

## THE ART OF GUILT AND SELF-DIVISION: ANAÏS NIN'S *A SPY IN THE HOUSE OF LOVE*

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### Abstract:

Anaïs Nin's semi-autobiographical novel, *A Spy in the House of Love* (1954), subjectivizes the physical experience of a wife's infidelities while personifying the mental terrors of her guilt by means of a male figure: The Lie Detector. Embarked on a *tournée* of self-discovery, Sabina is an offstage actress who aestheticizes her adulterous affairs in a sophisticated art of self-division, whereby she intermittently plays the roles of a Byronic Doña Juana and a melodramatic Emma Bovary to continue to cherish her sexual freedom with many lovers, without losing the protection of her fatherly husband. Although guilt is part of Sabina's artifice, the real risk inherent in her self-divisions and self-contradictions as a result of her infidelities, is to lose herself in her own lies and to fail to find her true identity beyond the Cubist canvas of her fragmented selves.

**Keywords:** adultery; guilt; self-division; life-writing; Anaïs Nin

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## 1. Introduction: The Adulteress

Female infidelity haunts men while inspiring writers. The Bible explicitly condemns to death both the promiscuous bride and the adulteress (Deuteronomy 22:21, Leviticus 20:10). In *The Second Sex* (2011), Simone de Beauvoir detects that, in patriarchal communities where a woman is a man's property, her conjugal infidelity is viewed as "a crime of high treason," due to the risk of introducing an illegitimate child into the family line and of "giving heritage rights to a foreign offspring" (118). Unlike unfaithful husbands, adulteresses have historically been labeled both as betrayers of religious dogmas and violators of men's laws of ownership; thus, deserving to be severely punished. Indeed, these women have been persecuted not only by the brutal hand of vindictive men and society, but also by the incisive pens of male writers. Consider the shared fate of Helen of Troy from Greek myths and Queen Guinevere from Arthurian legends, or the later sufferings of Hester Prynne, Emma Bovary, Anna Karenina, Luísa Carvalho, Ana Ozores, Sue Bridehead, Molly Bloom and Constance Chatterley<sup>1</sup> from canonical novels of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These heroines of fiction, portrayed as adulteresses by the pillars of Western literary architecture, are object lessons in self-destruction and social ostracism brought about by their non-conforming behavior with respect to sexual fidelity. Even in the rare exceptions of women writers' treatment of female adultery, like Kate Chopin's novel *The Awakening* (1899), unfaithful wives are doomed to unhappiness, social suicide or physical death.

Although it fertilizes literature, adultery remained as a moral and social taboo, or even a criminal offence, until its depenalization in increasingly secularized Western countries during the second half of the twentieth century. In the 1960s and 1970s, women's liberation movements and the so-called 'Sexual Revolution' not only precipitated the democratization of divorce, the availability of contraceptive methods and the legalization of abortion, but also recognized women's legal rights to own property and to choose their sexual partners beyond the boundaries of marriage, heterosexuality and procreation. Charles Glicksberg (1973) states that this new permissive sexual ethic argued that all guilt is not an expression of nature, but the result of a repressive culture, where marital fidelity is still officially prescribed, but without the same social and legal restrictions preventing a woman from betraying her husband sexually (xix). Thus, the chief difficulty of adultery becomes how to arrange matters to escape detection (xix). Meanwhile, some works from second-wave feminists during the postwar years, such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) or Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1970), have first diagnosed and then attacked women's financial dependence on men, their captivity in compulsory gender roles as wives, mothers and housekeepers and men's use of sex to degrade women. Moreover, the artistic Establishment has ceased to censure the previously denominated 'obscene literature' with erotic content. Likewise, the brave pens of a few female authors, like Doris Lessing in *The Golden Notebook* (1962), Erica Jong in *Fear of Flying*

(1973) or Anaïs Nin in *Delta of Venus* (1977), have not only observed women's lasting emotional dependence on men, but also celebrated their newly-won freedom of self-expression and action, including their right to satisfy their libido and voluptuous desires.

