

ANAÏS NIN

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SEDUCTION  
OF THE  
MINOTAUR

*Introduction by Anita Jarczok*

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# Introduction

*Anita Jarczok*

*Seduction of the Minotaur*, by the outstanding diarist and pioneering erotica writer Anaïs Nin, is the fifth and final part of her continuous novel, *Cities of the Interior*. It evolved from Nin's self-published work *Solar Barque* (1958), which later was expanded, retitled, and published as *Seduction of the Minotaur* by Alan Swallow in 1961.

*Seduction* is a novel about a journey; it is to be read, however, not solely for the adventures of the main character, Lillian, but also for the inner transformation that she undergoes. Lillian's travels to Mexico and back home are an outer manifestation of her journey of self-discovery. For Lillian quickly learns that probing the interior of her own mind, rather than escaping to a faraway country, is the only remedy for the anxiety that plagues her.

Journeys, both real and psychological, were an integral part of Nin's life. From her early days, she led a nomadic existence, moving around Europe with her family. Her father's career as a concert pianist took the family from France, where Nin was born in 1903, to Germany, to Belgium, and then back to France, where he abandoned his wife, his ten-year-old daughter, and two younger sons. The deserted mother took the children to Barcelona, where they all stayed temporarily with her parents-in-law before leaving Spain for the United States in 1914. The voyage across the Atlantic was a pivotal event in Nin's life, as it was aboard this ship that she began her diary. Initially intended as a letter to her father, her first attempts at writing

quickly developed into a daily habit that eventually would grow to an astounding 35,000 pages, win her popular and critical acclaim in the 1960s, and become one of the most remarkable oeuvres of life writing in the twentieth century. Among the various experiences recorded in the *Diary*, the most poignant descriptions relate to Nin's travels and relocations, as each displacement forced her to face a new culture, each with its own disparate customs, values, and beliefs.

A few months after her arrival in New York, the eleven-year-old Nin, disoriented and forlorn in an unfamiliar place, noted: "There are moments when I feel like crying, crying and never stopping. The weather, school, the streets, everything seems dark, dark. . . . Well, the true word: I detest New York and everything modern."<sup>1</sup> Although Nin eventually adopted the United States as her new home, in 1924 she moved to Paris with her new husband, Hugh Guiler. She was deeply thrilled at the prospect of living in the French capital—"the Paris of Balzac, Flaubert and Anatole France, . . . the Paris of poets, of Dumas and Victor Hugo"<sup>2</sup>—but once she reached her dream destination, she felt estranged. One aspect of life in France that she found especially disturbing was the sexual openness of the Parisians. On March 11, 1925, she recorded in her diary: "Spiritually, I hate Paris for the importance of sensuality in its literary and human life."<sup>3</sup>

Over the years, Nin adapted to French culture. In fact, the time spent in Paris was highly formative for her literary career. Paris between the wars was a major cultural center and a mecca for artistically inclined souls. To live in the City of Light at that time meant to be exposed to new literary trends and exciting cultural developments. Nin met many aspiring artists and writers, among them Henry Miller, with whom she embarked on a daring literary and sexual adventure. They collaborated and encouraged each other's writing aspirations, which resulted in the publication of Nin's prose poem, *House of Incest*, and her collection of novelettes, *The Winter of Artifice*, as well as the release of Miller's *Tropic of Cancer*. Soon enough, however, Nin had to move again.

When World War II erupted in 1939, Nin returned to New York. Although this move halted her intercontinental migration, it did not put an end to her itinerant lifestyle. In 1947 Nin, who was still married to Guiler, met Rupert Pole, with whom she soon set up a house in Los Angeles. She spent the next two decades traveling back and forth between the two cities, two partners, and two lives. The publication of Nin's diaries in the late 1960s and early 1970s at last brought her the fame and recognition that she had long craved, and Nin began traveling extensively, visiting Bali, Cambodia, Hong Kong, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, Morocco, the Philippines, Singapore, Tahiti, and Thailand. As was her habit, she scrupulously recorded her impressions of these distant locales.

