Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Anaïs Nin: The Last Days

Barbara Kraft · Tuesday, December 13th, 2016

[alert type=alert-white]Please consider making a tax-deductible donation now so we can keep publishing strong creative voices.[/alert]

Anaïs Nin: The Last Days *is a descriptive narrative chronicling the last three years of the celebrated diarist's life and her heroic battle with the cancer that felled her at the very apex of her long awaited literary success. The artistic renown that Nin had craved throughout her life finally came in her last decade with the publication of Diaries I-VI; the first volume was published in 1966.*

This memoir is based on my intimate relationship with Anais from 1974-1977, the years she referred to as the "years of pain and suffering." Underlying the narrative drama that spans Nin's many hospitalizations and surgeries are the themes of love and betrayal, pity and compassion, forgiveness and redemption. What follows is the Preface to ***Anaïs Nin: The Last Days.***

***

"A writer is in the end not his books, but his myth.
And that myth is in the keeping of others"

– V.S. Naipaul

"Barbara – This is Anaïs Nin speaking. I have read your work and I think it is very good. We have many affinities. I would like you to come and see me." That was how it began. Three years later it ended in a faint whisper: "I can't tell the world about my illness but you can Barbara, and I want the world to know. I want you to write about this."

I have chosen to reveal the intimacies of Anaïs's last days as I witnessed them so that the story of her death is not lost. There is no such thing as death. Everything comes back in the mind's eye. Everything comes back in the crucible of the heart. She remains in my psyche all these years later as the most refined and rarified human being I have ever encountered. As Marcel Proust observed, "People do not die immediately for us, but remain bathed in a sort of aura of life…it is as though they were traveling abroad."

I met Anaïs Nin February 8, 1974. I know the exact date because it is the first entry in the diary I

began to keep that day under her guidance…

> *"I met with Miss Nin today. It was as if I had always known her, so easy was the dialogue and yet I was conscious of being in the company of a vital presence. In a strange way I feel as if my life has been a preparation for this meeting with this singularly, uncommon woman…"*

This situation came about through the auspices of International College in Los Angeles, a tutorial college of scholars and professionals whose roster at the time included Anaïs Nin, Buckminster Fuller, and Lawrence Durrell. Two and a half years later, my diary, *The Restless Spirit: Journal of a Gemini,* was published by Celestial Arts/Les Femmes with a preface by Anaïs.

From the moment of our initial meeting until her death in January 1977, I was captivated by Anaïs who inspired intense feelings in everyone she came in contact with. No one was left untouched by an encounter with the woman her brother Joaquin referred to as the "steel hummingbird." It was either love or hate. For me it was love at first sight. Nothing I had read about her had prepared me for this meeting which was to so dramatically change the course of my life.

When she answered the door that balmy February afternoon, the kind we Californians are known to brag about, I was mesmerized by the figure who greeted me. She was Henry Miller's *Être Étoilique*. Dressed in a floor-length, gauzy, cerise-hued Indian gown — the kind popular among the counterculture in those days but one which she wore regally — she was taller than I had imagined. Perhaps five feet six inches. Her center-parted hair sat on top of her head like a tiny golden crown. There was not a line on the finely-wrought, mother-of-pearl skin to indicate her seventy-some years. She was poetry embodied with a hauntingly accented, slightly husky, flute-like voice. As she led me into the house, I followed in her wake feeling awkward and ungainly while she seemed to glide over the rose-colored carpet like a swan skimming the surface of still water.

Throughout 1974, we met nearly every week and during those sessions I would read to her from the diary that I was writing. It was the story of my life as I lived it from day to day between our meetings in Anaïs' glass 'house of mirrors' overlooking Silver Lake. She shared the house with her long-time companion Rupert Pole, who built the house for her. Anaïs never articulated exactly what her relationship to Pole was, and I never asked. He came and went, fetched the mail, cleaned the pool, offered a glass of wine. Husband or companion? At the time, it didn't matter, and I paid scant attention to him that first year.

The tutorial relationship between us quickly turned into an intimacy. This gift for intimacy with those whom Anaïs perceived as like-spirits, or would convert into like-spirits, was one of her most prominent traits; her work reverberates with references to twin-ship, sisterhood, and like-hood.

At the end of that first year, in December of 1974, Anaïs was hospitalized with advanced cancer. A lengthy and devastating surgery followed. For the next two years, she was in and out of the hospital for repeated sessions of chemotherapy, radiation, and additional surgeries. The golden crown fell out in clumps on the bathroom floor and she was attached, through an incision on her right side, to a series of bags that contained the bilious, acidic fluids draining from her broken body. These years of "pain and suffering" carved her a new face and rendered her a mortal being, made of flesh and bones and blood. As her illness progressed, my visits became more frequent. During the last six months of her life, I went to see her as often as I could, usually three or four times a week; when I was unable to visit we spoke on the phone.

To participate in Nin's death was an extraordinary experience. There was the time shortly before she died when my phone rang late at night.

