

Writing an Icon

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Introduction

Anaïs Nin and Her Diary

A few weeks after Madonna published *Sex*—a provocative book containing highly erotic, verging on pornographic, imagery and language—a short article entitled “Pages: No Monopoly for Madonna” appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*. “Harcourt Brace Jovanovich would like to remind the world that Madonna does *not* hold the patent on sexual confessions,” it announced in the opening sentence. The article further suggested that it was not Madonna but Anaïs Nin, a long-dead diarist and author of erotic stories, who paved the way for sexually explicit revelations. An occasion to mention Nin’s name arose because Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, a major American publisher, printed the very same year, in 1992, another installment of Nin’s unexpurgated diary. Entitled *Incest*, more shocking than Madonna’s *Sex*, Nin’s diary revealed, as the *Times* article duly reported, that Nin “was simultaneously sleeping with her psychoanalyst, her cousin Eduardo, her husband *and* her father.” Madonna’s controversial erotic fantasies faded, the article seemed to imply, when contrasted with the outrageous stories from Nin’s life. But juxtaposing Nin with the famous pop star served another purpose than just ranking these two female artists on the controversy scale: it was also a way of promoting the forgotten cultural icon with the help of a celebrity who was then at the top.¹

Nin and Madonna have a lot in common, but above all, both are controversial personalities whose image underwent many transformations. *Sex* was a major turning point in Madonna’s career. Prior to its publication, Madonna had

a following among many feminists, who regarded her as “a symbol of unrepressed female creativity and power—sexy, seductive, serious, and strong.”² With the release of *Sex*, however, the pop icon lost her radical edge, because her book was seen as paying homage to a patriarchal pornographic culture. The publication of Nin’s unexpurgated diaries, which revealed a new face of the author, similarly disappointed certain groups of readers.

Nin emerged on the American literary scene in 1966 with the publication of the first installment of her multivolume *Diary of Anaïs Nin* (reprinted in the United Kingdom as *The Journals of Anaïs Nin*) and almost instantly became a cultural symbol, a role model, and a celebrity revered by many of her contemporaries. Nin was invited to give lectures and interviews; she was filmed, photographed, and recorded. Young women in particular identified with the personal and professional struggles depicted in the volumes of her *Diary*. Considered a pathfinder, Nin was celebrated for her candid confessions, insights into female psychology, and distinctive writing style. Nin’s popularity reached new levels shortly after her death in 1977. The posthumous release of her erotic stories, praised for the exploration of sexuality from a female perspective, made her a best-selling author.

But a decade later, her stature as a representative of women and a reliable narrator of her life story diminished. The unexpurgated diaries and biographies published in the 1980s and 1990s disclosed many painful and discreditable details about Nin’s life, including the fact that she had an incestuous relationship with her father and that she had lied in her previously published *Diaries*. Much of the attention Nin received at that point was quite negative, especially in feminist circles. Once esteemed for her efforts to achieve artistic and personal emancipation, Nin was thereafter regarded as a devious manipulator, a liar, and a master of self-promotion. She became a controversial figure whose life attracted more attention than her works.

Since Nin came to the limelight in 1966, a variety of stories on her have appeared. Some of them were produced by

Nin in her *Diary*, which during her lifetime became a major medium through which she developed her persona—a version of herself manufactured for the public. Nin, like Madonna, was in charge of how she wanted to present herself to her audience, and she carefully crafted her image. But Nin's self-portraits came down to us saturated with the culture and times she lived in. For instance, Nin's concept of femininity was shaped by the way she was brought up, the books she read, the experiences she went through, the acquaintances she made, the narratives she encountered—in a word, by the ideas about femininity that circulated at that time.

But Nin did not have a monopoly on the construction of her public personality, and stories about her were also disseminated in biographies, films, plays, critical studies, and memoirs on her. None of these sources captured the real Nin, although a few might have promised to do so. Every text constructed a different Nin and a different account of her life, and just as it is impossible to fix the meaning of any text, so too is it impossible to determine who the real Anaïs Nin was. However, what is important is which story is chosen for attention, and how it is told. Critics, scholars, reviewers, fiction writers, biographers, playwrights, filmmakers, and fans who attempted to portray Nin did not write in a cultural vacuum. Like Nin, they were affected by the times and places they inhabited. They therefore supplied their own version of Nin rather than capturing a real person, and their portraits of Nin convey to us not only their attitude toward the author but also cultural phenomena that helped foster this attitude.

