

A SPY IN THE HOUSE OF LOVE: AN INTRODUCTION TO ANAIS NIN

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Anais Nin was born in Paris in 1903. Her father was a Cuban pianist and composer and her mother a singer of French-Danish origin. At the age of nine, after her father had abandoned the family, she started writing her **Diary**, which consisted of over one hundred volumes at the time of her death in Los Angeles in 1977. When she was eleven, she was brought to New York where, at the age of sixteen, Nin started writing in English. Her first book to be published was **D.H. Lawrence: An Unprofessional Study**, in 1932. She also worked as a fashion and artist's model and as a Spanish dancer for some time. Having been psychoanalysed by Otto Rank, she became his assistant.

The **Diary**, of which portions have been published, are almost unanimously considered as her main contribution to literature, but her criticism and fiction are also worth being taken into serious consideration. As a critic, besides several articles, she wrote **The Novel of the Future**, in which she exposes her techniques and theories, as well as analyses the works of several other novelists, painters, and filmmakers. In fiction, she is best known for her "continuous novel" **Cities of the Interior**, a series of five books in which Nin tries to present "dramas as the unconscious lives them:"¹ **Ladders to Fire**, **Children of the Albatross**, **The Four-Chambered Heart**, **A Spy in the House of**

Love, Seduction of the Minotaur.

The form chosen to present such dramas is usually that of a journey, an inward voyage toward the self, thus putting into practice one of the author's most cherished ideas: "form is created by meaning,"² that is to say, it is "born of theme."

The journeys presented in Nin's novels therefore attempt to portray the quest for the self, a search for identity that invariably takes place inside a woman's psyche. As a consequence of this fact, men appear as mere satellites, points of reference for the development of the main character, usually 'a woman at war with herself,'³ torn between colliding impulses such as those for creativity and for destruction. Due to this situation, the use of a limited point of view and interior monologue are a natural consequence, and they will appear in most of Nin's works.

Nin revolted against realism in literature. She considered it as a mere cult of ugliness, which resulted in the misinterpretation of reality. According to her, this cult of ugliness revealed itself as something very different from the acceptance of the existence of ugliness, rather presenting an enjoyment with such ugly aspects than an attempt to denounce situations that should be changed. Moreover, it expressed the "inability to discard 'what is' and create 'what might be.'"⁴ She goes further into it, blaming American culture for providing the necessary atmosphere for the development of such a situation: "Our American culture decided at one point to trust the 'objective' vision against the one, the 'subjective'."⁵ The consequence being that, instead of raising men to the level of the artist, America has reduced the artist to the quality of the common man: the ideal of democracy has led to a loss of identity, therefore resulting in an obsessive use of the theme of alienation, to such an extent that only through the use of extreme violence are human beings able to relate to one another.

To realism Nin opposed what she called reality, something which would not mean the mere attempt to reproduce the external aspects of life, but the effort to show both the conscious and the unconscious levels of experience, a flowing, permanently changing phenomenon, and the existence of multiple and changing selves. She wanted her works to produce the same direct effect

through the senses that music and painting provoke: Nin was searching for the production of the comprehensive art form, trying to go beyond the fusion of poetry and prose in order to create a synthesis of other media in literary terms. Therefore her style and the structure of her works will present a great influence of painting, music, and dance, a fact which will lead to the adoption of unconventional techniques, but not to the extent of transforming her writings into something too complex which would not be understood by large numbers of readers. She is definitely not a writer's writer.

The Novel of the Future significantly begins with the chapter "Proceed from the Dream Outward," a fact which well expresses another aspect of Nin's preoccupations: the dream, which "instead of being something apart from reality, a private world of fantasy or imagination, is actually an essential part of our reality which can be shared and communicated by means of imagery."⁶ For Nin dreams might be more important than physical encounters and therefore her characters cannot be expected to function like real people. According to Evelyn J. Hinz, 'Nin's characters also have external-practical attributes that make them ideally suited to the playing of symbolic roles. These they hold in common: all are women, all are artists, all are generally known only by their first names.'⁷ As the artist embodies the exaggerated feelings of ordinary people, the final effect will be very far from realism, the writer giving much more importance to the poetic significance of the stereotype, "because her characters' allegiance is not to society but to the "cities of the interior,"⁸ as Hinz points out. It is not Nin's intention to create the illusion of life. She would rather be interested in giving the impression of a struggle, with the elimination of all unnecessary external characteristics: "It is to reach a greater reality (authenticity) that I abandoned realism."⁹

A Spy in the House of Love is a novel that exemplifies well Nin's preoccupations and the characteristics of her writing. It might be considered as the most experimental of her works, showing a fairly complicated technique, which is achieved through a kind of stylization. In **Spy** Nin reveals her ability in giving symbolic significance to seemingly trivial objects. The arrangement of the novel is rather spatial than chronological: it takes

place inside the mind and feelings of the main character - Sabina - with the limitations that her own vision, obsessions and fantasies impose. It is the author's intention to make the reader know how a Sabina felt.

