

ANAÏS NIN

THE NOVEL
OF THE
FUTURE

Introduction by Deirdre Bair

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Realism is a bad word. In a sense everything is realistic. I see no line between the imaginary and the real. I see much reality in the imagination.—FEDERICO FELLINI
from *Interviews with Film Directors*

Introduction

Deirdre Bair

ANAÏS NIN wanted her readers to know from the outset where she stood on the subject of contemporary literature, so she wrote her own introduction for the original publication of *The Novel of the Future* in 1968. It still stands today as an effective overview of this fascinating slim volume, one of only two works of literary criticism she wrote. The other, *D. H. Lawrence: An Unprofessional Study*, is one of her earliest writings, while *The Novel of the Future* is one of her last. They stand as bookends that bracket and enclose everything else, the diaries as well as the fiction; and just as the Lawrence study sets forth many of her earliest thoughts about literature, *The Novel of the Future* demonstrates that she still held fast to them so many years later. The book is an honest and open statement of her literary credo and thus an important text for those who wish to understand this highly original writer.

Sharon Spencer, one of Anaïs Nin's most astute critics, says that this book "clearly details Nin's convictions about writing" and further declares that it "flows beyond the boundaries announced by its title into the realms of psychology, personal growth, aesthetic experience and drugs, the nature of consciousness and of the self." Spencer rightly defines it as a compendium of all the themes that had absorbed Nin's attention since childhood, when she first began to write, calling her "a rigorously independent and self-committed writer whose determination to express a private vision in literature

links her to the great moderns.”¹ Despite the many obstacles to publication Nin faced throughout her life, she remained true to the private vision that eventually brought her the respect and admiration her writing well deserves.

The gestation of this book was a long one. The ideas Nin expressed in it began to coalesce in the 1930s in Paris, where she had been living with her banker husband until World War II forced their return to New York. However, the actual writing did not happen until the time of the great fame she enjoyed after the publication of her diaries in the 1960s, when the public, still not sure what to make of the phenomenon she had become, clamored for some expression of her philosophy of life and work.

She had had modest success as a writer in Paris, mostly because she was the shadowy female figure who completed a literary triangle with Henry Miller and Lawrence Durrell. She hoped to build on her reputation as helpmate to two great men and also to develop her reputation as an altogether original voice in the United States, but the cultural climate was not propitious; for the next two decades, publishers generally ignored her and she had to print, publish, and promote most of her work herself. Her novels were seldom reviewed, and when they were, puzzled critics reacted to them with incomprehension, disdain, and sometimes even outright ridicule.

By 1945, when she sent *Under a Glass Bell* to prominent reviewers, she mourned that it was “not wholly accepted by anyone, not wholly loved, and much opposed.” She cited Edmund Wilson’s “stupidity,” Diana Trilling’s “implacable anger,” and Leo Lerman’s “betrayal” before lumping all the other negative reviewers into a group that she thought showed a general “lack of understanding” of what she was aiming for in her fiction. However, even though she was correct that most critics expressed reservations about the collection, most of them (Wilson most prominently) did have something

good to say. Although he had his own reservations, he knew what she was attempting to convey and praised her for it.

Wilson said Nin was “one of those women writers who have lately been trying to put into words a new genuine point of view, who deal with the conflicts created for women by living half in a man-controlled world against which they cannot help rebelling, half in a world which they have made for themselves but which they cannot find completely satisfactory.”² And despite Nin’s insistence that all the reviewers, especially Trilling and Lerman, were totally and entirely negative, they did also admire her originality for using themes that were a welcome change from the socially relevant fiction that dominated American writing during the war years and most of the decade after its end. Thus, a full two decades before the emergence of the contemporary Feminist movement, critics did recognize and praise Nin for her insights into the changing status of the modern woman as well as for her willingness to explore what was then considered the questionable science of psychoanalysis.

This was a time when the publishing world was embracing novels, written mostly by men, that were hard-hitting and hard-bitten and that dealt with everything from political injustice to social inequities. Here, we can think of John Steinbeck and John O’Hara as we recall a time when realism was paramount and the taut prose of Ernest Hemingway was much admired. Even though it was also a period when Virginia Woolf’s fiction was slowly gaining the enormous influence and popularity it enjoys today, most well-known women writers were shunted into a category where they were called just that—women writers—and their novels were praised because they did not veer far from family dramas or historical epics.³ Very few readers and reviewers knew what to make of a woman like Anaïs Nin who wrote novels “where all reality appears only in its symbolical form” and where everything “will have to be translated,

just as when you read dreams.”⁴ This was what Nin wrote to her mother as she tried to explain the literary credo to which she remained faithful for the rest of her writing life.

Anaïs Nin said repeatedly that all her writing began with a phrase coined by Jung, “proceed from the dream outward.” Jung did investigate dreams throughout his many volumes of published writings; however, this is not a phrase he ever wrote.⁵ Most likely, it was Nin’s synthesis of Jung’s thinking, something she created during her many years of reading about psychoanalysis and engaging in her own talk therapy. Her first analysis was in Paris with René Allendy, whom she left for Otto Rank; after relocating in New York she continued with two prominent Jungian analysts, first Martha Jaeger and then Inge Bogner. Nin had years of analysis, sometimes daily and carried out over many decades, so her experience of the process was both broad and deep, making psychoanalysis one of the major influences throughout her entire writing career. With *The Novel of the Future*, she gives a sustained and revealing assessment of what it meant to her.