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, Nin has been largely absent from academic curricula, scholarly debates, and popular culture. That said, scholars do comment on Nin's works, but they do so either in the journal *A Café in Space: The Anaïs Nin Literary Journal* or in monographs devoted to Nin. Rarely does one find articles on Nin in mainstream academic periodicals. Nin also inhabits popular culture, but she hardly ever makes it to the headlines the way she did in previous decades. But paradoxically, this absence of Nin today, which stands in stark contrast to her very

prominent presence in the 1960s and 1970s and then in the 1990s, makes Nin an interesting case study.

When we consider the expanding literature on celebrity culture and Nin's popularity in American culture in the 1960s and 1970s, the fact that there has not been a single study devoted entirely to Nin as a celebrity, a public figure, or a cultural phenomenon is astonishing.³ Viewing Nin as a celebrity is a great way to learn more not only about Nin herself but also about American culture. Tracing the trajectory of Nin's celebrity, the reception of her writings, and the changing constructions of her public persona facilitates the examination of the rise and fall of cultural icons. Whereas in the 1960s and the 1970s Nin was considered an important writer and a voice of the generation, in the 1990s she was reduced to a "major minor writer."⁴ The changing portraits of Nin enable an analysis to be made of the interplay between Nin and the culture that first brought her to prominence and then pushed her off the pedestal. By looking at which version of Nin prevailed or was privileged at a given time, the dominant cultural movements, together with the ways in which they produced the Nin that met their own needs, can be identified and examined.

The specificity of Nin as a case study also yields stimulating insights into celebrity culture studies and autobiography studies. Bringing these two disciplines together can enhance our understanding of the complexity of public personalities. The specific trajectory of Nin's celebrity status facilitates an examination of the fallen icon. Nin's example demonstrates that falling out of grace is closely connected with both changes in image and cultural shifts. The fact that different portraits of Nin were emphasized/constructed at various times reflects changing American culture and highlights the importance of market factors in the creation of her persona. Nin's example also illuminates, and has the potential to advance, some important issues in autobiography criticism. It brings to light the dynamic relationship between the stories we tell about ourselves, our identity, and our cultures. The multilevel construction of the Nin persona serves as a good illustration of

how the self is fashioned through narratives, not only obvious ones such as diaries but virtually all stories that invite us to give an account of ourselves and our lives (such as lectures and interviews). It also points to the malleability of identity, which changes with every story told.

The analysis of the complex process of the construction of Anaïs Nin's public persona (or rather, personae) by herself and by a variety of media in the United States requires consideration of the following questions: How have Nin's name and persona been used? What has she come to signify? What sort of statements has she been brought to support? What products has she advertised? What debates has she triggered? What was her own contribution to her image making? And last but not least, In what ways have these constructions corresponded with cultural phenomena? Throughout this book Nin is approached as a construct or a set of representations, rather than as a historical individual. It is necessary, however, to investigate how Nin the person intervened in her career and in her image production, because her involvement was a driving force behind the creation, distribution, and promotion of her public personality. Although I do not try to identify the authentic Nin—that is, I am not preoccupied with determining who Anaïs Nin really was or which of the versions of her that have been circulating in the media is accurate—the section that follows contains a brief biography of Nin for the benefit of those readers who might not be familiar with her life and achievements.

WHO IS ANAÏS NIN?

Anaïs Nin is commonly considered an American writer despite the fact that her birthplace was France.⁵ Born in Neuilly, near Paris, on 21 February 1903, she was the first of the three children of Joaquín Nin y Castellanos and Rosa Culmell y Vaurigaud. She was followed by two brothers: Thorvald and Joaquín. For the first eleven years of Anaïs's life, the family moved around in Europe—France, Germany, Belgium, Spain—as her father was determined to make a success of his career as a pianist. Joaquin senior abandoned

the family in 1913, and a year later, Anaïs's mother took her three children to the United States. Aboard the ship to New York, Anaïs Nin started her lifelong pursuit—her diary. At first her intention was to record everything for her father, but her diary quickly became her confidante and daily habit. The first volumes of her diary were written in French; she switched to English in 1920.

