" and high moral standards. He is an ascetic, whose art demands "repudiation of the world" and "abstinence and voluntary suffering" (*Ibid.*: 232, 265 ff., 281, 408). This ascetic aspect is emphasized repeatedly. The true artist sacrifices himself by descending to the tragic depth of existence. He suffers for the sake of mankind, who gleans his tragic insight in a bearable form and is consequently purified. This highest form of suffering manifests his desire for purity, as the true artist is imbued with: "The desire for satisfaction in a higher, nobler element that [...] should appear to me as a chaste, virginal, and unattainable, intangible entity" (*Ibid.*: 58).

That ideal of spiritual purity, however, coincides with an appeal for national and racial hygiene. After all, Wagner (1850) attributes cultural decadence to physical and biological degeneration. This connection becomes apparent in his notorious essay *Das Judentum in der Musik*, where the Jew is revealed as the diabolical origin of all modern illnesses. The Jew is the alien, an intruder in a culture in which he plays no internal role. He is an actor, who conceals his true identity from those around him. Above all, he symbolizes modern chaos, which is associated with money that is always on the move. In *Heldentum und Christentum*, Wagner (1881) even advances a comprehensive historical philosophy, where the desire for purity, asceticism, and mixophobia are curiously intertwined. Modern society's degeneration is attributed to Aryan blood, which had been tainted not only by consumption of meat but especially through crossbreeding with inferior races. Wagner asserts that only a restored faith in Christ can save mankind. But Wagner's Christ is an Aryan Christ. As the purest human being, he was born in a time of extensive racial crossbreeding in a place that was the centre of all impurity. He shed his blood, so that his spiritual purity would purge mankind of all sins that resulted from racial crossbreeding. Renewed faith is the only remedy for biological decay. But Wagner's faith is a "German faith": a Christianity devoid of contamination by Judaism and shrouded in Germanic mythology. His ideal is the Aryan Redeemer: Parsifal, who brings about the *Erlösung des Erlösers* (redeemer's redemption) and thus frees Christ from his Jewish roots. This national religion was proclaimed to thousands of admiring *Bildungsbürger* in Bayreuth.

Wagner's work sheds light on the psychobiographical background of the desire for purity. His uncertainty about his origins seems especially

important.<sup>1</sup> Was he the son of Karl Wagner or of the actor Ludwig Geyer? Was Geyer of Jewish descent? Wagner appears to have believed that he was a bastard. His anti-Semitism seemed to derive from a problematic relationship with his father, with whom he had difficulty identifying. The Jew he contests is Geyer: an intruder and an actor. He is the father that Wagner initially seeks in Meyerbeer: the father who is associated with the God of the Old Testament, whom Wagner rejects to identify with the Son. Associating the Jew with the feminine at the same time is not a contradiction. The association merely highlights Wagner's insecurity about the identity of the Jew and especially of Geyer. After all, female sexuality is the chaos that threatens the clear, male order. Men with feminine attributes are denigrated and deserve no respect. Associating Jews with feminine attributes thus legitimizes Wagner's resistance and relieves him of the feelings of guilt aroused.

The repressed resurfaces through many secret pathways. Wagner expresses his sense of guilt indirectly through his tense relationship with the body and sexuality. His desire for purity is unmistakably regressive. The Love that leads to it is asexual and is symbolized by chaste women who willingly sacrifice themselves for the man: Senta in *Der fliegende Holländer* (*The Flying Dutchman*) or Elisabeth, who rescues Tannhäuser from the *Wollusthöhlen des Venusberges*. The heroes are chaste as well. Parsifal resists the temptations of Kundry, who not only symbolizes female sensuality but is also intimately associated with the Jew according to some. Parsifal baptizes her and thus relieves her of evil and sensibility, as well as of her Jewish identity. In all cases Wagner considers sexuality a threat to true identity, which, like Parsifal, is pure and is threatened by Kundry, as well as by Geyer.