In spite of all the untraditional aspects, the novel presents an essentially simple situation: a woman torn between the love she feels for her husband and the love she feels for a series of other men. Sabina is reluctant to lead one single life: she wants to live in all directions, the problem lying in the fact that the different selves will not coexist harmoniously.

The name - Sabina - already expresses the existence of a conflict: she is at the same time a seducer by temperament and a victim by conscience. Such conflict will be reinforced throughout the novel by the use of recurrent images associating the heroine with fever and disguise on one side, and with guilt and punishment on the other.

The idea of fever is present ever since the beginning of the novel, when the following description of Sabina is given: "Dressed in red and silver, she evoked the sounds and imagery of fire engines as they tore through the streets of New York."¹⁰ Purple is the other colour she will wear, and one of her lovers calls her a "firebird:" it is "only in Stravinsky's 'Firebird' that Sabina found her unerring musical autobiography. It was only here she could find the lost Sabina, her self-revelation" (p.56). When the lie detector, a mysterious character created by the protagonist's own imagination, sees her for the first time, he feels: "everything will burn" (p.2). Philip, another of her lovers, tells Sabina: "Your body is feverishly hot. Have you had too much sun" (p.24)? Her answer is simply: "Stage fright" (p. 24), thus introducing the associations with disguise. She suffers from stage fright because she is an actress, or else she pretends to be an actress, an occupation that clearly expresses the existence of a struggle between nature and artifice. Deceptiveness is characteristic for an actress, a specialist in gestures, capable of multiple acts of composure and artifice. She is also a specialist in cosmetics: Sabina's eyes are painted with coal dust. The heroine is a specialist in costumes as well: Philip "had never seen a woman dress so quickly, (...) gather up her belongings as

quickly and never forgetting a single one" (p.41-42). When Sabina returns home after one of the supposed tours with her fictitious theatre group, her husband Alan comments: "What an actress you are, (...) you've entered into this woman's part so thoroughly you can't get out of it" (p.14). Significantly enough, the role she pretends to be playing is that of Madame Bovary.

As opposed to the images associated with fever and disguise, Sabina is also related to images connected with guilt and punishment:

She was compelled by a confessional fever which forced her into lifting a corner of the veil, and then frightened when anyone listened too attentively. She repeatedly took a giant sponge and erased all she had said by absolute denial, as if this confusion were in itself a mantle of protection. (p.5)

Words such as "betrayal," "treason," "crime," "arrest," "evil," "fear," "enemy," recur many times throughout the book, and the presence of the lie detector functions as if it were the materialization of her awareness of the fact that she is being followed. All these aspects contribute to create an atmosphere of secrecy and mystery around Sabina: she has to probe the nature of love itself - an adventure of high risk in the quest of a secret. As a consequence of such a situation, she feels as if she were a spy: "an international spy in the house of love" (p.58). Furthermore, the same way as the actor, the spy is another specialist in the art of disguise, both of them having to alter roles continuously. And, to add to the atmosphere of mystery there are also Sabina's "moon baths," and the fact of her preferring night to the day, an aspect which definitely establishes the opposition between the protagonist and "day people:" "She understood why it angered her when people spoke of life as One life. She became certain of myriad lives within herself." (p.34)

According to Evelyn J. Hinz,¹¹ the novel is unified in three ways: by the presence of the lie detector, expressing the conflict temperament versus conscience; the use of imagistic and metaphoric patterns, some of which already mentioned; by the figure of the compass, whose fixed foot would stand for Alan and home, and whose

free foot would represent the several paths Sabina attempts to follow. Her internal conflict is therefore expressed as a struggle between her need for stability on one side, and her need for mobility on the other.