Nin dropped out of school early. At the age of sixteen, she managed to convince her mother that she did not benefit from formal schooling and that she was capable of educating herself. Soon afterward she started working as an artists' model at the New York Art Workers' Club for Women. In 1921, she met Hugh Parker Guiler, a banker of Scottish origin, whom she married on 3 March 1923. The newlyweds moved to Paris in December 1924 and remained there until the outbreak of World War II. In 1931, Nin met Henry Miller and his wife, June, and a year later she published her first book, *D. H. Lawrence: An Unprofessional Study*, which, as Philip Jason notes, "appeared in a limited edition and received limited attention."⁶

The other two works released in France in the 1930s, *House of Incest* and *The Winter of Artifice*, fared no better. *House of Incest* was self-published in 1936 by Siana Edition: a printing press established by Nin, Henry Miller, and their mutual friend and fellow author Michael Fraenkel. Despite "all the enthusiasm and promotional zeal, the first edition of *House* had a tiny print run that did not get far beyond Nin's immediate circle."⁷ *The Winter of Artifice*—a collection of short novelettes—printed by the Obelisk Press came out in the summer of 1939, just a few months before Nin moved to the United States because of the commencing war. Circumstances were not conducive to the promotion of the book, and its release did not boost Nin's literary career either.

In the early 1930s, Nin attended her first psychoanalytic sessions with Dr. René Allendy, whom she left later for Dr. Otto Rank. She maintained sexual relationships with both therapists. Around the same time, she also reunited with her father, and this reunion went beyond a usual father-daughter

relationship, as it developed into a sexual affair. In 1934, she underwent her first abortion, which she later described in her *Diary* as a stillbirth. Nin engaged in many sexual liaisons during her Parisian years, her last major lover in Paris being Gonzalo Moré, a married communist who followed Nin to New York.

After spending fifteen years in France, Nin and Guiler moved back to America in 1939. Nin swapped the bohemian Parisian society of Miller for the artistic circles of New York writers, painters, photographers, and filmmakers such as, to enumerate a few, Maya Deren (a choreographer, dancer, and experimental filmmaker), Robert Duncan (a poet), Dorothy Norman (a photographer and editor of the journal *Twice a Year*), and the writer Gore Vidal. In the United States she continued her therapy, first with Martha Jaeger, then with Dr. Clement Staff, and finally with Inge Bogner. She also continued to have numerous love affairs. Nin's biographer, Deirdre Bair, observes that while her "lovers in the 1930s represented what she called 'years of erotic madness' with adult men . . . the period 1945–1947 represented erotic madness of a different kind, usually with mere boys half her age."⁸

Nin engaged energetically in the enhancement of her literary career from the very beginning of her stay in New York. She established important acquaintances and did her best to see her works, both diary and fiction, in print. In the 1940s, she started writing erotic stories for a private collector, and these were released after her death in two volumes: *Delta of Venus: Erotica* (1977) and *Little Birds* (1979). She also began submitting shorter pieces and articles to alternative magazines such as *Twice a Year*, the *Phoenix*, and *Furioso*. Bair comments, "Anaïs, realizing that the path to commercial publication was uncertain, intended to build up a solid list of publications in various little magazines as a way to bolster her planned assault on commercial American publishers."⁹

Nin intended to reprint *The Winter of Artifice* in the United States, but when neither she nor her literary agents managed to interest publishing houses in her work, she bought a printing press in 1942 and named it Gemor Press

after her lover, Gonzalo Moré, with whom she ran it. However, the publication of *Winter of Artifice* (1942) not only failed to boost her literary career but also brought financial losses.¹⁰ Her next book, the collection of short stories *Under a Glass Bell* (1944), which was published by Gemor Press, sold three hundred copies in the first three weeks and received several reviews, one from the prominent critic Edmund Wilson, writing then for the *New Yorker*, who commented that the volume contained “really beautiful little pieces.”¹¹ However, neither these two collections nor her novel *This Hunger* (1945), which was also self-published, brought her any considerable degree of popularity. Even when her novels started to be printed by commercial publishers—beginning with E. P. Dutton’s release of *Ladders to Fire* in 1946—they received mainly unfavorable evaluations, and none of them brought Nin the recognition she craved (although it is worth mentioning that one of her novels, *A Spy in the House of Love*, sold over 100,000 copies in the late 1950s, thus becoming her first commercial success).¹²