Before this historical and literary explosion of sexual permissiveness, the French-born Cuban-American writer and diarist Anaïs Nin (1903-1977) was a pioneering author by subjectivizing women's physical experiences with tabooed sex, orgasm and infidelity from a genuinely female perspective: her own. Anaïs Nin oracularly embraces the future act of *Écriture Féminine* with the female body,<sup>2</sup> which would be articulated by French Feminism many years later, in the 1970s. Symbolically, Nin obeys Hélène Cixous's credo in "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976), which compels the woman to liberate herself from patriarchal (writing) pressures and to break the silence: "it is with her body that she vitally supports the logic of her speech. Her flesh speaks true. She lays herself bare. In fact, she physically materializes what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body" (881). Nevertheless, Anaïs Nin's bold artistic achievements, anticipating the Sexual Revolution and Cixous's *Écriture Féminine*, remained in the shadows for decades. Benjamin Franklin V. (1997) contends that Nin's *Cities of the Interior*<sup>3</sup> and other works failed to interest publishers in the United States during the late 1940s and 1950s, and even when they were published – with Nin herself assuming part of the printing costs – they did not require a second edition, so her fiction was soon unavailable or out of print (159-160). This commercial failure was accompanied by negative reviews or by indifference from literary critics. Sharon Spencer (1989) posits that in the multivolume *Cities of the Interior*, Anaïs Nin "wanted to endow words with flesh and blood" to prove the value of eroticism, sensual pleasure and love, which were qualities killed by many male writers' "cerebral approach to fiction" and "their puritanical judgmental attitudes" ("The Music" 161). Nin not only rejected the patriarchal literary conventions of her times to engender a new female writing practice, but also used her own physical experiences to explore the *terra incognita* of women's sexual lives and bodies in her stories and journals, long before Cixous formulates *Écriture Féminine*. Being also *avant la lettre*, Anaïs Nin's diaries represent an early form of autofiction. This term, coined by the French writer Serge Doubrovsky in 1977, distinguishes between autobiography and fictionalized autobiography. Finn Jensen (2019) explains that autofiction is a text where the author, the narrator and the protagonist bear the same name, while the text has an active fictional level, so the integrity of the narrator and the truthfulness of the situations are questionable (4-5). In fact, Anaïs Nin's journals occupy an ambiguous realm of in-betweenness, betwixt autobiography and fiction, where the author becomes an unreal construction of her *self* as a heroine, the narrator's reliability is under suspicion and factual information is often elusive.

Elizabeth Podnieks (2000) argues that, as a "consummate liar," Anaïs Nin writes her lifelong journals as an "act of self-invention" – or a work of fiction –

to perpetuate an idealized self-portrait as if she herself were a character and to manipulate episodes of her own life through a careful process of rewriting and editing, while warning her reader not to take her final texts as facts (284-285). Within the fluid novel sequence *Cities of the Interior, A Spy in the House of Love* (1954) becomes, indeed, thin pages with an 'I' perspective uprooted from Nin's own diaries, which are then further fictionalized with a third-person narrator and without the heroine's real name: Anaïs. Nonetheless, the psychological depiction of a woman, as well as the situations and events found in those journals, provide a potent autofictional dimension to *A Spy in the House of Love*. In fact, for Diane Richard-Allerdyce (1998), this novel is part of Nin's process of narrative recovery from traumas, anxieties and conflicts in her own life (127). Since the decade of the 1960s, the relatively successful publication of her diaries, which were meant to be read by others and were later complemented by their unexpurgated versions after her death, confirmed the eventful, yet guilt-ridden, love and sexual life of Anaïs Nin. She is the wife of the wealthy banker Hugo Guiler and the mistress of many men in interwar Paris and the postwar United States, including Henry Miller, René Allendy, Otto Rank, Rupert Pole and her own father Joaquín Nin. In *A Spy in the House of Love*, its protagonist Sabina embodies the self-portrait of Anaïs Nin as depicted in her diaries. In this novel, the author abandons the physical to penetrate the mental, while disintegrating the conventions of a chronological narration so that present times coexist with the recent past in North America or with recollections from a more remote past: Sabina's experiences in Paris some years before. The current urban space of New York or the maritime landscapes of Long Island and Provincetown are the palpable sites for seduction, eroticism and sexual consummation in Anaïs Nin's story. However, these places are narratively substituted by intangible speculations, mental nebula and inventiveness within the labyrinthian cavities of Sabina's brain. Officially, she is the wife of a kind, older man – Alan – and a would-be actress who is apparently often on tour. Nonetheless, her only true artistic performance occurs offstage in her real life: she is a spy in the house of love. She is a woman dangling from the trapeze of adultery and holding the heavy burden of five lovers, with a risk of mortal danger: to be discovered by her husband and, consequently, to lose his protection. This essay explores how Sabina aestheticizes her cascade of infidelities, whereby guilt and the confession of guilt become an art of self-division and self-deception to project her fears onto the male characterization of her seemingly tortured conscience: The Lie Detector. This article further analyzes how Sabina simultaneously performs the antagonistic roles of victim and tormentor both in her marriage and in her extramarital sexual affairs. Although she personifies the heroine from Nin's autofictional diaries, this article examines instead Sabina's versatility as an actress, who can reproduce two artificial scripts and incarnate two fictional heroines: the neglected, tragic wife – Emma Bovary from Gustave Flaubert's novel – and the recidivist *femme fatale* – Doña Juana, a feminine version of Lord Byron's Don Juan.

