

"Pseudo Heart Trouble":
Anais Nin in 1950s America

by

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Is it possible to imagine a person as exotic, as European, and as experimental as Anais Nin living through the American 1950s, a decade of hamburgers and hotrods, but also censorship and McCarthyism? This post-World War II period was one of deep conservatism, growing commercialism, and obsession with family that led to a "baby boom." It was a time when even Lucille Ball -- one of America's treasures -- was accused of being a "red." What did a daring iconoclast like Nin make of such a decade?

On a rainy day in Los Angeles, almost sixty years after the period I was researching, I drove through pelting rain and walked across the otherwise deserted UCLA campus to examine contents of the Anais Nin Collection in search of evidence. Nin had written and spoken of her unhappiness during the '50s, of the "silence" in response to her work, and of her dissatisfaction with the culture. But I also knew that during these years Nin was entering her own chronological fifties, a powerful and potentially difficult passage of change.

The loose leaf diary pages, letters, and other documents I found in the gray file boxes housed in UCLA's Special Collections Library reveal that in the weeks immediately before she turned 51 in February of 1954, and continuing through the mid-'50s, Anais Nin struggled to find solid footing. Perhaps symbolically, she wrote that she believed she was suffering from heart trouble. Another image she conjured was of punishment in a solitary

cell. The lasting impression for me is of a prisoner serving out a time of confinement while the engine of her physical life and the seat of her feelings – her very heart -- threatens to quit altogether. It is a vivid and painful image from a particularly difficult passage in a writer's life.

* * *

On February 10, 1954, after returning to husband Hugh Guiler in New York from another clandestine stay with Rupert Pole in mild Sierra Madre, California, Nin wrote¹:

When I arrived a month ago the plane landed in a snowstorm. It was 6am. I wore no rubbers. Several passengers shared a cold taxi which had difficulty in getting through the snow. All night I had felt such pain in the chest that I thought I would die of heart trouble in the plane. I was surprised to awaken alive. In the cold taxi I felt so weak I thought this was truly the end. Hugo had arrived a few hours before from Haiti. I got into a hot bath, to warm myself. In the bath my sense of illness and weakness overwhelmed me. I wept. I went to bed. I got up later to see Dr. Bogner. We arranged for a medical check up the next morning. It took all morning. No heart trouble, no tuberculosis, no cancer – but a low functioning of thyroid and lack of estrogen. I was given pills. The pain continued for a few days but the anxiety disappeared. Once more I was repaired by doctors.

Through this period, Nin repeatedly wrote of "heart trouble" associated with weakness. She had been told by a doctor that her heart would worsen with age and, upon telling Hugo this, he wept. Surely, Nin may have been suffering from physical

¹ For the sake of clarity, I've made minor corrections to selections from Nin's diary.

illness or disease; she had undergone a grueling operation exactly one year before to have a tumor removed from her ovary. But Nin's life during the '50s was particularly stressful. Chief among her stressors was the fact that she regularly flew back and forth between two men and was compelled to keep the triangle relationship a secret. She felt forced to create elaborate stories to serve as excuses for the constant travel, and both the travel and the strain wore heavily. But there were other factors in her life that certainly affected Nin dramatically.

Nin's mid-1950s diary reveals that she suffered over criticism, lack of understanding, and outright rejection of her writing. As I began examining the contents of the boxes, I came across letter after letter from publishers rejecting Nin's novels. While most were polite and genteel in tone, one publisher took another approach, stating with blunt finality that he found Nin's novels "pretentious." Later in the year Nin even wrote a letter to a reviewer in which she defended her work against what she felt was his total misunderstanding. And in the fall of 1954, Nin received a letter from a friend named Carol who wrote a long and detailed criticism of *Spy in the House of Love*, basically pronouncing it uneven. Nin responded with a letter of strong defense, explaining that the psychology of the character of Sabina is uneven and warned Carol not to "judge." Once again Carol responded, restating and underscoring her original criticism. Fascinatingly, this letter is ripped into pieces, but then taped back together. There was no continuing argument from Nin and no further correspondence from Carol.

Another source of stress was what Nin called her "failure" to succeed in supporting herself financially, in spite of her repeated efforts to do so through her writing. This pitched her into the hands of the two men in her life -- men who, in her words, provided "protection," but who also made

demands. On October 6, 1954 from Sierra Madre, she wrote:

The efforts I made this month to sell books, give lectures, were interpreted by Hugo as an effort to help him (by supporting myself) and to Rupert as an effort to earn my living here so I will not have to go to N.Y. too often. Both are true. And it is also true I failed. I earned exactly \$100 this month!

Auspiciously, Nin then received a check for *Spy in the House of Love* from James Brown Associates for \$186.62, along with note from "Joan," revealing:

I know you will be appalled at the size of this payment, but as far as we can tell the statement is correct, unless you have some different information. I hope that you will not decide to give up writing as a bad job.