One of the most important ideas she gleaned was derived from Jung’s concept of Animus and Anima (the masculine and feminine principles that govern the formation of personality). She used it to divide American writers into two groups, in which the male Animus led men to write about “alienation,” whereas women who were ruled by the feminine Anima concentrated on portraying “relationships.” Critics who did not understand what women were doing felt free to attack them because the cultural climate of the United States had created a “Collective Life” that dismissed inner-directed originality. “Feminine writing,” Nin believed, concentrated on the “small, subjective, personal,” while contemporary culture valued “a monolithic image of maleness which is a caricature of maleness, an exaggeration of maleness (no sensitivity, only toughness, logic, factualness.)” Nin wrote this even as she was being honored and feted everywhere from

university campuses to public halls of culture. Even though she was respected when she spoke in so many academic settings, she still faulted those who wrote academic studies for concentrating on dead writers rather than on what was actually happening in contemporary circles: "Fiction which was intended to capture *living* moments finds itself either embalmed or placed in a deep freeze."⁶

These ideas grew after she self-published *House of Incest* in 1947, which she described as her own personal nightmare and "a woman's *Season in Hell*."⁷ She came to believe that she had been too much under the influence of Rimbaud when she wrote it; while she was writing *The Novel of the Future*, she thought in retrospect that in *House of Incest*, based on her own nightmares and dreams, she might have overemphasized the nightmares because they were "more dramatic." She felt the hurt anew in the 1960s when she relived the rejection and derision the novel generated in 1947–48. However, she had given so many talks and lectures on her working methods that in time she was able to assess the earlier responses to all her fiction, mostly with objectivity. Her aim in this book was to explain her method, attitude, and intentions to readers of her novels while placing herself where she thought she belonged within a general theory of fiction.

She thought it would be a simple matter to create a book from the many lectures, conversations, and interviews she gave throughout the early 1960s, after the publication of the first volumes of the *Diaries* brought her the positive audiences and critical attention she had long craved. She had crisscrossed the country to speak at colleges and universities; she had met informally with groups of young people, sometimes inviting them into her own home; and she had participated in print, radio, and film programs where her striking presence as well as her innovative writing made her a great success. But when she attempted to combine all the different documents

into a coherent text she realized it would not be the simple matter she had envisioned earlier, so she went further back, to her first efforts to explain her literary intentions.

Her first attempts to explain her literary credo had appeared before her period of great fame, in two brief essays published by the Alicat Press as separate books: *Realism and Reality* (1946) and *On Writing* (1947). Both grew out of her then-few public presentations, and this material was eventually melded into the text of *The Novel of the Future*. By the time the first two diaries had appeared and her public appearances became extensive, her readers wanted to know more about how and why she wrote, which is why she decided to incorporate everything into a coherent written text.

Nin's audiences were enthralled by what seemed to be mostly extemporaneous talks. Beforehand, she always tried to determine who would make up each group—students, mature women, literate general readers—and she carefully gauged their responses to her initial topic before moving fluidly on to the next idea that came to mind, and then the next, and then the one after that. This sometimes led to overlaps, repetitions, and even in a few instances to remarks that might be considered contradictory, for oftentimes she was synthesizing her thoughts as she went along. Repetitions and seeming contradictions in the final version of this book are most likely due to Nin's attempt to coalesce vast amounts of material from other venues into a coherent entity.⁸

But even as her public was fascinated by the diaries, which had become immensely popular, her novels were lagging far behind both in sales and in critical commentary. Nin thought she was now in an authoritative position to make audiences and readers understand and appreciate literary modernism, and by writing about her particular version of it, she hoped to encourage readers to turn naturally to her fiction. She also wanted to use the book to promote other writers whose work she appreciated, so the reader will

find many references to (naming just a few) Marguerite Young, William Goyen, Maude Hutchins, and Anna Kavan. She does not hesitate to settle scores with critics who have disappointed her, among them Wallace Fowlie, Albert Guérard, and most noticeably, Maxwell Geismar. She also peppers her text with references to the many writers who were enjoying accolades and acclaim, but she never makes it clear whether she actually read their work or simply read what was written about it. Interestingly, prominent among them are writers for the theater: Tennessee Williams, Edward Albee, Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Giraudoux, and Jean Genet. With the exception of Alain Robbe-Grillet, she limits her sustained commentary on and praise of novelists mostly to D. H. Lawrence and Marcel Proust. However, these references make the book important for being more than just one writer's literary manifesto: they make *The Novel of the Future* an important historical document that sheds light on the American literary world of the mid-twentieth century and thus an important contribution to the study of literature and culture.