## 2. The Versatile Actress: Emma Bovary and Doña Juana

Helen Tookey (2003) posits that the figure of the actress, notably the *femme fatale*, is a patriarchal ideal of femininity which fascinates Anaïs Nin and recurs in her self-constructions as a woman and in her writings (91-92). Nin's real role as a socialite and her cosmopolitan life experiences in Europe and North America, among actors, painters, dancers, musicians, writers and intellectuals, also enhanced her theatrical vision of her own self. Nin had both French and Spanish ancestry. In her journals, she reflects her affinity with the French fictional character of Emma Bovary and her identification with her Cuban father of Spanish origin. The first volume of her diary (1931-1934) begins with Flaubert's doomed heroine from the nineteenth century. There, Anaïs Nin compares her traditional role of domestic wifehood and her quiet residence in the French village of Louveciennes with Emma's provincial life of boredom, dissatisfaction, reveries and unfulfilling infidelities leading her to Thanatos. Nonetheless, Anaïs Nin affirms: "Unlike Madame Bovary, I am not going to take poison" (*Diary* 5), because she chooses Eros: she often manages to flee to the nearby city of Paris for her artistic, social and sexual self-realization. Her father, the pianist Joaquín Nin, was a womanizer who abandoned his wife and children when Anaïs was only a child. The first volume of her diary also reveals her passionate reunion with him during adulthood after decades of estrangement and the discovery of her characterological resemblance to her father. While discussing with her therapist – and lover – Otto Rank the psychoanalytical figure of the double and the strong paternal influence on her own self, she confesses that Joaquín Nin "dared to be Don Juan [...] he set out to possess more women than Don Juan, to surpass the legendary figure of a thousand mistresses" (*Diary* 287). To explain the infidelities of his patient and her incestuous attraction to her father, Otto Rank diagnoses that Anaïs Nin and her father would be viewed as "duplicates [...] then he could love his feminine self in you and you could love your male self in him" (287). Thus, Anaïs Nin does also dare to personify the Spanish myth of Don Juan<sup>4</sup> to embrace her own masculinity and her kinship to her artistic father. The autofictional *Diary of Anaïs Nin*, volume I: 1931-1934, dialogues with her fiction, *A Spy in the House of Love*, because Nin understands herself and her double Sabina in literary terms: they become both Emma Bovary and a female Don Juan. These aesthetic reincarnations enhance the artifice and duplicity in her heroine's life, because Sabina's apparent voyage of self-discovery in the novel, instead reveals her art of self-division, and not a journey to learn who she really is or to reach her true self. In addition, Ellen Friedman (1993) argues that Sabina seeks her identity through a series of lovers, each of whom speaks to an aspect of her, but none of whom helps her to coalesce the fragments of herself into a whole (247).

Being himself a Don Juan, Philip is the man who baptizes Sabina with the alias Doña Juana. In their clandestine sexual rendezvous, this German opera singer understands that he runs into his match when he perceives the connoisseurship of his mistress in the art of infidelity: "She lay all her clothes on one chair, as if

she might be called away suddenly and must not leave any traces of her presence. She knew all the trickeries in this war of love" (Nin, *A Spy* 47). Although she was at first intimidated by Philip's assurance and arresting beauty, Sabina is not the victim of his seduction games. Her instinctive alertness prepares her to hastily fly from both the risk of her husband's detection and any emotional entanglement with her new lover. She not only tastes the elixir of sexual climax with Philip: "a high tower of fireworks gradually exploding into fountains of delight through the senses" (45), but also "contemplate[s] the piercing joy of her liberation: she was free, free as a man was, to enjoy without love. Without any warmth of the heart, as a man could, she had enjoyed a stranger" (45). Benjamin Franklin V. and Duane Schneider (1979) claim that, thanks to Philip, Sabina is, at last, no longer repressed because she is able to consummate their relationship sexually without committing herself to him or loving him, which is the essence of freedom for her (117). As a female Don Juan, Sabina also welcomes her masculine self and rejects a more traditionally feminine definition of sex: the alchemic sum of physical pleasure and feelings of love. Furthermore, her costume and *modus operandi* match her new personality as a seductress. She wears a cape to move incognito and to track new sexual prey during her night escapades, after having lied to her husband. In fact, she tells Alan that her acting career is the reason why she is often absent from their home in New York, because she must perform elsewhere.

Sabina's lovers represent artistry and conflict in her existence. Every male conquest is a battle for her to win within the war between the sexes, while the man's artistic vocation inspires her sexual excitement: Philip is a lyric singer, Jay is an avant-garde painter and Mambo is an ethnic musician working as a drummer in a New York nightclub. Philip symbolizes for her the Wagnerian hero who enraptures her with his melodious voice and transports her to the fairy-tale realm of Tristan and Isolde inside the Black Forest in Germany. Meanwhile, Mambo's music calls Sabina to explore the West Indian calypso. Before approaching him in the club, she dehumanizes this musician. Man and exotic nature fuse in her palpitating mind when she fantasizes with the wild blackness of her potentially new male trophy to be captured and colonized, like his native Caribbean island: "[She] could see him swimming, squatting over a fire by the beach, leaping, climbing trees" (Nin, *A Spy* 53). The hypnotizing sounds and rhythms of Mambo's drums make Sabina's body vibrate and her heartbeats accelerate, inducing a sensuous trance in her: "she felt possessed by his song" (55). Later, dancing with Mambo becomes a sexual rite governed by his virile dominance: "he placed his knees between hers, as if implanting the rigidity of his desire. He held her firmly, so encompassed that every movement they made was made as one body [...] His desire became a center of gravity, a final welding" (55). Nevertheless, when Mambo's manly initiative of music and dances cease, he confesses to Sabina that he distrusts her because he has previously experienced the sexual fetish of white women for men of color, like himself. He rightfully intuits that Sabina is a dangerous *femme fatale* and that he is merely an exotic, erotic object in her artful hands: "It's desire, but not for me. You don't know me. It's for my race, it's for the

sensual power we have” (56). Mambo believes that multiethnic sex is exciting for any white woman, whereas he is looking instead for a domestic wife. Thus, he feels that interracial breeding is inconceivable for someone like Sabina, who would not bear mixed-race children. In the power struggle between a man and a woman, she plays the active role of a sexual invader. Indeed, she silences the fears and anxieties of her male victim, because she is aware of men’s weakness: Mambo’s libido can defeat his tender longing for babies.

