An anthology of radical feminist writings from the current women's movement. Forty-five articles ranging from the personal to the theoretical and drawn largely from the feminist annual NOTES.
Women's Private Writings:
Anaïs Nin

Ann Snitow

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The following article is a radio talk, one of a series by Ann Snitow on women's diaries and letters to be heard on Nanette Rainone's Womankind program, WBAI-FM, and reproduced with her permission.

When I began this radio series on women's diaries and letters I had several goals. The first was to show how much women have written, and how well. The second was to show how hampered they have been by the necessity to think of their writing as largely a left-handed or private matter, not destined to be read by a large audience. However, out of this privacy came new subject matter and new forms. My third goal, then, was to explore what was unique about women's private writing which can and will become a part of the growth of our literature as a whole.

Until recently women's subject matter has been a synonym for the trivial: Women are repetitive; women are subjective; women are gossips. All these qualities have a hard name in our culture. Women are frequently reminded of their ignorance of the world and their limitations are constantly being thrown in their faces. But the confined life most women have led is an historical fact, not an

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aesthetic judgment. Depth of experience is possible anywhere. Women do need a larger world, but the lack of one has not always doomed them to the inconsequence of which they are so often accused. Women are not without a subject matter; they are without respect for their subject matter. Nevertheless, the limitations placed on women have been, and continue to be, crippling. We, and our subject matter, must change.

Finally, my goal for the series has been to say to women that our writing in diaries or in letters is serious and potentially a public form, and to stimulate all women to write in this way. When you have written something in a diary, it becomes permanent, like any form of art, while your life begins instantly to diverge from what it was at the moment of writing. Having a record of an earlier state of mind is both a satisfaction in itself, and a gesture toward the future. The desire to make such a record is at the source of all writing.

If you are keeping a diary or spend energy writing long letters to friends, please write to Womankind about your experience. Maybe other women will be moved by something you say to start writing themselves. Write to: DIARY, c/o Womankind, 359 East 62nd Street, New York, N.Y. 10021.

Anaïs Nin began her diary when she was thirteen and there are now about 150 volumes of it stored in bank vaults. The small portion of this vast work available in print has become a kind of cult book for the feminist movement and I’ve been asking myself why this should be.

It’s puzzling at first, because it’s fairly plain Anaïs Nin isn’t a conscious feminist as we understand the term now. For example, her closest friend in Paris in the Thirties was Henry Miller, who took incredible advantage of her energy and devotion. June Miller, his wife, Anaïs turns into a myth-like image of woman in the diary, and Anaïs’s psychiatrist—Freud’s famous disciple, Otto Rank—often gave her the kind of advice that would be intolerable to a feminist today. For example, he once told her that when neurotic men get cured, they become artists; when neurotic women get cured, they become—Woman.

It seems that then as now, psychiatrists were particularly bad offenders against women, and Anaïs Nin seems to be unaware of
their treachery. Here, for example, is an exchange between her and the psychiatrist she went to before finding Otto Rank:

Anaïs. I am analyzing what you said, and I do not agree with your interpretations.

Dr. Allendy: You are doing my work, you are trying to be the analyst, to identify with me. Have you ever wished to surpass men in their own work, to have more success?

Anaïs: Indeed not. I protected and sacrificed much for my brother’s musical career, made it possible. I am now helping Henry [Miller] and giving him all I can, to do his own work. I gave Henry my typewriter. There I think you are very wrong.

Dr. Allendy: Perhaps you are one of those women who are a friend, not an enemy of man.

Anaïs: More than that, I wanted to be married to an artist rather than be one, to collaborate with him.

The lack of feminist consciousness in the passage is staggering, especially when in a later episode Anaïs mentions quite casually that Henry Miller took that precious typewriter she gave him and pawned it to buy drinks. But this is the painful truth of her diary. After all, she doesn’t care about a mere typewriter. She is forgiving and compassionate about Henry Miller’s weaknesses, his limitations. She loves him, is inspired by him, learns from him, and teaches him, and she is the one who can tell us the things that are wrong with him, and with herself, living through him. The portrait of Henry Miller in these pages is devastating, and every stroke of it laid on with love.

Anaïs Nin was the mediator between Miller and his wife June. With a confused kind of bisexuality she adored them both and understood them both. Henry was the artist, selfish but full of life. June was the model, unsure of her own existence, a victim of Henry’s portrait of her in his books. Anaïs was the androgynous go-between who wanted to play the man to June, and play the male companion, the fellow artist, to Henry.

The diary explores this painful kind of bisexuality—so unlike the kind feminists dream of—in which, to create, you must in some way become a man, but to live in a human way, you must support men, give them your typewriter, and sacrifice those things in you the world calls masculine.