To further complicate Nin's problems during this period, she experienced a deep distaste for American life. In November of 1954 she wrote:

It is true Rupert was raised here and can listen to the ugliest voices in the world discuss the price of the new Hilton Hotel, read *Time Magazine* – and accept mediocre people. But for the few moments of heightened life.

Later, she wrote:

Return to France impossible because it is a return to the artist life separated from the rest of the world – and possible only because of Hugo's work at the time. The concentration upon creation, which was my paradise: writing with Henry, and breathing the artist's life, is not possible here.

Why? asked Bogner.

I am not sure. I reconstructed for her the efforts I made to live with the artists here. I knew them all. But it was not the same. I remember when we tried to meet at the café on East 13th and Davis, the painter turned on the radio to listen to a prize fight. It is

intermittent, not continuous. And the fraternity is destroyed by competitiveness. The pressure from the outer world is greater. The pressure of economics, the problems of living. The atmosphere, the moral climate of Paris helped. Also absence of Puritanism and political pressure. I don't know what the artist life in Paris is like today.

Varda is the only one leading such a life today in Sausalito.

Again, later, she continued ruminating on this issue:

So much takes place within me that by comparison I find a paucity, a stinginess, a silence in people which drives me to excess. I would at times be less of a rebel if people did not seem so inert, cautious.

Am I creating my own isolation? It seems to me that most of my acts are of integrity. It is true I do not share with the many the cult of T.S. Elliot, or of Dylan Thomas. That I broke with "Living Theatre" after seeing play by Rexroth and Gertrude Stein. Sincerely, I do not care for the Sitwells. I do care about Tennessee Williams and Capote.

Do I really deserve this Solitary Cell treatment?

To confound Nin's problems, she also experienced what are believed to be the classic signs of mid-life hormonal changes: waning energy, mood issues such as anger, and depression. Her self-awareness, as always, was vivid. In November of 1954 she wrote:

With Bogner I discover I cannot assume leadership, because of fear of my angers – of an uncontrollable anger that might explode. This anger is inextricably woven into my active and positive impulses. It forces me into passivity – a passivity I do not enjoy. Every active manifestation is followed by depression.

When Nin attended an exhibit of Henry Miller's watercolor paintings at the Brooklyn Library, she saw a publisher, someone she called, simply, "Laughlin" -- a man who had, in Nin's opinion, been in a position to defend Miller's writing, but who had not. She recorded the scene in her diary, once again framed by the growing intensity of her frustration:

When I saw Laughlin come in I said to myself: be careful of your hostility, Anais. [...]

I went up to him and said: "You made me so happy writing a letter in which you said my writing was deteriorating because for years I have felt your taste was deteriorating." He was startled but said: "Oh you must not take this personally!"

I asked him during the meeting why he had not fought for Miller's books in court. He answered his lawyer had told him he could not win. But that is not a reason for not fighting, as we know from political battles.

Holding runaway horses of my angers!

She went on to explain:

I cannot bear to see myself as a person capable of anger -- as one possessing a quick temper.

Repression of anger causes intensification of it.

Six months later, Nin described her continuing physical struggle and her exhaustion became apparent:

I haven't the energy to push it. The only thing of which I have become avaricious is my energy. I try not to waste it. [...]

What frightens me is that my energy is lessening -- so I will soon accept, resign myself. The energy I have left I had hoped to use in getting out of America and finishing my major work.

My modern interpretation of this confluence is this: In her early fifties, Anais Nin was damned tired. She had struggled over twenty years for acceptance of her writing and, along with being ignored, fought criticism from publishers and friends alike. Because she had been unable to support herself financially, she felt trapped and was unable to escape or find a practical solution to her convoluted romantic relationships. As an added strike, Nin's inability to find in America a warm artists' community intensified her feelings of loneliness and her utter distaste for the art of this era added to her feelings of isolation. Finally, the symptoms of menopause, including her struggle not to reveal her anger just when it was coming to a roiling boil, only compounded Nin's dilemma. In the wake of all of these frustrations and heartbreaks, Nin was convinced she had "heart trouble" -- and no wonder. This convergence of practical, creative, physical, and emotional issues threatened to defeat her altogether.

But Nin being Nin, she managed to pull herself together -- at least on the surface. For example, in the weeks before she turned 51 and while working exhaustively to help Hugo present his experimental films publically, she wrote, "I managed, by dint of massages & facials to conceal the fatigue and to look beautiful." And after these "5 weeks of intense work (for Hugo)" she got on a plane to meet Rupert in Mexico. It was her intention to be well for him in every way and to bring about a repeat of past Mexican vacations. She wrote:

But I had worked for it as the Thibetans worked to achieve their religious ecstasies. I had subjected myself to all the disciplines, analysis, doctor Jacobson and [Elizabeth] Arden -- to emerge one morning at the icy airport all in ivory white wool, leopard belt and bag, festive, calm, strong, for life with Rupert. To her delight, the vacation was a success and her pleasure with Rupert deepened.