While being Doña Juana, Sabina successfully deploys her irresistible allure and her art of deception to seduce and trap this reticent lover, because the more difficult the battle is, the sweeter the victory will taste. And she does eventually taste the “multicolored flames” (59) and “the tropics” (62) of interracial sex. Like many women have done, Mambo submits knowingly to Sabina’s use of his body due to his great need to enjoy the illusion that he is loved (Spencer, “Continuous Novel” 74). The feminization of the racialized ‘stallion’ – Mambo – culminates in his constant reproaches about the neglect and lack of commitment from his white mistress. In the meantime, the split of the self, innate to many adulterers, worsens in Sabina’s case, because she is torn between the loyalty to acting as Doña Juana and her disloyalty to her role as a faithful wife, which paradoxically she does not want to stop performing. The post-coital madness of wishing to stay in bed with Mambo forever fights against the image of her husband returning to her mind when the danger of her infidelities being detected torments Sabina: “the heightened moments of passion dissolved as unimportant in the face of the loss of Alan” (Nin, *A Spy* 60). Ultimately, her body and her mind do not coexist in harmony, do not become one whole self and do not lead the same single life. Instead, the physical and the mental are at perpetual war inside Nin’s heroine.

Ubiratan Paiva de Oliveira (1985) contends that, in Nin’s novel, Sabina’s inner conflict is “expressed as a struggle between her need for stability” embodied by her husband and “her need for mobility” because she personifies a firebird in perpetual motion to avoid confrontation with herself (76-77). Accordingly, Sabina remains in a state of indecisive self-division while fleeing from a lover – Mambo – to perch on her nest at home, but not for a long time, because the white heat of sexual passion is within her own nature. Indeed, she does not want to abandon her acting career as Doña Juana. Consequently, she soon needs to hover above another lover. Sabina’s yearning for high flights, without emotional entanglement, finds another masculine profession: an aviator. While Alan is absent, she runs into John in Long Island. He is a handsome, young pilot from the English Air Corps, with striking eyes stricken by the experience of warfare. She is attracted to this new man not only on account of his youth and physical beauty, but also because they both have witnessed war: Sabina within herself and John during the world’s recent bloodshed. The two of them prefer to fly to a sky of freedom and to run away from any suffering on the ground, to avoid making choices in life and confronting other fellow humans in love affairs. However, this mutual likeness does not mean peace and oneness between Sabina and John, but instead fighting and male desertion after a one-night stand: “he had injected into her body his

own venomous guilt for living and desiring” (Nin, *A Spy* 81). The aviator saw death during World War II. As a result of this traumatic experience, he blames himself for the ecstasy of enjoying sex with Sabina. His eyes also perceive a devil inside the adulteress, comparable to the evil of the armed conflict. Meanwhile, she discovers her addiction to a lover who scorns her and refuses to see her again. John’s poison of Thanatos symbolically kills Sabina’s Eros, leaving her body with thwarted sexual longing for him. But unexpectedly, the aviator also fails to satisfy her emotionally. In fact, his desertion blows up her dreams of oneness with a man, because she had imagined that John could have been her twin or the mirror that reflects her own soul. She had allowed herself to hope that he could have quenched her yearnings for sexual adventures against the ordinariness of life. She had visualized that they could have flown in unison and reached together an antidote for their respective poisons: the horrors of war in his case and the guilt of infidelity in hers, or according to Sabina’s own thoughts: “I feel close to him [...] I run towards all the dangers of love as he runs towards the dangers of war. He runs away, war is less terrifying to him than life...” (87). In essence, the Long Island episode reveals the vulnerability of the real woman behind the actress and feelings of infatuation behind sexual impulses. Thus, Sabina’s one-night stand with John shows her fallibility as Doña Juana or her inadequacy to perform this masculinized Byronic role.

The consequence of Sabina’s passion for the runaway aviator is to seek his ersatz back in New York. Donald is a handsome adolescent boy but unlike John, he is crowned with an aura of innocence. The sexual addiction of the actress is substituted for the tenderness and nurturance demanded from the maternal figure that Sabina ultimately embodies in her relationship with a deceptively angelic Donald, due to his craving for an older woman to replace his own mother. In fact, this childish man is more dangerous than any previous lover, because he imposes his rules in the seduction game with Sabina. Simultaneously, she resents that Donald’s absent parent adulterates her new sexual adventure: “his eyes did not see her alone, but Sabina and a third woman forever present in a perpetual triangle, a menage-a-trois, in which the mother’s figure often stood between them, intercepting the love Sabina desired” (Nin, *A Spy* 92). As a result, Donald is repulsed when he has a sexual encounter with her, because he feels that he is touching his mother, so he frustrates his lover’s libido (Franklin and Schneider 23). Hence, Donald also imposes the acting roles within the couple, so Sabina cannot play Doña Juana with him and temporarily, neither can she play that role with other potential male conquests. After enjoying the serenity and newness of maternal scripts, Sabina understands that she cannot be Donald’s surrogate mother in a sexless affair for a long time. Not only does she refuse the joys and burdens of biological maternity in her own marriage, but also, she embodies the firebird seeking sexual mobility while she is herself the symbolic daughter of her paternalistic husband. In the end, Sabina always returns home after her childish mischiefs with her lovers to find Alan’s protection and absolution, to play and replay the role of the girlish wife for him.

