

The Diary of Anais Nin

Review

Richard Centing

1967

a review of

The Diary of Anais Nin: Vol. 1 (1931–1934) and Vol. 2 (1934–1939). Edited by Gunther Stuhlmann. Swallow Press/Harcourt, Brace & World. \$6.95 each.

“Creation,” says Anais Nin, “is a source of action, a directive which alters the course of human life.”

And anyone who reads these diaries will find them revolutionary, destined to take their place with the great transcendental works.

Anais offers an alternative to the industrial state and the violence of mass anxiety: the route of the dream that leads toward humanism founded on the individual beyond ideology. “There is not one big, cosmic meaning for all, there is only the meaning we each give to our life...a book for each person.”

When I spoke to her recently in New York she told me that she was not deeply involved politically because she believed the French saying that one should cultivate one’s own garden first. Creating a garden for the growth of the artist has been her life.

The two volumes now published are part of a continuing diary that has grown to 150 volumes. The people that she encounters range from Henry Miller to Otto Rank; indeed, the characters in her diary represent a wide slice of ‘the intellectual history of her time, including the surrealists Artaud and Breton. Their relationships are enlightening, but the biography is not an end in itself, only a trellis upon which she hangs her images, making the diary a work of art.

Even speculations on minor characters produce revelations. Richard Osborn, lawyer by day, bohemian by night, who talks about writing someday, leads into a digression on hibernation. “The symptoms of hibernating are easily detectable: first, restlessness. The second, absence of pleasure.” To avoid the death of pleasure Anais believes that we should not be afraid to live out our dreams. By the example of her own salvation through artistic consciousness, she shows us the path to self-liberation through a belief in creative imagination and compassion.

She sees herself on an imagined ship, with a cord made of sand and an anchor or aurora borealis, believing that she can create visions without wine or drugs, suffering the destruction of books and furniture if they hamper her voyages. “What I seek is...not comfort but the smoothness of magical happenings. Not security but the drug effects of harmony.”

From the diary she also extracts the material for her fiction. She said that readers are being created for her fiction by their exposure to the diary.

One of the greatest short stories of our time, “Birth,” from *Under a Glass Bell* (1948), concerns a woman’s experience of a stillbirth, and is a distillation of a chapter from the diary in which she relates her communion with God as the result of her experience.

“I had come upon the infinite, through the flesh and through the blood.”

This story is an example of her attempt to transcend realism and probe the unconscious mystery of life, not unlike her earlier hero, D.H. Lawrence. To make her point about realism she relates an anecdote about Hemingway complaining that he was aware of another dimension in writing and not being able to reach it, because “he was trapped in his reporting of externals.”

Throughout the diary we are experiencing a woman’s instinctual knowledge that has faith in its power to create a world different from man’s objective detachment. It is easy to be seduced by her promotion of the mythical, and forget the virtues of realism; but we need her warmth now, as we needed the cold bath of Henry Miller.

As woman-artist she seeks to find in reality the eternal moments turned into living rituals. “Woman wants to destroy aloneness, recover the original paradise.” Men have often looked contemptuously on the artistic pursuits of women: hopefully this diary is the predecessor of a female literature that can unveil the mystery of the womb, and retrieve man from the folly of his self-imposed alienation from nature.

Today, as exploration of the self becomes more important than rational systems, the male role will be the most changed. Already the psychedelic generation has taken the lead.



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