Wagner's associations reflect a deeper pattern. Jews are identified with sensuality and sexuality. They represent chaos and are therefore impure. This chaos that Wagner perceives around him, however, originates within himself. His nature is determined by the anarchy of feelings, which indicates a discordant identity. The struggle against Jews and sensibility is also an internal struggle against the false Self, which needs to be exorcized for the true Self to prevail. The Jew he rejects is also the Jew with whom he identifies in a negative light and suspects of being the Alien in himself. The struggle against the enemy within requires constant purification through incessant asceticism. Wagner is thus a melancholic, who punishes himself for his desires and inadmissible feelings of aggression, which were originally directed against Geyer. The punishment lies in the sense of

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1. Regarding the following: Cf. L. Poliakov (1981: 237-257); R. Gutman (1971: passim.).

guilt, which internalizes the aggression. Here, however, the need arises for a surrogate victim for deflecting the aggression. The struggle for a stable identity is projected on the racially pure nation, which has been stripped of foreign elements. The pathological fear of contamination that underlies Wagner's "German faith" thus appears to originate in a distorted sense of identity caused by a traumatic youth.

*Bram Stoker's "Dracula"*

Wagner, Bram Stoker, and Zola share this desire for purity, which, born from the experience of a chaotic modernity, is the foundation for a new faith that guarantees a new order. This relationship is apparent in Stoker's (1895) *Dracula*, which sheds light on myriad aspects of the psychological disposition of the contemporary English middle class. The plot is well known. Count Dracula, the Transylvanian vampire king, reaches England and threatens to infect the entire population with his poisonous bite. The count embodies Alien blood. As a creature without a soul, his identity is defined in negative terms: an empty screen for the members of the bourgeoisie to project their secret fears and hidden desires. He is like the scapegoat of René Girard, who resembles us but will always be an alien. We identify with him and revel in his crimes without being tormented by our conscience. Finally, these acts have been committed by the Alien, who is burdened with our guilt and exiled at the eleventh hour, before we recognize ourselves in him. Dracula is persecuted and killed by the English bourgeoisie. The murder of the Alien within us is the true catharsis, which brings about a Rebirth. The blood of the old god will inseminate exhausted England. For at the end of the book, his main victim, Mina Harker, delivers a son. Although she personifies feminine purity, she bears a potential vampiress inside her like the others of her sex and is redeemed through motherhood. Young Quincey Harker is welcomed as the Messiah of a new order.

Dracula is a monster of mixtures and inversions. His arrival obscures all frontiers that define the bourgeois order. The living dead is neither man nor animal but a combination of the two. Upon their first encounter the young notary Jonathan Harker is struck by his hawkish appearance, his deep curls, connected eyebrows, cruel mouth, pointed ears, and sharp nails. The description resembles that of the Darwinian ape, which lurks within all of us according to the theory of evolution and is characterized in the Victorian image by its remarkable sexual appetite. The same definitely holds true for Dracula, who is driven purely by his desire for sensual

delight and proves "amazingly vital". This vitality brings to mind another awesome association. As Charles Blinderman notes, the Darwinian ape, because of his lassitude, is inclined to masturbate (Blinderman, 1980). Fear of masturbation peaked in Victorian England. Masturbation was regarded as evidence of a lack of self-control and as the origin of hysteria, perversion, and countless other ills. Dracula's pale complexion, hollow cheeks, and hairy palms recall the stereotype of the onanist, who by indulging in self-abuse deprives the nation of his seed.

Dracula is impure in other respects as well. He exudes a deadly stench, "as if even putrefaction were rotting away here". In the nineteenth century, stench was a sign of disease. The count does indeed carry a highly contagious virus. His bite infects his victims with "that diabolical disease" and infuses "that horrible poison" into their veins. The members of the bourgeoisie associate stench and disease with the slums in London's East End, where crime and prostitution are rampant, and paupers contemplate acts of violence and revolution: an invasion of the affluent West End. The vampire king's actions recall this fear of the residual element. His social conduct is an odd combination as well. Jonathan Harker notes with amazement that the count cooks and makes the bed for his guest. Little wonder, therefore, that he seeks refuge in the East End. He feels at home among proletarians and servants. As his secret allies, they help him escape England and through their negligent behaviour enable him to visit his victims, who are invariably ladies of bourgeois society. Like his allies he is a vagabond: an aristocrat who drags his land in boxes across the earth, like a king of the gypsies and bearing a curse as they do. Ultimately, he also symbolizes fear of immigrants, especially of Jews from Eastern Europe, whose arrival from 1880 onward inspired anti-Semitism in England as well. Dracula is arbitrarily described in terms that correspond with the negative stereotypes that stigmatized Jews from Eastern Europe at the time as well. Like them, he is a cosmopolite with a foreign accent that betrays his origins. He also carries diseases that emanate a stench resembling the notorious *foetor judaicus*. Like them, he is mobile, as is the money stashed in his hideouts; a creature of the night that moves under the pale moonlight.<sup>2</sup>