Paul Brians (1996) discusses that Anaïs Nin uses the symbol of the theater in her novel as the vehicle for the shifting roles of Sabina, who occasionally plays the character of Cinderella in a children's party, but her real performance is her daily life (125). Her husband is, indeed, the most admiring spectator of her art of self-division: her offstage acting. Sabina returns from her one-week sexual adventure with Philip in Provincetown. Instead of confessing her adultery to Alan, she tells him the truth but otherwise. She has been staging the role of Flaubert's fictional heroine: "I hated the role at first, as you know. But I began to feel for Madame Bovary, and the second night I played it well, I even understood her particular kind of voice and gestures" (Nin, *A Spy* 15). Even though she has not been performing this character in any Provincetown theater, Sabina is not lying to her husband because her reality is that she has certainly incarnated Emma Bovary. Thus, playing this literary woman from nineteenth-century France is her act of both masking and telling the truth. Initially, she feels guilty for betraying Alan and plays this role reluctantly but soon after, she is accustomed to being an adulteress and enjoys the next sexual encounter with Philip. Like Flaubert's female protagonist, Sabina has also perfected her art of deception and self-deception to such an extent that she is unable to distinguish between reality and fiction.

Extramarital affairs are not only highly pleasurable bodily experiences, but also the machinery through which Sabina's mind romanticizes her own life to fly like a bird and to escape from the dullness and monotony of her captivity: her only official role as a wife. Alan also embodies Anaïs Nin's husband, the wealthy American banker Hugh Guiler. The biographer Deirdre Bair (1995) provides evidence that Guiler was aware of Anaïs Nin's love affairs with other men and even accepted them, notably when she lived with him in New York for some months and the rest of the year with the actor Rupert Pole in California. Hugh Guiler knew that his wife deceived him, but he loved her, was happy to see her after her absences and allowed her to construct her web of lies by pretending to believe them (Bair 437). Similarly, in *A Spy in the House of Love*, Alan is an ambiguous character who sincerely trusts his wife's fidelity or who performs gullibility to perfection. Paradoxically, Sabina's husband seems to enjoy her artifice after her *tournée* in Provincetown: "What an actress you are [...] you're still doing it! You've entered into this woman's part so thoroughly you can't get out of it!" (Nin, *A Spy* 15). In fact, Alan would play Charles Bovary or the literal-minded husband from Flaubert's novel. He would be unable to understand his wife's emotional complexity, exuberant imagination and domestic dissatisfaction, so that he cannot see before his own eyes that Sabina is an adulteress. Alternatively, Alan would be the antagonist of Gustave Flaubert, the French writer who punishes the sinful sexual transgression of his creature Emma with a long, painful agony: death by arsenic poisoning. As such, Alan could implicitly forgive his wife's infidelity, while surreptitiously revealing that he is aware that she lies to him about her performance in a Provincetown theater because every day behind the scenes, she is a true Madame Bovary.

When Sabina watches a film about espionage and secret agents with her lover Mambo, she identifies herself with these cinematographic characters, so much

so that she even calls herself: “an international spy in the house of love” (Nin, *A Spy* 68). In fact, Sabina sees that danger, secrecy and performance characterize her vocational profession as an adulteress. Therefore, she is a ‘real’ actress, hungry for risk-taking and without doubts about her innate talent for artifice. Furthermore, this movie inspires her to foreshadow the finale of her own acting career: “ignominious death” (69), analogous to Emma Bovary’s tragic ending of suicide. Guilt also appears to be the poison that slowly kills Sabina. Anna Balakian (1978) posits that Anaïs Nin probes the problem of the connection between sexual liberation and the sense of guilt, because the infraction of infidelity is unrelated to society or to God (166). Instead, Sabina feels guilt after each adulterous encounter, not because she considers sex evil but because she must act hypocritically so as not to hurt her husband and not to rob him of his trust in her (167). Nin’s heroine takes refuge in Alan, the same way she clings to the stardom of incarnating Doña Juana. Therefore, she believes she must lead a double life to simultaneously play this transgressive role and that of Emma Bovary, who always returns home to her husband, to the comfortable nest at the bourgeois Fifth Avenue in New York. Following one of her sexual escapades at night, Sabina tells herself: “He will be happy at my coming. He will be here. He will open his arms. He will make room for me I will no longer have to struggle” (Nin, *A Spy* 13). After she experiences the exciting dangers of flying to spy on sexual pleasure in the bodily houses of other men, Alan offers his wife both financial protection and emotional safety. In spite of being only five years older, he performs the role of the father-husband, who paradoxically encourages her acting career both at home and elsewhere: “Sabina wants to be the woman whom Alan wants her to be” (19). As a husband, he would not care about her real self, but rather about her performance of the ideal of a good wife scripted by him: infantile and dependent on him, while being also captivating and sparkling. Consequently, the gender pressures and expectations from the patriarchal institution of marriage would inseminate Sabina’s art of self-division.