The year 1947 was significant for Nin personally, as she met two men who played a crucial role for the rest of her life: the writer and actor James Leo Herlihy, the author of *Midnight Cowboy* (1965), who became her devoted friend and supporter; and Rupert Pole, sixteen years her junior, who became her lifelong partner. Beginning in 1947, Anais Nin led a bicoastal life, shared between Los Angeles and New York and between Rupert Pole and Hugh Guiler, respectively. Nin married Pole in 1955, thus committing bigamy, because she had never divorced her first husband, Hugh Guiler.

In 1957, Nin met the young literary agent Gunther Stuhlmann, who would thereafter represent her interests. Stuhlmann—whom Nin introduced rather briefly in her diary as “an intelligent man who loves literature, does translations, worked in films”¹³—turned out to be a very loyal and dedicated representative who took good care of Nin’s literary business, even after her death. In 1961, however, impatient at the lack of publishing opportunities, Nin took the initiative into her own hands and got in touch with an

independent publisher, Alan Swallow, and offered to collaborate with him. Swallow agreed and set out to reissue her short stories and novelettes. He also released the collection of her five novels in a single volume entitled *Cities of the Interior*. These reeditions did little to boost Nin's status. Not until the joint release of the first volume of Nin's *Diary* by Swallow Press and Harcourt, Brace and World in 1966 did she become popular with the general public. The publication of the first volume of her *Diary* turned her instantly from an author followed by a small coterie into a celebrity writer.

When Nin became a public figure with her own income and when her name started to appear in the records of the Internal Revenue Service, she had to annul her marriage to Rupert Pole. Nin, who until then had kept both husbands in the dark about each other's existence, revealed to Pole her marriage with Guiler, explaining that their relationship had ceased to be sexual. She also informed Pole that she felt obliged to provide Hugh with both emotional and financial support because he had maintained her for most of her life (not only did Hugh Guiler support Nin's daily needs but he also financed the publication of some of her books, gave her money to buy her own press, and helped out—sometimes oblivious to the fact—many of her friends). Pole did not object, and he remained her partner until her last days. Guiler, with whom Nin met more and more reluctantly, excusing herself with her declining health, allegedly remained oblivious to Pole's existence until Nin's funeral, where the two men met. Anaïs Nin died of cancer on 14 January 1977. The obituary in the *New York Times* mentioned Hugh Guiler as Nin's husband, while the *Los Angeles Times* listed Rupert Pole.

DIARY VERSUS *DIARY*

No biographical note about Nin would be complete without a description of the work that contributed greatly to forming her identity, that made her famous, and that was the main source of carefully crafted self-portraits, namely, her diary. When it was published in 1966, it brought her immediate recognition, which, as she reports at the end of volume 6,

“erased all the past disappointments” (396). Nin was invited to lecture, to give speeches, to appear on television, and to write blurbs, prefaces, and reviews. The release of her *Diary* therefore constituted a turning point in her literary career.

Anaïs Nin began her diary at the age of eleven in response to two traumatic events: her father’s abandonment of the family and the decision taken by her mother to move from Europe to the United States. Her diary, which started as a series of letters to her father in 1914, continued through her lifetime, albeit in various forms, until her death in 1977. Elizabeth Podnieks, who in addition to the customary textual analysis also provides a detailed description of the physical qualities of Nin’s original volumes, notes, “There is a gradual shift in the journal as it moved from being a letter to Nin’s father to a letter to the world, from a romantic document to a modernist text, and *from a work that was written in order to be published to a work that was written because it was being published.*”¹⁴

The original diaries from 1914 to 1965 were sold in 1976 to the University of California–Los Angeles for \$100,000, and they are available for inspection.¹⁵ The remainder are in the possession of the executor of the Anaïs Nin estate. While going through Nin’s diaries from 1914 to 1965, one cannot help but notice a change in their format. Nin kept the diary in book form up to May 1946, and these journals were occasionally interspersed with photographs, paper clippings, and letters. The manuscript journal number 69, covering the period from November 1945 to May 1946, was the last one written in book form. From 1946 on, the diary was written on loose sheets of paper, and the closer one approaches the year 1965, the less of a diary one encounters—the diary was almost entirely replaced by Nin’s vast correspondence. So in its later stages, Nin’s diary seems more like a collection of letters to and from Nin, rather than a diary as one tends to think of it—a record of daily entries.

