

# Introduction

No artist writes in a vacuum, and each work of art, howsoever privately conceived, bears the imprint of the age and the culture in which it was produced. At the same time, however, certain artists reflect the interaction of art and ideology, literature and ideas, more directly than others, and some of them to the extent that their work may be read as an index to the concerns of a particular period, whereby in turn their art acquires a significance that goes beyond a purely aesthetic or literary valuation.

In the twentieth century, few writers better exemplify the type than Anaïs Nin, although ironically in the early stages of her career her work was criticized precisely for its apparent lack of social or cultural context. This very fact of her earlier rejection in view of her current acclaim, however, in itself underlines the cultural and historical significance of her work and career, humanistically documenting as it does the difference between the attitudes of the 1940's and 1950's and those of the past couple of decades — a difference, furthermore, that centers largely on the question of what constitutes "social consciousness" and "public responsibility." From the vantage point of the present, we are in a position to appreciate the way in which her "lack of concern" paradoxically constituted the most responsible and far-sighted type of commitment.

In addition to being such a seismograph in herself, Nin also commands attention by reason of the cultural milieu through which she moved. Few modern artists reveal the range of personal involvement with so many other artists and key figures in contemporary thought, for it is a range that is extensive both in terms of geographically spanning the world as well as in terms of historically encompassing much of the twentieth century. She was as much "there" when the "lost generation" and other expatriates congregated in Paris, as she was "here" when she debated with Aldous Huxley over the merits of drug-induced states of consciousness after having participated in an experiment at the University of California; she knew Salvador Dali, Brancusi, André Breton, just as she knew Edmund Wilson, Richard Wright, Kenneth Patchen. And among those paying special tribute to Nin at the memorial gatherings which followed upon her death in January of this year were Christopher Isherwood, Stephen Spender, Dory Previn, James Leo Herlihy, Viveca Lindfors, Kate Millett, and Marguerite Young.

To speak of "The World of Anaïs Nin," therefore, is almost to imply limits where none exists; her world is the world of the arts, and accordingly the only restrictions one faces in putting together a collection of essays under the present title are those imposed by the exigencies of time and space.

At the same time, the essays which appear in this collection already go far to illustrate the wide range of Nin's involvement as well as to provide fresh and provocative insights into the nature of her relationship with certain

key individuals. In his challenging analysis of Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*, for example, Gutierrez not only reminds us that Nin wrote the Preface to this work but also in the process of his analysis indirectly suggests some new reasons why she may have done so. Similarly, Jason in his study of Nin and Rank explores the extent to which the person and theories of this early psychoanalyst informed and sometimes complicated her fiction. More directly, using a number of hitherto unpublished letters, MacNiven traces the development, difficulties, but ultimate resolution of the relationship between Nin and Durrell, just as in their studies Faas and Dick respectively explore the personally abortive but artistically productive nature of Nin's association with Robert Duncan and Gore Vidal and along the way provide some lively examples of the routes by which personal encounters may find their way into fictional characterizations. Finally, in Hugo's personal commentary we are given to meet the artist whose engravings appeared in the first editions of Nin's fiction, as well as a behind the scenes look at the making of one of his films in which Nin appeared.

Aside from being individually provocative, certain of the essays when viewed collectively also reflect a considerable amount of controversy, and this is perhaps the place to emphasize that the opinions expressed in the respective essays are not necessarily mine. As editor my chief concern is with the quality and comprehensiveness of the collection, while like a true Areopagite I believe that free discussion is the best means to the discovery or recovery of the truth. Furthermore, if the reader bears in mind what Nin herself once said on the subject of criticism — "In considering the value of any assessment, one should focus not only on what was said but also ask oneself *who said it*" — then it is the critic not the object of his criticism who will suffer if there is misrepresentation. Hence the importance of a "Notes on Contributors" section in a scholarly journal, which too frequently is dismissed as mere formalism or academic puffery.