Nin begins her account of her coming of age in that world with her own literary beginnings. She tells how she never had any intention of creating a theory of fiction, let alone explaining such a theory. She thought of herself as an independent writer, far from the confines and constrictions imposed by what the academic community deemed suitable for research and writing, and very far from what was deemed both popular and acceptable in the world of commercial publishing. Describing in her introduction the opposing cultural attitudes she encountered in France and America, she speaks of the French mood of innovation and experimentation, and of what a disappointment it was to come to New York to find that American literature was dominated by sociopolitical themes and not by the inner world of ideas: "In America the aim was not to be

original, individualistic, an innovator, but to please the majority, to standardize, to submit to the major trends" (1).

The America of the 1940s and 1950s was not an encouraging climate for a writer steeped in a surrealism that promoted inner psychological reality above the social and cultural norm. Endorsing Lawrence, James Joyce, Proust, Djuna Barnes, and André Breton, she faulted Americans for embracing fiction that "alternated between the hypocritical glamorized and placebo novels which soothe, lull, and disguise life, which do not prepare anyone for the traumatic shocks of reality," and novels that became "acts of vengeance and character assassination, causing more traumatic shocks than life itself" ("Abstraction," 39).

In the final essay, "The Novel of the Future," she appraises the techniques of some of her favorite writers, particularly Henry Miller and Marguerite Young, concluding with a remark by her friend, the composer Edgard Varèse. When Varèse was given a celebratory dinner and introduced as "an avant-garde" composer, he replied, "There is no avant-garde. The artist is always ahead of his time but some people are a little late" (190). Nin liked this comment because she believed it applied to her as well.

She begins the concluding section of *The Novel of the Future* by saying she does not believe in absolutes and therefore does not intend her book to be the final word on the avant-garde; she will leave it to the novelists of the future to create their own version "to explore all the possibilities, to experiment with their own potentialities" (191). Earlier in the book she had written that "creativity is in itself a denial of categories, dogmas, and set values" (68), and in her conclusion she describes some of the ways in which a "greater liberation of the imagination" might come to pass (191). She ranges freely among topics from pop art to science fiction and the sexual revolution, offering acute insights about how other genres might help liberate fiction from the constraints of what she calls "photographic realism." Nin

worries that “the active, fecundating role of the novelist has been forgotten” in an age when “the supine tape-recorder novelist . . . registers everything and illuminates nothing.” She urges writers to reach for something above and beyond “the traps set by the so-called realists” and, with a metaphor that is so typical of her writing, “to travel by moonlight as well as sunlight” (199).

Almost half a century later, *The Novel of the Future* remains one of the most lasting, and quite possibly one of the most vibrant, commentaries on the literary history of her time.

Notes

1. Sharon Spencer, ed., *Collage of Dreams: The Writings of Anaïs Nin* (Chicago: Swallow Press, 1977), 2.
2. Nin is referring to Wilson, *New Yorker*, November 10, 1945, 97–101; Trilling, *Nation*, January 26, 1946, 105–7; and Lerman, *Mademoiselle*, May 1944.
3. John Ferrone lists such women writers as Taylor Caldwell and Frances Parkinson Keyes. I would add Mazo de la Roche, Edna Ferber, Daphne du Maurier, and Helen MacInnes. Ferrone, “The Making of *Delta of Venus*,” in *Anaïs, Art and Artists: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Sharon Spencer (Greenwood, FL: Penkevill, 1986), 42.
4. Anaïs Nin to her mother, Rosa Culmell, n.d., in the archives of her brother, Joaquín Nin-Culmell, University of San Francisco.
5. *The Novel of the Future* (118 in the present edition), in which she gives credit to this phrase for inspiring *House of Incest*. I am grateful to a number of Jungian scholars who have attempted to help me find this phrase during the years I wrote the biographies of Nin and Jung, and most recently as I wrote this introduction, all of whom looked for it once again throughout Jung’s *Collected Works*. The closest approximation may be the brief discussion in “On the Nature of Dreams,” in *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche* (*Collected Works*, transl. Gerhard Adler and R. F. C. Hull, 2nd ed. [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970], 8:294, paragraph 560), but as this essay was published in German (a language Nin did

not know) and was not translated until long after she wrote her novel, it is unlikely that she derived the phrase “proceed from the dream outward” from it. She might have read Jung’s essay on James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, first published in English in *Nimbus* 2, no. 1 (June–August 1953), but there is nothing in it that resembles the quotation she attributes to Jung. The mystery of where she got this expression remains to be solved.

6. “Abstraction,” in *Novel of the Future*, 38–40; emphasis is Nin’s (all page references are to the present edition).

7. Self-published and printed by Nin and Gonzalo Moré in Paris in 1936, as Siana Press (Anaïs backward); first American edition in New York, 1947, as Gemor (G. Moré) Press. Quotation is from “Abstraction,” *Novel of the Future*, 34.

8. Noël Riley Fitch cites Deena Metzger as saying she spent “months” helping Nin prepare the text for the book. Fitch, interview with Metzger, November 6, 1991, in *Anaïs: The Erotic Life of Anaïs Nin* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993), 378 and 485n37. Metzger apparently wishes to deny her involvement now; in an e-mail sent by her assistant to me on November 1, 2013, she said she “did not work on *The Novel of the Future* and is therefore unable to assist [in this introduction].”

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