Nin also copied and rewrote her diary at different stages of her life. The originals together with the copies were kept in various places. Bair relates that in the 1950s Nin made

use of three storage sites for her enormous oeuvre: a bank vault in Pasadena, where she stored half of the original journals; her friend's basement, where she stored the other half; and Bekins Storage in Arcadia, "where she kept the first revised copies typed by Virginia Admiral [a young painter whom Nin commissioned to copy her journals in the early 1940s], as well as the second series of revised copies typed mostly by Lila Rosenblum [a young student and friend of Nin's], with occasional assistance from Jim Herlihy." The Nin archive contains therefore not only the original version of the published diary but also the rewritten versions of the original. Nin's diary is better thought of as an enormous textual collage made up of revised and embellished copies of her diary as well as other texts, such as letters, lecture notes, and newspaper articles.¹⁶

The published diaries—seventeen volumes in total, to date, extending from 1914 to 1974—subdivide into three series. The first series to be published consists of seven volumes (cited here as *Diaries 1–7*) covering Nin's life from 1931 to 1974, most of which appeared during Nin's lifetime. These volumes were heavily edited, and the extent of this editing is investigated in chapter 2. Nin herself (with the collaboration of her agent, Gunther Stuhlmann) managed to revise six out of seven volumes. After her death, Rupert Pole and Gunther Stuhlmann took over the revision of *Diary 7*, which appeared in 1980. Another series, known as *The Early Diary of Anaïs Nin*, started to be published shortly after Nin's death; it contains four volumes presenting Nin's early life from 1914 to 1931. Having thoroughly examined the manuscripts of the early diaries, Podnieks notes that these were published with few alterations and are a better reflection of Nin's original than are the other two series.¹⁷ One has to bear in mind, however, that the first volume was translated from French, as Nin kept her diary in that language until 1920.

The last series, referred to as unexpurgated diaries, originally consisted of four tomes: *Henry and June* (1986), *Incest* (1992), *Fire* (1995), and *Nearer the Moon* (1996). These four installments cover the period from 1931 through 1939 and

include the material that was left out of the first two *Diaries* of the first series. Although these diaries were advertised as unedited, the comparison between them, the first series of the *Diary*, and the manuscripts reveals a great extent of editorial manipulation. Recently two more volumes of the unexpurgated *Diary* were published—*Mirages* in 2013 and *Trapeze* in 2017. The first one covers the years between 1939 and 1947; the second narrates Nin's life from 1947 to 1955. Both installments differ considerably from the previous unexpurgated volumes. The biggest change involves a re-vamping of the format. Unlike the other four unexpurgated journals, these two are divided into thematic chapters, each with its own separate title. This change in layout was a decision of a new editor. Whereas the previous unexpurgated volumes were edited by Rupert Pole, Gunther Stuhlmann, and John Ferron, the editor of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, *Mirages* and *Trapeze* were edited by Paul Herron, the founder of Sky Blue Press, which releases an annual magazine, titled *A Café in Space: The Anaïs Nin Literary Journal*.

The next two chapters are largely devoted to Nin's self-marketing in and through the diary. There are two significant reasons for starting the analysis of Nin's celebrity with the diary. First, separating Nin the public persona from Nin the *Diary* persona is virtually impossible, as she became the director and star of the *Diary*; in a sense, she became her *Diary*. Second, the published version of the diary was the first medium that launched a set of representations of Nin, which later would be either reinforced or contested as Nin's visibility in the public increased. But before I concentrate on Nin's diary, a few words of introduction to the phenomenon of literary celebrity are in order.