This brings us to the deepest essence of the novel. The moon is a female celestial body. As is the case with Jews, the vampire king's conduct is associated with the effeminate in a remarkable manner. Anti-Semitic images of Jews highlight their effeminate features: nervousness, tendency

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2. On images of anti-Semitism: S. Gilman (1991: 63 ff., 124 ff.); P. Shuttle & P. Redgrove (1978: 305-306).

toward hysteria, and unbounded sexual appetites. These same characteristics are attributed to Dracula. In fact, the vampire king's most successful disguise is that of a woman. Stoker's novel reflects a cultural ambience that Peter Gay (1985: 197) describes as being imbued with a "pervasive sense of manhood in danger". The established male order is threatened by the New Woman, who leaves her domestic environment to acquire a social position on her own and thus to overcome the traditional division of the sexes. In *Dracula* the confusion of sexual boundaries becomes manifest. Even worse than the count are the vampirellas, who bewitch Jonathan Harker. He is mesmerized by their sparkling teeth and fiery red mouths, which resemble a *vagina dentata*; an impression reinforced by their bittersweet breath, "like smelling blood". The sexually active women, though a source of temptation, also arouse a fear that is transformed into aggression. All women in the novel come with death wishes. This holds true for Lucy Westenra, a vampirella who is delivered in her tomb by "the stake of mercy" and is thus returned to the yoke of the male order as a dead woman. It also applies to the pure Mina, a Victorian Madonna who is left to her fate by men at the strangest moments and thus inevitably becomes one of the count's victims. The next scene is the raciest in the entire novel. Dracula opens a vein in his chest for Mina to drink, the way a mother nurses a baby. Coming to her senses, Mina sees the blood and exclaims in horror: "Impure! Impure!" Mina's impurity is her sexual desire awakened by her adultery with the count. Social confusion culminates in sexual anarchy: the New Woman, abandoning her role as a mother and a chaste wife, lasciviously devours men in the end.

This fear is epitomized by Dracula himself. Notwithstanding the feminine ring to his name, he is the most sexually threatening character and symbolizes the vanishing frontier between the sexes. His cruel mouth dominates the act. But this deepest truth is concealed. The fear of women is projected onto a man, whose forceful potency is constantly emphasized. Stoker's monster remains an actor to the end. As many critics have observed, *Dracula* is indeed about the emergence of repression. But the repressed can enter the conscious only in a distorted form: it returns as a vampire. According to Maurice Richardson, Stoker's novel is "a kind of incestuous, necrophilous, oral-anal-sadistic all-in-wrestling match" (Richardson, 1959: 427; Moretti, 1988: 102-104). Although the plot appears to confirm the bourgeois decency moral, it refutes it as well. Purity, order, and asceticism set the tone. At the same time, however, pure England is threatened by the vampire, whose misdeeds are a delight to readers. The vampire is the Alien within us and must be sacrificed as a

scapegoat for the original purity to be restored. According to Stoker, however, the Rebirth also requires renewed faith. We must believe in the vampire's reality. Only by recognizing the Evil within ourselves can we fight it effectively. As the vampire killer Van Helsing tells the rationalist physician Dr. Seward: "I want you to believe. Believe in things that are unbelievable".

*Émile Zola*

Wagner and Stoker both advocate an asceticism that demands purity, order, and self-control. Expression of primal urges, especially of sexuality, is charged with guilt. This is closely related to a virtually obsessive interest in death. Wagner's heroes find the perfect love in the *Liebestod*, which also marks the death of all sensual desire. Conversely, Stoker regards death as the price of indulging in sexual delight. A sense of order and hygiene, an ascetic tendency toward abstinence, and – in response – an obstinacy that easily turns into aggression are the characteristics that Freud attributes to the anal type (Freud, 1908*b*: 203-209). Both Wagner and Stoker conform to this profile. The artist returns to the world of the most basic instincts, muddles in the depths of his deepest fantasies, and distils his work from there. The filthiest and the most valuable are associated directly with each other, as the obscurest visions are purified into art.