Alan and home would represent her need for stability, for he is described as being very calm, "a photograph in her mind" (p.10), "a snap-shot" (p.10), "a fixed point in space" (p.9), "having a calm face" (p.9), "a calm bearing" (p.9), "a static pose" (p.10), as having "a rock-like center to his movements" (p.12): "... his emotions, his thoughts revolved around a fixed centre like a well organized planetary system" (p.12). And, "in the two snap-shots she carried he showed two facets but no contrasts: one listening and waiting, wise, and detached, the other sitting in meditation as a spectator" (p.10), a description which once again stresses the figure of the actress in the midst of a performance, in movement, as if to contrast with Alan's fixed image merely watching. A contrast which is taken even further in the description of their home as something unchangeable, expressing Alan's stability in every detail:

He was there. Five days had not altered his voice, the all-enveloping expression of his eyes. The apartment had not changed. The same book was still open by his bed, the same magazines had not yet been thrown away. He had not finished some fruit she had bought the last time she had been there. Her hands caressed the overfull ash trays, her fingers designed rivers of meditation on the coats of dust on the table. Here living was gradual, organic, without vertiginous descents or ascents. (p.43)

As totally opposed to this static situation, Sabina's need for mobility is also exhaustively stressed throughout the novel: She could not "sit still. She talked profusely and continuously. ... She sat as if she could not bear to sit for long and when she rose to buy cigarettes she was equally eager to return to her seat" (p.99). Innumerable references to transportation modes are also made: red and green traffic lights, taxis, ships, buses, trucks, bicycles, streets, trailers, roads, walks, alleys, boats, flying, parachute, all these elements come and go as the story develops. Sabina is the "firebird" which one of her lovers wants

to capture, a bird in perpetual motion to avoid confrontation with herself: having been compared to fire engines running through the streets of New York, her cape reinforces the idea that she is in permanent flight and stresses her swiftness: "Her cape which was more than a cape, which was a sail, which was the feelings she threw to the four winds to be swelled and swept by the wind in motion..." (p.92)

Pointing is another element which contributes to emphasize the mobility aspect and the existence of many Sabinas: during a visit to an ancient city ravaged by an earthquake, the remaining façades of the houses remind her of De Chirico's paintings, in which doors and windows are not closed, and people are "protected from strangers only by one wall and door, but otherwise completely free of walls or roofs from the other three sides" (p.55), an image which expresses the possibility of innumerable escapes from the stability represented by home in search of "this illimitable space she had expected to find in every lover's room, the sea, the mountains visible all around, the world shut off on one side." (p.55)

One of Sabina's lovers is a painter, and the description of Jay's works also adds to the ideas of movement and multiplicity, thus reminding the reader of the existence of many different Sabinas leading to several conflicting directions and yet all of them remaining as separate parts of the same woman: "... his figures exploded and constellated into fragments, like spilled puzzles, each piece having flown far enough away to seem irretrievable and yet not far enough to be dissociated." (p.93)

The third painting mentioned in the text is the one which best comprises the theme of the novel and its form: "Eight or ten outlines of the same woman, like many multiple exposures of a woman's personality, neatly divided into many layers walking down the stairs in unison" (p.107). This total woman in Marcel Duchamp's "Nude Descending a Staircase" would stand for the complete novel as well as for stability, whereas each individual outline would refer to each separate episode in the book, and therefore to mobility.

The conflict stability-mobility is taken even further if one establishes a parallel between Sabina's relationships with

her husband and with each one of her lovers. Alan calls her "My little one" (p.13), this way expressing his partial view of only one Sabina, as if she were Duchamp's "total woman." There are many other Sabinas though, under many layers, and each one of her lovers is invested with a particular symbolic quality or is associated with a significant object, aspects which clearly establish the distinction between the different kinds of love she feels for each one of them, while she "could only see Alan as a kind father who might become angry at her lies and punish her." (p.57)

Philip is an opera singer who has already played the role of Don Juan and rehearses the part of Tristan. Sabina ends up by being his Isolde, and when she is introduced to his wife, he says: "Meet Dona Juana" (p.41), this way defining the protagonist as a woman of many lovers, permanently looking for something in several different men and never finding what she seeks.

John is a puritan who therefore thinks that love is evil. Consequently the woman to whom he makes love can only be a "bad woman" (p.72). He is not only an aviator, but also a gunner, and when Sabina sleeps with him, she has the impression that she "slept with war, all night I slept with war once. I received deep war wounds into my body, as you never did, a feat of arms for which I will never be decorated." (p.75)

Mambo accuses Sabina of being a selfish pleasure-seeker who can only see in him the exotic aspect which will satisfy her desires. His name and his drum add to make it clear that he provokes the manifestation of the "native" Sabina: "He felt that she embraced in him, kissed on his lips the music, the legends, the trees, the drums of the island he came from." (p.53)

Donald is an androgynous character, an anemic adolescent who collects empty cages in the hope of finding that "unique bird I once saw in my dreams" (p.83). This unique bird can only be a "firebird," and one day Sabina realizes that she is "moulting," playing the role of a mother and guardian to a feeble young man.