The focus of most of the controversy in the present collection is upon the question of how the *Diary* should be approached and with the related questions of the kind of artistic excellence which Nin's fiction evidences and the various traditions to which her work may be allied. Schneider, for example, argues that while the narrator of the respective volumes of the *Diary* develops to the point that in the last volume she most closely resembles "Nin," we must never confuse "Nin, the persona" and "Nin, the author." In contrast to Schneider's emphasis upon the *Diary* as a work of art, Demetrakopoulos argues that the *Diary*, in particular the first volume, constitutes a personal record of Nin's developing self, and that Nin's editing only highlights the psychological authenticity of the account. Midway between the two, Bloom and Holder discuss the extent to which the *Diary* exhibits certain of the conventions of the genre and in turn many of the characteristics of women's autobiographies; for them one of the major tensions in the *Diary* is the struggle between the autobiographical impulse — the desire to publish — and the diary impulse — the desire to keep the record of her life experience a private and personal affair.

Insofar as the question of Nin's success as a writer of fiction is concerned, Franklin convincingly refutes the somewhat romantic idea that Nin always

wrote effortlessly and perfectly, just as Van der Elst, in her description of the early Nin manuscripts, suggests the tentativeness and uncertainty which characterized Nin's first forays as a critic and writer of short stories. But whereas Franklin contends that Nin never achieved full control of the American idiom, Cushman argues that the stories published as *Under a Glass Bell* reflect a degree of imagistic control that goes beyond language and secures for the collection a position amongst the best in the American short story tradition. Similarly, in her commentary upon the problems one encounters in attempting to translate Nin, Janvier indirectly points to the fact that to change a word, to choose an inappropriate word, would be to change the meaning of any one of Nin's works. Here Knapp's essay cuts both ways, just as in point of style it deliberately combines poetic expression with academic insights; according to her, Nin's first work of fiction, *House of Incest*, is at once the excruciating record of the creative trauma as Nin experienced it and simultaneously the product of that trauma, an artistic process, furthermore, which was extremely personal at the same time that it has its roots in the alchemical tradition.

On the related question of Nin's cultural orientation, Broderick specifically takes issue with those who would place Nin's work outside the confines of Western ideology and orientalize it; what appears to be the "Eastern" character of Nin's writing, she argues, is best understood as the missing but not foreign feminine dimension of traditional American literature. Similarly, although also slightly conversely, Balakian compares the distinctly American concern with the pursuit of happiness as manifested in *The Scarlet Letter* and Nin's *Spy in the House of Love*. Balakian's essay, however, is not so much concerned with peculiarly national traits as it is with the fundamental human problems which Hawthorne and Nin each in their own way attempt to explore. And here her essay joins company with Kuntz's humanistic consideration of the profound philosophical issues which inform Nin's work and which in the process give both order and universal significance to her individualism.

It is, moreover, at this common point of humanism, humaneness, and humanity that all of the essays ultimately converge; and hence by way of conclusion it is instructive to notice that as much as the contents of these essays themselves attest to the depth and breadth of Nin's involvement so also do the disparate backgrounds of the respective contributors and the other scholarly pursuits with which each is concerned. One contributor is a specialist in early American literature; another teaches at a naval academy; one teaches philosophy and is a medievalist; another is a Renaissance scholar. It is unfortunate that space does not permit a statement from each contributor describing how his or her interest in Nin originated, but for the present it is sufficient to observe the extent to which Nin's work encourages scholars to move out from their individual areas of specialization and to become truly interdisciplinary in their approaches. In turn, one begins then to appreciate why there are relatively speaking so few "Nin specialists": for to specialize in Anaïs Nin involves broadening rather than narrowing one's focus — in short, not specializing. It is for this very reason most fitting that the first collection of scholarly essays upon Nin's work should appear in a journal the subtitle of which is "A Journal for the Comparative Study of Literature and Ideas."

Killington, Vermont  
August 13, 1977