In “A Room of One’s Own” (2000), Virginia Woolf denounces the fact that women of fiction have been seen only by the other sex and also solely shown in their relation to men, not in their relation to other women (107). *A Spy in the House of Love* illustrates Anaïs Nin’s complicity with or, alternatively, her denunciation of these literary practices because Sabina uniquely lives and exists in relation to her husband and to her lovers, not to other female characters or even to her own self. There is not one Sabina but many different Sabinas, each one devised to satisfy men’s self-serving needs and desires. Enhanced by guilt, her self-divided identity is presided over by two leading roles: the masculinized seductress – Doña Juana – and the penitent wife – Emma Bovary –, apart from some cameos: the muse, the mother or the eroticized object. Meanwhile, Alan’s paternalistic role to forgive the unspeakable sexual mischiefs of his girlish wife, encourages her acting career and applauds her art of self-division that entertains him so much after a hard day of work. In contrast, for Sabina, being an offstage actress in her marital life represents the necessary self-torture “to protect his happiness [...] [her] guardian angel...” (Nin, *A Spy* 22). The fact that

she incarnates both the symbolic daughter and the actress of Madame Bovary appears to satisfy her husband's expectations in a wife and they should not be contradicted by ugly sincerity. Thus, Sabina obeys Alan's implicit wish for self-delusion in their marriage. Nevertheless, she inwardly expresses her desire of leaving the scene, confessing her infidelities to 'father' Alan and asking for his absolution in order to find her peace of mind, to grow up and to reunite her different selves. Sabina lives in perpetual struggle and self-contradiction: adultery spices her life with motion, sensuality and excitement, while marriage sinks her into ordinariness and boredom. And yet, Alan is irreplaceable and represents the sun in her existence: "She placed him apart from other men, distinct and unique. He held the only fixed position in the fluctuations of her feelings" (14). In reality, Alan means the longed-for stability that even the volatile Doña Juana – or the firebird – always needs betwixt her flights of seduction and infidelity. In essence, Sabina would revel in sexual freedom with her lovers but not in freedom from guilt, which drives her to great anxiety and emotional suffering. Accordingly, Nin's female life-writings, while aspiring to be deep and honest, generally trace expeditions into dangerous terrains of taboos and forbidden relationships, "even if the search for truth causes pain" (Spencer, "The Music" 165).

The first scene of the first act in *A Spy in the House of Love* captures Sabina at night randomly telephoning a man to follow her and to spy on her cascade of infidelities: The Lie Detector. In fact, this male figure exteriorizes and personifies her guilt at being unfaithful to her husband, as an essential element of her art of self-division to compensate for her impracticable confession of deception to her husband. Deirdre Bair holds that Anaïs Nin initially created the Lie Detector as an imaginary character or a projection of one of the many different emotions that engulf Sabina, but that he eventually becomes a real person, whose only purpose is to enhance her frustrations and thus, her inability to "achieve stasis either alone or within a relationship" (366). Whether a real man or merely the imaginary materialization of her inner tensions, the Lie Detector discovers that Sabina is, indeed, a spy in the house of love and that her acting career symptomatizes her feelings of guilt. In the meantime, this enigmatic male figure informs her that she is not a sinner, but a criminal who should "confess, [to] be caught, tried, punished" (Nin, *A Spy* 2). He represents patriarchal justice and persecutes Sabina to show her that the fragmentation of her own psyche and her life with different men is the disquieting side-effect of the crime of her extramarital affairs, precipitating her mental deterioration. Moreover, the Lie Detector enlightens Sabina to understand what culpability truly signifies: "Only half of the self wants to atone, to be freed of the torments of guilt. The other half of man wants to continue to be free" (2). Here, the Lie Detector's use of the word man, instead of woman, strengthens Sabina's acting role of a masculinized Doña Juana. Moreover, her self-division as a woman and as an actress is rooted in the inherently divided nature of guilt: the momentary excitement in the moral transgression of infidelity alternates with the much longer aftermath of emotional self-torture near her husband. The Lie Detector also observes that Sabina loves flirting with this feeling of guilt, oscillating

between pleasure and pain. Alternatively, guided or not by this (un)real man, readers can infer for themselves that Sabina's guilt means the constant imposture of a bad actress or that she is performing guilt as the compulsory feminine script imposed upon all adulteresses by patriarchal ideology, such that the male Lie Detector is inside her to direct her own acting. Consequently, culpability would not be a natural role in her life, but instead, freedom would represent her genuine self: "She felt related to [...] the planet of lovers. Her attraction to it, her desire to bathe in its rays, explained her repulsion for home, husband and children" (39). Ultimately, Sabina could manage this contradiction by lying to herself every time she is unfaithful to her husband as she mentally accuses herself of being a bad wife, because these are the lines expected from her role as Emma Bovary. In short, Sabina could seek neither contrition nor absolution, but she transforms the Lie Detector into her art of self-division.