The need for mobility is further expressed in several of the sexual encounters described in the book. John, whose occupation is connected with transportation, first meets Sabina at an intersection while riding his bicycle and waiting for the stop

signal to change. They walk together "endlessly, tirelessly along the beach" (p.66), and then they bicycle home. Sabina and Philip make love inside a sailboat, and as she and Jay have no place to go, they end up by having sexual intercourse inside an elevator:

She pressed the button wildly, and we went on kissing as the elevator came down. When we got to the bottom it was worse, so she pressed the button again, and we went up and down, up and down, while people kept trying to stop it and get on... (p.104)

Another aspect which should be taken into consideration is the importance given to music in the novel, to the extent that one may say its structural principle is that of a musical composition. The recurrence in the end of a scene presented in the beginning gives the impression of a finished book, an enclosed novel, without destroying the impression of flow sustained by phrasal repetition and the absence of transitions. Events flow into each other without an apparent break, in such a way that one can speak of the existence of movements and not chapters, movements which express the cadences of a mood and the flow of the narrator's voice.

This sense of flow and movement brings forth the idea of music, a constant presence in the text, through the mentioning of several compositions and other details: Wagner's "Tristan and Isolde"; "Don Juan"; Debussy's "Île Joyeuse" and "Clair de Lune"; the record presenting drumming and singing from the real Île Joyeuse; Mambo and his drum; Stravinsky's "Firebird"; the Beethoven quartets in the final scene. Music is present so much in the book that one can say it represents "a symbol of the kind of perfection unattainable in human relations," as Oliver Evans points out.¹² That is the reason why the lie detector tells her: "You sought your wholeness in music" (p.116-117). It is the awareness of the discrepancy between this ideal world of art and music, of dreams, and the real world, the impossibility of unity between the two and, consequently, of her various selves that makes Sabina recognize her failure in the final scene, which once again presents the image of a transportation mode, this time coming to a complete stop: "Sabina slid to the floor and sat there with her head against the phonograph, with her wide skirt floating for one

instant like an expiring parachute; then deflated completely and died in the dust." (p.118)

One last aspect concerning *A Spy in the House of Love* which would be worth mentioning here is the parallel established by Anna Balakian between Nin's novel and Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*.¹³ In both novels the heroines have committed adultery and therefore have broken a moral code. Hester Prynne has to face the authority of a Higher Being, whereas Sabina will only face a secular judge. Both women present the need for redemption, the difference being that in Hester's case, punishment is imposed by society, which gradually changes the connotation of the "A." In Sabina's case, condemnation is self-inflicted, due to the existence of a past code which is heavier than outside sources. She suffers not because she wants to obtain liberation from society's rules, but because of the difficulty in coordinating happiness with freedom. Yet, she retains two features from religion: the need for a confessional, which is caused by a sense of guilt provoked not because love would be considered as something evil, but because she must act hypocritically in order not to hurt Alan.

NOTES

- ¹ Anais Nin, *Realism and Reality* (New York: Gemor Press, 1946), p.14.
- ² Anais Nin, *On Writing* (New York: Gemor Press, 1947), p.27.
- ³ Anais Nin, *Ladders to Fire* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1946), p.11.
- ⁴ Anais Nin, *The Novel of the Future* (New York: Collier, 1976), p.174.
- ⁵ Nin, *The Novel of the Future*, p.78.
- ⁶ Nin, *The Novel of the Future*, p.23.
- ⁷ Evelyn J. Hinz, *The Mirror and the Garden: Realism and Reality in the Writing of Anais Nin*, (New York: Harcourt, 1973), p.66.
- ⁸ Hinz, p.63.
- ⁹ Nin, *The Novel of the Future*, p.45.
- ¹⁰ Anais Nin, *A Spy in the House of Love* (New York: Bantam, 1977), p.2. All further references to this work appear in the text.
- ¹¹ Hinz, pp.57-58.

¹²Evans, p.158.

¹³Anna Balakian, "'... and the pursuit of happiness:' *The Scarlet Letter* and *A Spy in the House of Love*." *Mosaic* XI/2 (winter 1978), pp.163-170.

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