These journeys, whether emotionally straining changes of domicile or pleasurable trips to exotic places, made Nin a shrewd observer. They put her out of her comfort zone, challenging her convictions and beliefs and never allowing them to harden. Nin knew all too well what it meant to be a stranger in a foreign country, and her outsider status allowed her to be more perceptive. But this awareness came at a price, often precipitating a painful inner conflict as each encounter with the unfamiliar forced her to define herself anew. Her outer journeys, therefore, frequently were accompanied by inner ones. It was this very self-exploration that made Nin so popular with her readers. She had an exceptional gift for heartrending depiction of her interior turmoil. She was a master of introspection, of probing, of contemplation of the inner self, all of which she rendered movingly in the pages of her diary as well as in her novels, whose characters often face dilemmas that compel them to look deeply within themselves. Not without reason is the continuous novel titled *Cities of the Interior*: the inner landscape of her protagonists is what interested Nin most.

Like most of Nin's fictional writings, *Seduction of the Minotaur* contains many parallels to the author's own life. The book is based loosely on Nin's 1947 visit to Acapulco, which left a lasting impression

on the writer. Nin was enchanted with the scenery and the lifestyle there, and she often thought back on those months spent in Mexico, confessing in her diary, "In Acapulco I felt for the first time the slackening of this tension I suffer from in my dealings with the world. . . . I felt at one with the people and nature."<sup>4</sup> Journal entries describing her stay in Acapulco served as a source from which she drew many of the characters, places, and episodes in the novel.

The title of this book, *Seduction of the Minotaur*, loaded, like the rest of the novel, with symbolic meaning, aptly condenses the central idea of the story and reveals themes and influences that were essential to Nin. It refers to the Greek myth of the Minotaur—a creature with a human body and the head of a bull—who was the offspring of an unnatural sexual union between Pasiphaë, wife of King Minos, and a sacred white bull sent to Minos by the god of the sea, Poseidon. The product of betrayal, abnormal desire, and revenge, the Minotaur was confined in the Labyrinth, a tortuous maze built by Daedalus at the command of King Minos. The monster was eventually slain by the hero Theseus, who found his way out of the maze by following a thread supplied by the king's daughter, Ariadne.

Nin's invocation of the Minotaur aligns her with the modernists, who were fascinated by the monster and frequently depicted it in their paintings, drawings, photographs, and writings. Ziolkowski claims that the myth of the Minotaur, which had been virtually absent in premodern art, became immensely popular in the 1930s and was widely exploited in all the arts.<sup>5</sup> An avant-garde journal published in Paris in the 1930s bore the name of the creature, and the cover of each issue—illustrated by such artists as Pablo Picasso, Marcel Duchamp, Joan Miró, Salvador Dalí, Henri Matisse, André Masson, and Diego Rivera—portrayed the imprisoned beast.<sup>6</sup> Some of these artists became so fascinated that they produced further representations of the monster. "The artist obsessed during these years more absolutely than any other by the Minotaur," as Ziolkowski asserts, "was Pablo Picasso."<sup>7</sup> His

images of the Minotaur as a violent and sexually potent beast became a fundamental part of modern culture.

Yet Nin's interest in the figure of the Minotaur indicates less a fascination with Greek mythology and more a familiarity with Carl Jung's psychoanalytical reinterpretation of mythical tales. The Swiss psychologist gives myths a central place in his writings, claiming, "The products arising from the unconscious are related to the mythical."<sup>8</sup> According to Jung, certain "mythological components," which he terms "archetypes," structure our collective unconscious, which is best understood as a "psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals."<sup>9</sup> In the Jungian interpretation of the Minotaur myth, the maze symbolizes the unconscious, and the heroic Theseus embodies the ego, whereas the creature itself represents the shadow—the dark part of our nature that we have to identify, acknowledge, and conquer in order to attain full personhood. Joseph Henderson, a follower of Jung, explains the symbolic battle between the ego and the shadow in this way: "For most people the dark or negative side of the personality remains unconscious. The hero, on the contrary, must realize that the shadow exists and that he can draw strength from it. He must come to terms with its destructive powers if he is to become sufficiently terrible to overcome the dragon."<sup>10</sup>