Nevertheless, the more lovers Sabina accumulates, the more corporeal the Lie Detector becomes and the more this man imaginarily follows her nocturnal sexual escapades. In fact, Nin's heroine not only realizes that, as an adulteress, she is a spy in many houses of love, but also understands that she is spied upon by her own conscience and by the terror of being caught in the act. She fears that she is physically watched by her husband when she is with one of her male conquests in the streets of New York, while also feeling that she is mentally watched by the Lie Detector. Thus, Sabina implicitly rejects the inherent nature of the acting profession: to be observed and judged, because the fact of being watched as an actress is ultimately the impediment to discovering who she really is or whom she wants to become. If the guilt for her sexual crimes is not an imaginary man persecuting her, it is, then, the emotional exhaustion from playing different roles and from incarnating different women to please men and to satisfy her own sexual desires, that haunts and tortures Sabina. Accordingly, the narrator states that "she carried too great a weight of untold stories, too heavy a weight of memories, she was followed by too many ghosts of personages unresolved, of experiences not yet understood" (Nin, *A Spy* 122). Indeed, the novel's heroine realizes that her many infidelities, together with their aftermath of deception and self-deception, are what provoke the disintegration of the 'one' Sabina and her fragmentation into multiple Sabinas: "She had lost herself somewhere along the frontier between her inventions, her stories, her fantasies and her true self. The boundaries had become effaced" (107). Dissolving herself in her own artificial, fluid narratives is the act which can, paradoxically, solidify Sabina's true identity. Nin's fascination with the *femme fatale* lay in her status as an enigma, spinning endless tales around herself which "rather than presenting a clear self-portrait, confuses all images" and blocks knowledge (Tookey 104). Accordingly, *A Spy in the House of Love* explores its heroine's mission to find the likeness of herself, while its author weaves and entangles her readers in the gossamer of the multiple sexual, romantic and domestic stories of Sabina, her fictional self-portrait. Nin does not unveil her creature's real face, but instead she keeps her aura of mystery as a *femme fatale* and enhances her inborn self-divisions and self-contradictions.

Just as in the autofictional diaries of her literary mother Anaïs Nin, the roles of an actress and a storyteller in Sabina are equally intertwined. On the one hand, she is the adulteress, who delights in sexual freedom as Doña Juana and in melodramatic scripts as Emma Bovary. On the other hand, she represents Scheherazade from *The Arabian Nights*, who eternally reinvents herself in thousand and one stories to survive the exciting – though risky – entanglements of infidelity and to entice ‘the Sultan’ of her conscience: The Lie Detector. In short, these two artistic roles together constitute Sabina’s real self and her art of self-division, where guilt is yet another artifice to keep separate her two lives as a wife and a mistress.

### 3. Conclusion: The (Cubist) Mirror of Truth

Thanks to her years of residence in interwar Paris, Anaïs Nin was imbued with the spirit of avant-garde movements that nourished her literary experimentalism and advocated for the syncretism of arts. More concretely, she borrowed the potential of Cubism, which depicted the same object from many angles, in her own writings to reflect the multifaceted female self. Bettina Knapp (1978) posits that Nin’s “fascination with fragmented personalities and their image equivalents, shattered mirrors, draws her to the Cubist fold – to Picasso and Braque” (7). Indeed, *A Spy in the House of Love* can be seen as a Cubist canvas because fragments of its protagonist’s life are taken out of temporal context and laid down side by side, so that their significance is revealed by the artificial order imposed on them (Brians 124). But its heroine Sabina eventually discovers that she, too, is a Cubist work of art. While she claims that she is seeking her true identity in numerous houses of love and attempting to reassemble her different selves, Sabina suddenly finds her portrait. She looks at her own image in the mirror of a painting created by Jay, a former lover from Paris and an artist now displaying his canvases at Mambo’s night club in New York. In fact, Jay can be viewed as the daguerreotype of the writer Henry Miller, Anaïs Nin’s penniless lover and her economic burden in Paris, who returned to the United States upon the outbreak of World War II in Europe, like Nin and her husband Hugh Guiler.

In the novel, Sabina also identifies herself with Marcel Duchamp’s Cubist painting *Nude Descending a Staircase* (1912) depicting a woman in motion. Anita Jarczok (2014) argues that, just as Duchamp portrays the nude in multiple moments, Nin shows the multiplicity of Sabinas to stress “the lack of a fixed self and the multifaceted nature of human existence,” which enables readers to understand her novel as a Cubist work (x-xi). In her diary, Nin sketches Don Juan as a Spanish womanizer who “liked to mirror himself in the eyes of adoring women” (*Diary* 287). As Doña Juana, Sabina in *A Spy in the House of Love* is as narcissistic as the literary Byronic hero. She is afraid of being spied on, yet she needs to see her own reflection in the looking glass of her admiring lovers, to be worshipped by her sexual prey. Nevertheless, Jay is no longer the devout priest of Sabina’s cult of *her* self. He remembers her well from their common past in Paris. Consequently, he knows her true nature: she is an actress, a professional