This relationship is also discernible in Zola's work. Contemporary critics already noted Zola's interest in the dregs of existence. Jules Lemaître (1986 [1884-1885]: 51) felt inundated by "a miasma or the reek from a dung-heap" while reading the book. Havelock Ellis (1986 [1896]: 71) also expressed amazement at the many racy sexual details and at Zola's inclination "to dwell on excrement". Ellis has attributed this overly active imagination to a lifestyle characterized by "the strictest chastity and sobriety" (*Ibid.*: 67). He is referring to the psychiatric report of the eminent contemporary physician Toulouse about Zola in 1896. In this report Toulouse labels Zola as a neuropath: "as a compulsive neurotic tormented by depressions and mortal fears and ashamed of his own sexuality" (Fernandez-Zoila, 1983: 37-38). Toulouse goes on to note Zola's fascination with diamonds and steam engines as: "a diamond steam engine would be his prized possession" (Dezalay, 1973: 124). Rocks delved from the Earth and machines that secrete ashes and cinders like a mechanical intestinal tract. The image reflects the logic of an anal fantasy



in which the most impure is transformed into the most pure. Zola pursues this same alchemy in his writing. Writing is a form of literary hygiene focused on an overall catharsis. As he notes: "Honest research purifies everything, including fire" (Zola, 1867: 522). Zola is like the laundress Gervaise in *L'Assommoir* (*The Drunkard*), who scrubs the bourgeoisie's dirty laundry. As Philip Walker (1986 [1971]: 183) explains, Zola's oeuvre is a literary washing machine. Hanging out the Republic's dirty laundry in public will allow it to become clean in the fresh air. The Word purifies!

But Zola is also familiar with the attraction of dirt. Gervaise longs for a spot that is clean, and that she can call her own: *propre*. Nevertheless, she succumbs to dirt. Overwhelmed by it, she loses her self-control and gives in to her desires, meeting her end in a thoroughly soiled state. Still, dirt and dung are not considered in an exclusively negative light. Although they are consistently associated with chaos, chaos also symbolizes fertility. Life is born from dung. This idea is central in the *Rougon-Macquart* series and is conveyed in the opening scene of *La Fortune des Rougon* (*The Rougon Family Fortune*), which is the first volume. Zola describes the Saint-Mittre *aire*, where the graveyard of Plassans used to be. He renders a plastic account of how this tract became overgrown by lush plant life that shot up from "the greasy fertile Earth" fertilized by the dead. *Les Rougon-Macquart* is a cycle in the most literal sense: a cycle of Life, Death and Rebirth. The earth where the coffins are buried is also the womb of new Life.

This image recurs repeatedly, most explicitly in *Germinal*, Zola's novel about the horrors of working in the mines. His description of the Voreux mine is excessively prescribed. The Voreux is like a mother who devours her children instead of feeding them. The mine is a hell, ruled by death and decay. It is also an anal fantasy, as the Earth's excrements are transformed above ground into the valuable Capital of the owners. The Voreux is a labyrinth of passageways that is described explicitly as an "immense intestinal tract that was capable of devouring an entire people". The question in the novel is in fact how this bad mother can become a good one, how this place of death can be transformed into a womb of new Life. The hero, Etienne Lantier, has set himself this task. Although the strike he organizes is unsuccessful, he fertilizes the mine with his ideas nonetheless. The blood of the miners, who have succumbed to the strike, seeps into the Earth and forms the seed that sprouts new life under the ground. This scene concludes the novel: Etienne's vision of "a black army of avengers that germinated slowly in the furrows and grew for the harvest of the century ahead". The images of the mine as an intestinal tract and as

a womb converge in this optimistic fantasy of an anal birth that will deliver mankind.

But redemption requires asceticism. In Etienne's vision the unbridled horde of strikers has changed into an army that defends its claim to social justice in an orderly fashion via legal channels. Life emerges from chaos but needs to shape it to avoid lapsing back into the dung. This means first and foremost: work and order. Zola is a *Leistungsethiker* who, driven by his Puritan work ethic, churns out a set quota of words every day. He resembles the author Sandoz in *L'Oeuvre (The Masterpiece)*, who does not work for his enjoyment but because work is necessary to arrange life. Writing means discipline. Repressed life is sublimated in an oeuvre that reflects a remarkable interest in sexuality and violence. Zola appears to have understood this. As he notes, the true artist is chaste and proves his virility through his work: "His desire is to write, and he broadcasts these desires in great works".