"Barbara, do you think you could slip away for a bit? I know it is terribly late but I cannot bear the pain anymore. Please come and sit with me. I need you."

When I arrived she was in terrible distress and asked if I would get in bed with her and hold her in my arms. She said, "I've never done this before. I've never wept on another woman's shoulder. But there are some places where women touch that men cannot know."

When she died January 14, 1977, Anaïs Nin was 73 years old. She so wanted to live, this graceful, elegant, cultivated woman whom Henry Miller called "a masterpiece."

Illness is the great leveler from which none of us is immune. It flushes out all the old, buried truths and puts us in touch with the essential meaning of things. There is no time, no energy for masks, veils, labyrinths, interior cities or multiple hearts. Death hovered over her, a falcon circling its prey; it was the one reality that Anaïs could not transcend or transmute or transform or levitate with the magic of words. It was a reality she met with a dignity that tore at the heart of all of us who knew her and were close to her. No one dies as Anaïs did. During this time I learned that the essence of a human being is resistant to time and that, in spite of all, it is possible for human beings to find grace.

Several years later, I met Henry Miller and we reminisced fondly about Anaïs. (Ironically, he too was nearing the end.) Lovers during the 1930s in Paris when both were struggling to make names for themselves, their paths crossed one last time when they ended up in the same hospital at the same time, separated by a floor or two.

Leaning on his elbows across the dinner table one evening, Henry laughed as he told me that Anaïs was the "greatest fabulist" he had ever known, and one also possessed of the nine lives of the cat. Henry was a tough old bird, rather like a turkey, with his croaky voice, heavily veined hands, parchment-thin skin, wattled throat and naked head. The memory of Anaïs's shenanigans amused him, spreading across his wrinkled face in a broad smile. Being of a less sanguine disposition than Miller, Anaïs herself referred to her lies as "mensonges vitals" by which she meant "the lies which give life."

As I was to learn shortly before her death and quite by accident, Anais had been married to two men at the same time. I was in New York visiting a friend when one of Nin's acquaintances invited me to a dinner being given by an Ian Hugo. It was then that I learned that Ian Hugo was Anaïs's husband, Hugh Guiler, not Rupert Pole.

Nin married Hugh Guiler in 1923, met Rupert Pole in 1947 (he was 16 years her junior), and married him bigamously in 1955. Once her diaries were published, she was forced to annul the Pole marriage for tax reasons. Her legal husband was and remained Hugh Guiler until the end of her life, while Rupert Pole, her constant companion, cared for and nursed her through her long and terrible battle with cancer.

A myth in her own time, the Scheherazade of the diary genre, both of her husbands 'spared' her life and by so doing made her creative life possible. Without their support, there would not have been the Anaïs Nin of the diaries as we know her. When she died the obituaries in the East listed Hugh P. Guiler as the husband of the deceased; in the West, Rupert Pole.

The publication of Nin's diaries fortuitously coincided with the women's movement, which catapulted her into the status of an icon. She was thought by her followers to possess an authentic feminine voice, free of male influence. She presented herself as having successfully defied the conventions of a woman's role, emerging unscathed to tell the tale. It was an unbeatable combination in those idealistic days.

My personal experience with Nin is where I started, but I'll never know how much of what she related to me about her actual life was true and how much was her 'signature' evasive fabrication. In the 1990's, two biographies appeared revealing that Nin's published diaries were all smoke and veils; that her life as she wrote about it in the diaries was a labyrinth of lies which she edited and rewrote in a never ending re-creation of self. (I reviewed the Deidre Bair biography for the *Los Angeles Times* in 1995.) There is no mention in the published diaries of her bicoastal husbands, of her incestuous relationship with her father, published posthumously as *Incest* by Rupert Pole, of her many abortions.

Does it matter? It can be argued that there is no language without deceit. The diaries are, in a sense, an imagined version of Nin's life as she wanted us to perceive it, perhaps how she herself wanted to perceive it. My feeling upon our initial meeting was of a woman who had fashioned herself to become the myth of her own design.

In retrospect, I have come think of her as like the Sirens of mythology. Part bird, part woman, they lured the sailors to their deaths on the rocky coasts they inhabited. There was something in Nin's voice, in the timbre, in her articulation that lured her followers, that lured me, into the intoxicating aura of her being. Odysseus, warned by Circe of the power of the Sirens, wisely stuffed his ears with wax and had himself tied to the mast of his ship before it sailed past the Siren's craggy home. As Edmund Wilson, one of Anaïs's *en passant* lovers wryly observed, she was both a "practical little Franco-Spanish housewife" and a "lovely little nymph who was not quite a human being."

In the end, her spirit transcended her human failings. We should all be able to say as much. She was the physical embodiment of poetic lyricism and in this role, in the role of the creative spirit, she spread light and hope. That is how she will be remembered. That is how I remember her.

This entry was posted on Tuesday, December 13th, 2016 at 9:10 pm and is filed under Fiction
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.