This is the great conflict of the diary. On the one hand, Anaïs Nin
wants to be, in her psychiatrist’s dreadful phrase, “A friend, not an enemy of man.” On the other hand, she wants to live.

It is interesting that in her novels she tries to be true to Art, which to her, and to all her psychiatrists, is primarily a male principle. These novels are abstract, poetic, and literally disembodied. We began this series on women’s private writings partly to raise the question, “Why do women crave anonymity so much that they can only write if they think no one, or almost no one, will ever see what they have said?” Why is it that Anaïs Nin’s diary is full-blooded and complete while what she calls her Art is pale, fragmented, unconscious? Henry Miller was always nagging Anaïs Nin with a related question: “Why,” he kept asking her, “do women lie?”

There are all kinds of answers in the diary:

I only regret that everyone wants to deprive me of the journal, which is the only steadfast friend I have, the only one which makes my life bearable; because my happiness with human beings is so precarious, my confiding moods rare, and the least sign of non-interest is enough to silence me. In the journal I am at ease.

Playing so many roles, dutiful daughter, devoted sister, mistress, protector, my father’s new found illusion, Henry’s needed, all-purpose friend, I had to find one place of truth, one dialogue without falsity. This is the role of the diary.

So the diary is the place where a woman can speak the truth without hurting all those people she is supposed to protect and support. Women can’t tell all, like Portnoy, since so much of what they feel would damn them in men’s eyes. They are too dependent on men to be able to afford this luxury of self-revelation.

Here is the diary again:

Dear diary, you have hampered me as an artist. But at the same time you have kept me alive as a human being. I created you because I needed a friend, and talking to this friend, I have, perhaps, wasted my life.

Today I begin to work. Writing for a hostile world discouraged me. Writing for you gave me the illusion of a warm ambience I needed to flower in. But I must divorce you from my work. Not abandon you. No, I need your companionship....

Never have I seen as clearly as tonight that my diary writing is a vice. I came home worn out by magnificent talks with Henry at the cafe; I glided into my bedroom, closed the curtains, threw a log into the fire, lit a cigarette, pulled the diary out of its last hiding place under my dressing table, threw it on the ivory silk
quilt, and prepared for bed. I had the feeling that this is the way an opium smoker prepares for his opium pipe. For this is the moment when I relive my life in terms of a dream, a myth, an endless story.

This should perhaps prompt us to examine the opium content of our own private writings. To what extent are we cutting ourselves off, both from danger and each other? Certainly we need new forms of writing—women’s forms—and a diary like this one offers another whole way of working and of thinking about our daily lives. But this private, complex, flowing kind of writing must be published, as only an inadequate portion of Anaïs Nin’s diary has been thus far. Her friends and relatives are evidently resisting publication of certain parts of the diary. Out of deference to them, Anaïs Nin cuts herself off from the response of an audience.

People kept trying to get Anaïs Nin to stop writing the diary.

Is Henry right? He does not want me to write a diary any more. He thinks it is a malady, an outgrowth of loneliness. I don’t know. It has also become the notebook of my extroversion, a travel sketchbook: it is full of others. It has changed its aspect. I cannot abandon it, definitely. Henry says: “Lock up the journal, and swim. What I would like you to do is to live without the journal, and you would write other things.”

I would feel like a snail without its shell. Everyone has always stood in the way of the journal. My mother always urged me to go out and play. My brothers teased me, stole it, and made fun of it. It was a secret from my girl friends in school. Everyone said I would outgrow it. In Havana my aunt said it would spoil my eyes, frighten the boys away.

Otto Rank wanted her to give up the diary, too. “The diary is your last defense against analysis,” he told her. “It is like a traffic island you want to stand on. If I am going to help you, I do not want you to have a traffic island from which you will survey the analysis, keep control of it. I do not want you to analyze the analysis. Do you understand?” For a time during the analysis, Anaïs Nin gave up the diary opium habit. Otto Rank comforted her during her withdrawal symptoms by saying, “Perhaps you may discover now what you want—to be a woman or an artist.”

It is our good fortune Anaïs Nin never had the strength to make this absurd choice. Her strength lies elsewhere, in the diary itself. It was her traffic island, from which she judged them all.
In the diary she ceases to be a mirror for other people like Miller and Rank, and tries to become herself. But this is a terrible struggle. "... No one has ever loved an adventurous woman as they have loved adventurous men." So annhilating is this difference that the very images by which she expresses it are, of necessity, male:

This struggle to live by my own truth is so difficult, so wearing. A terrible algebra, always. I am like the adventurer who leaves all those he loves, and returns with his arms full of gold; and then they are happy and they forget how they tried to keep this adventurer from exploring, from his voyage and his search.