Zola, too, is an apostle of purity. Like all those who yearn for purity, he also experiences the ambivalence of his desire. He wallows in the dung of Life, which he delivers in his work through the purifying Word. Writing is both a compulsive act that creates order and a purification ritual. Zola regards this ritual as a religious act that requires the power of faith. In Zola's writing the *Rougon-Macquart* series symbolizes the descent to Hell, from where the author emerges purified in the conclusion (*Le docteur Pascal*). Henceforth, Zola lives in the Utopia. The earthly history of the Rougon-Macquarts is followed by the ideal history of the Froment family, which culminates in a tetralogy appropriately entitled *Les quatre Évangiles (The Four Gospels)*.

#### *Concluding remarks*

Purity is a matter of place. Freud shared this insight, when he noted (in English): "Dirt is matter in the wrong place" (Freud, 1908b: 206). His statement is supported by Mary Douglas' observation that purity prescriptions in primitive cultures depend largely on the fear of change, ambiguity, and transgression of established frontiers: "Dirt is essentially disorder" (Douglas, 1989: 2). The quest for purity reflects the desire for a rigid order and the corresponding mixophobia, which is the fear of mingling categories that should remain distinct. This also implies that such prescriptions have both a hygienic and a symbolic purpose. They are "analogies for expressing a general view of the social order"; according to René Girard, they are "a type of camouflage", where social relations are

interpreted in material terms (Douglas, 1989: 3; Girard, 1972: 47). In this respect the body symbolizes the pure, closed community. The fascination of purity prescriptions with physical cavities, excrements, and secretions (i.e. zones where the frontiers between what belongs to oneself and to others disappear) corresponds with concern for preserving the community's internal unity with respect to the outside world. This remains true in modern culture as well. Here, too, hygiene is always more than just hygiene. The bourgeois yen for propriety cannot be attributed solely to utilitarian considerations. People who dust their house every morning are not driven by hygienic need alone. Here, cleansing once again becomes a symbolic act, by which one confirms one's own order and reclaims the house as it were, as part of one's own (proper/*propre*) identity.

Given the link that Mary Douglas has identified between the desire for purity versus the fear of change, ambiguity, and transgression, interest in the pure and the impure would certainly be likely to increase in eras perceived as historic periods of crisis. This is especially true for the bourgeois culture around 1900, which was a time of extensive social changes conveyed by the buzzwords industrialization, secularization, urbanization, democratization, socialism and – in whatever small measure – feminism. Although this classification was never so dominant before, the changes tended to worry the established bourgeoisie. This new world full of dynamism and mobility, the result of the bourgeoisie's own doing, proved particularly disconcerting. The fear inspired a need for order and reaffirmation of traditional boundaries, which modernization appeared to have obliterated. The work of Wagner, Stoker, and Zola documents this heightened interest in boundaries and their transgression, order, and chaos: for the pure and the impure. They pay tribute to a culture, which, as Eric Hobsbawm (1995: 10) has submitted, reflected "a profound identity-crisis".

Wagner, Stoker, and Zola were not alone in their views. In the decades around 1900, this preoccupation with the pure and the impure appeared in an immense variety of manifestations. Examples include ideological movements, such as theosophy and anthroposophy and the ideal of a pure art or even a pure science. The propagation of nationalist and racist doctrines is also relevant. While the differences between such phenomena are far from coincidental, the similarities merit consideration as well, since all invoke the purity ideal. In this respect they are parallel movements occurring during the same chronological period and exhibit comparable reactions to contemporary problems, at least formally. Perceived as an official category, purity represents the religious ideal of recaptured

harmony, integrity, and unity. As Roger Caillois (1950: 38) notes, "the pure is that which is always united with itself" and "of which the essence is not mixed with any other substance that changes and sullies it". The impure, however, is the alien that penetrates and mingles with the pure order, thereby causing it to become infected and to decompose. Every purity ideal produces its own impurity and thus always entails the exclusion of what is Alien.