Such a reading of the myth, together with the phrase "proceed from the dream outward,"<sup>11</sup> which Nin attributed to Jung<sup>12</sup> and often quoted as a dictum that guided her writing, provides a key to understanding this novel. The story opens with Lillian's recurrent nightmare of a ship stuck in a waterless place and her futile attempts to launch it. This dream inspires her travel to Mexico, which she initially treats as an opportunity to leave herself, her husband Larry, and her former life behind. Her Mexican adventure is supposed to be "a drug of forgetfulness" (1). But she soon realizes that "the farther she traveled into unknown places, unfamiliar places, the more precisely she could find within herself a map showing only the cities of

the interior" (76). Lillian begins to understand that in order to liberate herself, she must undertake an inward quest and that the only way to resolve the conflict is to confront her past, her fears, and her anxieties; otherwise she is bound to repeat the same patterns and re-enact the same dramas. As one of the characters, Doctor Hernandez, explains to her, "The condemnation to repetition would only cease when one had understood and transcended the old experience" (25). Lillian eventually faces her inner Minotaur, which turns out to be not a monster but "Lillian herself, the hidden masked part of herself unknown to her, who had ruled her acts" (107), and travels homeward endowed with a new perspective. The visit to Mexico allows her to see her husband in a new light, "as if while she were away, some photographer with a new chemical had made new prints of the old films in which new aspects appeared she had never noticed before. . . . As the inner turmoil quieted, she saw others more clearly. A less rebellious Lillian had become aware that when Larry was not there she had either become him or had looked for him in others" (92).

As ever, the strength of Nin's prose lies in its ability to seduce readers with its poetic language. *Seduction of the Minotaur* is full of beautiful evocations of Mexican landscape, rich imagery, and insightful commentary on human emotions. In her desire to remain "true to human psychology rather than to chronology of events,"<sup>13</sup> one can detect echoes of Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce. Together with other installments of *Cities of the Interior*, the novel is a significant contribution to twentieth-century modernist literature. The introspective protagonist, the focus on the inner world, and the stylistic virtuosity place Nin among the best innovators in the realm of the experimental novel.

## Notes

1. Anaïs Nin, *Linotte: The Early Diary of Anaïs Nin, 1914–1920* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 32.

2. Anaïs Nin, *Journal of a Wife: The Early Diary of Anaïs Nin, 1923–1927* (London: Quartet Books, 1986), 43.
3. *Ibid.*, 115.
4. Anaïs Nin, *The Journals of Anaïs Nin: Volume Five, 1947–1955* (London: Quartet Books, 1976), 39.
5. Theodore Ziolkowski, *Minos and the Moderns: Cretan Myth in Twentieth-Century Literature and Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 70.
6. *Ibid.*, 72.
7. *Ibid.*, 74.
8. Carl Gustav Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious*, trans. Beatrice M. Hinkle (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1916), 37.
9. Carl Gustav Jung, *The Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious*, trans. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 153, 43.
10. Joseph L. Henderson, “Ancient Myths and Modern Man,” in *Man and His Symbols*, ed. Carl G. Jung (New York: Anchor Press, 1988), 120–21. A very similar reflection appeared in the second volume of Nin’s *Diary*. Reflecting on the war that had just broken out in September 1939, Nin noted that “the modern hero was the one who would master his own neurosis so that it would not become universal, who would struggle with his myths, who would know that he himself created them, who would enter the labyrinth and fight the monster. This monster who sleeps at the bottom of his own brain.” Anaïs Nin, *The Journals of Anaïs Nin: Volume Two, 1934–1939* (London: Quartet Books, 1974), 362.
11. Anaïs Nin, *The Novel of the Future*, with a new introduction by Deirdre Bair (Athens, Ohio: Swallow Press, 2014), 5.
12. In the introduction to a new Swallow Press edition of *The Novel of the Future*, Deirdre Bair, Nin’s biographer, notes that Jung scholars have not managed to identify this phrase in Jung’s works. Bair, introduction to *Novel of the Future*, xiv; for further details, see note 5 to her introduction.
13. Nin, *Novel of the Future*, 83.



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