After taking her restorative pleasures with Rupert in what was one of her favorite countries and in her favorite climate, Nin seemed to spend the winter of late '54 and early '55 preparing to ask herself whether she could continue the struggle to get her writing into the world. Then, shortly after her 52nd birthday, Nin realized she did indeed have the will to go on:

Then yesterday I asked myself whether I had lost my power to create because of the many humiliations America inflicted on me, and the disastrous failure of the "Spy" -- Am I beaten by the coldness, the stupidity of the critics, and the low level of the life in general? Has America's treatment of me triumphed?

The answer came this morning. The inner music started again. I reread what I had done on *Solar Bark* and liked it. Tonight I hear the music, and all my feelings are awake.

My greatest problem is one inherent in the experimental itself. Because I follow the pattern of free association, the design is sometimes chaotic even to me.

The attempt to construct a novel in this way is difficult.

I wanted to show how the adventurer does not forget his past or escape it when he goes to the paradises.

And here is what is perhaps the most telling line: Lillian does not escape -- so she returns to remember and liquidate the past.

In the vast desert of Nin's mid-'50s America, and after an arduous struggle for acceptance as a writer, she came upon a precipice and glanced over the edge into a terrible breach. What she saw she described after attending a musical presentation:

During the music, because the music was not good, I feel nevertheless reconciled to the idea of my personal death. It would be a pity if I died before completing my work, because I

am an exceptionally fine instrument for human consciousness.

At the point of mid-life, through the lens of time, Nin seemed to have taken the long view and achieved a new wisdom. Though America in the 1950s had brought her to a kind of death, Nin then rediscovered her hunger to succeed. Indeed, she realized she was in the middle of what was a great life-struggle.

Fortunately, Nin had friends who were capable of delivering pep-talks just when she was ready to collapse. Such was the case with Maxwell Geismar, an American author who sent flowers along with a letter to "Anais Pole" in what appears to have been late 1955. A portion of this letter reads:

Dear Anais,

What bothers me most in this whole thing is your conviction that you are 'through' as a writer, at least in this country, and that it is useless to go on writing; if that is what you really feel . . .

This is death for a writer, and you must not accept this statement except as a momentary revulsion...

In early 1956, Nin again struggled with her health. "This is the longest period I have had of low energy and depression," she wrote, "Two months, almost continuously gray." But by the middle of the year a fascinating document appears in Nin's diary files: a typed sheet upon which are handwritten the words: "Pseudo Heart Trouble." Under this title is typed another title: "Symptoms." The sheet describes heart issues, pressure, palpitations, shortness of breath on damp days, and the fact that she had at one point exercised 15 minutes a day but by mid-1956 was only able to exercise five minutes due to "tightness" of her heart. The list continues:

On an emotional level, I have been disturbed, but I am under analysis, for six years.

Other illnesses: typhoid, anemia until the last few years chronic. Jaundice at 30. Stopped menstruating at forty-two. Have had hot flashes ever since with very little relief. Basically depressed, with temporary elations.

Nin's "Pseudo Heart Trouble" document is followed with a letter from a Dr. Harold Pardee in New York. Pardee's letter states that, after administering tests, he concluded Nin's heart was normal. A diary entry from Nin then states that "Bogner," Nin's psychologist, suggested Nin's heart issues could have been caused by anxiety and neurosis. Indeed, Nin lived for another twenty years and died, not of heart problems, but of cancer.

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The image of the heartbroken writer serving out her time in a solitary prison cell is a chilling one. The 1950s were a painful, lonely, and frustrating time for Nin, but it is elevating to know that after laboring on for another decade, Nin transitioned out of this long and difficult phase, achieving breathtaking success as the writer of *The Early Diary of Anais Nin, Vol. 1: 1931-1934*. This diary, written two decades before her darkest creative hour, catapulted her into the kind of fame and awarded her the sort of respect she had always craved. Nin most certainly "liquidated" her past, making events that had haunted her palatable, beautiful, entertaining, and instructive for others.

As I departed UCLA, which protects Nin's now-famous diaries, I drove down Sunset Boulevard. The spring flowers bloomed ecstatically in Beverly Hills. I continued east, by the hospital where Nin

eventually died (which is now the surreally-blue Church of Scientology). Then I drove near Silverlake, where Nin would eventually own with her beloved Rupert a fabulous Japanese-inspired home on a winding hillside. As I drove further away from the ocean where Anais Nin's ashes were scattered, I thought of how the heart ticked on and the solitary cell shattered.