The distinction between the pure and the impure, however, is far from clear. Saint Elizabeth kept company with the ill and bathed in mud as a token of her superior purity. Conversely, the impure becomes the scapegoat – Oedipus, in the homonymous tragedy, Wagner's Jew, or Stoker's vampire – that is sacrificed, so that his exile or death may purify the community. These cases of ambivalence are virtually inevitable in the work of modern artists. Though they pertain to the bourgeois culture and have been educated there, artists often feel like outsiders as well. What the bourgeoisie sees as pure is often proof of the contrary to the artists. The work of Wagner, Stoker, and Zola exhibits a marked desire to transcend the boundaries imposed by bourgeois culture. They also accommodate the hidden desires and fears of the general public, which is fascinated by such work. What has been suppressed from bourgeois awareness returns to the surface via countless secret pathways after being distorted by the imagination. Members of the bourgeoisie understand the temptation of the impure. Although they have removed the impure from their order, they still suspect it of being the Alien within them. Like the mine chief Hennebeau in *Germinal*, they long to cast off the moral yoke they have imposed on themselves to give in to profligacy and promiscuity like the people and "to live like beasts".

The pure world is sterile and has been weaned from life. After all, life is impure by nature, as it is changeable and full of mixed substances. In this respect, the excessive desire for perfection expressed in the quest for purity is difficult to distinguish from a secret desire not to exist. According to Vladimir Jankélévitch (1960: 8): "Purity resembles death, which is also a form of purity and relates to us like the void to the universe".

On the other hand, life cannot be suppressed. As the French psychiatrist Evelyne Pewzner (1992) has noted, the resulting tension can give rise to melancholy or compulsive neurosis in extreme cases. Both melancholics and compulsive neurotics have a deeply rooted awareness of their own impurity and are therefore overly sensitive to disorder and dirt; they are tormented by guilt that can be assuaged only through self-punishment. This guilt is aroused by the desire to live, which is inextricably linked with

primal urges, such as aggression and sexuality. Such punishment consists of the depression itself or of the incessantly recurring purification ritual intended to exorcize the impending chaos. Pewzner argues that these symptoms are not isolated manifestations. They are merely the most extreme consequence of a purity ideal that derives from the Christian tradition and continues to determine much of the bourgeois moral standard. In this light, the yen for perfection, which becomes a morbid obsession among melancholics and compulsive neurotics, characterizes bourgeois culture in general and its members to some degree. Order and hygiene are the cardinal virtues of the members of the bourgeoisie, as external signs of decency and moral purity. All these virtues converge in the hygienic model, which proliferated from the early nineteenth century onward and culminated in the paradigm of the bourgeois world view around 1900 (Frey, 1997: 26-28). This aseptic ideal of a world without dirt and microbes corresponds with the ideal of a pure order based on – as Max Weber called it – *innerweltliche Askese*. The tensions associated with this ascetic lifestyle, which inevitably entail repression, are easily projected onto the Alien. Dirt is the Alien who threatens the pure order: the pauper, the woman or the Jewish immigrant. They represent chaos, which manifests itself in considerable measure through the temptation they exude. This temptation of dirt, however, threatens the bourgeois self-image and coincides with guilt, which is easily translated into aggression toward the purported seducers. Such tension becomes manifest in the work of Wagner, Stoker, and Zola: the ambivalence of a purity ideal that masquerades as Life itself but is merely the cloak of Death.

**Arnold Labrie**  
Universiteit Maastricht  
Faculteit Cultuurwetenschappen  
Postbus 616  
NL-6200 MD Maastricht  
Arnold.labrie@history.unimaas.nl

### **Summary**

*Purity and Danger in Fin-de-Siècle Culture: A Psycho historical Interpretation of Wagner, Stoker and Zola*

According to the anthropologist Mary Douglas, the quest for purity is usually accompanied by fears of change, ambiguity and transgression. Translating Douglas' insights into historical terms, one may assume that sensibilities about what is pure and what is impure will grow stronger during times of intense social and political change, for instance, during the stormy decades around 1900. This period was characterized by a profound identity-crisis and at the

same time was marked by a quest for purity. One may think of a deepened concern for hygiene, of the rise of racist movements, but also of an intense longing for cultural reform and regeneration. Notwithstanding their many differences, these phenomena are linked through their concern for the formal distinction between what is pure and what is impure. A study of the work of Wagner, Bram Stoker and Zola gives some insight into the language of purity, serves to show the religious meaning of formal categories of purity and impurity, and makes it clear that the quest for purity in one area is related to the quest for purity in another area.

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**Key words**

Psychohistory, Purity, Wagner, Dracula, Zola.