liar “changing personalities with such a rapidity that [he] was reminded of a kaleidoscope” (Nin, *A Spy* 118). This is precisely the flawed character that Jay captures in his portrait of Sabina. In Jay’s case, he actually sees Sabina as a collage with many faces, revealing her inborn mutability, and with multiple flat surfaces, reflecting the absence of human depth in her character. Indeed, this encounter with Jay angers and splinters her into even more fragments. His artwork does not display Sabina’s desired likeness of beauty, mystery and glamour, because both as an artist and a former lover, Jay does not portray one single woman, but paints a mosaic of women to disclose the multiple dimensions of Sabina’s personality: the sexually voracious Doña Juana, the guilt-stricken Emma Bovary, the girlish wife of Alan, the mother for boyish lovers, the erotic artifact for womanizers and the muse for his own canvasses. Each layer shows one of Sabina’s many roles as an actress but paradoxically, all surfaces taken together draw her entire inner self of *real* insincerity. Moreover, Jay reunites the numerous moments of Sabina’s infidelities and the many houses of manly love she visits in a single space within the frozen time of his Cubist canvas. Ultimately, Sabina sees herself defeated and disempowered as an artwork. Dismembered, manufactured and made public by a male artist, she is merely an object of juxtaposed images in an ugly mirror of truth: “She understood Jay’s paintings [...] It was perhaps at such a moment of isolation that Madame Bovary had taken the poison. It was the moment when the hidden life is in danger of being exposed, and no woman could bear the condemnation” (125). Sabina cannot prevent viewers from contemplating her as the picture of the sinful adulteress. Furthermore, she cannot weld the laminated layers of her identity because her own art of guilt and self-division has transfigured her into superimposed silhouettes without physical depth, being each contour a feminine image in the lives of her husband and her multiple lovers. This is the *real* tragedy of Sabina as Emma Bovary, which fractures her own psyche, not the act of adultery *per se*. In fact, each Cubist stratum represents one additional subservient gender role she had embraced to meet men’s needs and desires, but each separate layer is incompatible with other strata, and all of them are in male authorial hands. Even as Doña Juana, Sabina is not the avatar of sexual freedom but a fetishistic object to please men’s sexual fantasies: to be possessed and dominated by the lustful *femme fatale*. In short, she understands that she is merely a conglomerate of fragmented, artificial selves, eventually exposed to the public by Jay’s unflattering Cubist canvas of duplicity and multiplicity.

The fictional and autobiographical writings of Anaïs Nin investigate the modernist preoccupation with the divisions of the self, and while the author’s own solution against the final disintegration of the self is psychoanalysis, Sabina conceals “her internal turmoil beneath masks and costumes” (Jarczok xi). Indeed, the heroine’s art of guilt and self-division to hide her true identity, to fragment herself into superimposed images of femininity and to perform different acting roles to satisfy the men in her life accentuate her descent into madness. However, they are also the necessary evil to cling to the illusion of sexual freedom without losing her husband’s love. The final act of *A Spy in the House of Love* stages the

fluid openness of inconclusion and the continuity of Sabina's *modus vivendi* of extramarital relations. Her self-divisions and self-contradictions as a woman and an actress persist, because she does not renounce Alan or the myriad of her sexual affairs, while she finally accepts the Cubist reflection of her fragmented selves in the mirror. It is not the artist Jay, but a woman who rescues another woman to prevent the patriarchal punishment against the adulteress and her self-inflicted torture of remorse. Sabina confides in her friend Djuna – a dancer from Mambo's cabaret – to reveal the self-image of her own infidelities, not to confess her sexual crimes to Alan and not to be crucified again by what she now understands is a figment of her conscience: The Lie Detector. Survival for the unfaithful wife ultimately requires eradicating the emotional burden of the guilt of adultery and avoiding the temptation of revealing her sexual transgressions to her husband. Therefore, Sabina's art of self-deception needs to be perfected to become only the art of deception: she must learn not to lie to herself when she seduces men with the narratives of her thousand and one lies. Against Jay's invasive Cubist eye, Djuna becomes a gentler mirror of truth for Sabina. As a symbolic sister, this female friend shows Nin's heroine that the public exposure to the stigma of adultery would cause her loneliness and imply the loss of her protective husband. Alan is not only a real man, but also Sabina's immature fantasy of a father, who is indispensable in her existence. Beyond the novel's ending, she continues not to make a choice between the domestic stability offered by Alan's home and the sexual mobility of spying on multiple houses of manly love. Not without hesitation or pain, Sabina ultimately discovers that her secret real self is being still a girl in need of a father-husband and a talented offstage actress performing Emma Bovary and Doña Juana, among other acting roles of femininity. In essence, Sabina must guiltlessly embrace her artistic profession of deception and artifice in adultery, because the show must go on...

### Notes

1. Hester Prynne in *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) by Nathaniel Hawthorne, Emma Bovary in *Madame Bovary* (1857) by Gustave Flaubert, Anna Karenina in *Anna Karenina* (1877) by Leo Tolstoy, Luísa Carvalho in *O Primo Basílio* (1878) by José Maria de Eça de Queirós, Ana Ozores in *La Regenta* (1884) by Leopoldo Alas Clarín, Sue Bridehead in *Jude the Obscure* (1895) by Thomas Hardy, Molly Bloom in *Ulysses* (1922) by James Joyce and Constance Chatterley in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928) by D. H. Lawrence.
2. In "The Laugh of the Medusa", Hélène Cixous urges the woman to write her own self to transgress and destabilize patriarchal constructions of femininity, so Cixous proposes a new practice of writing to assert a distinctive female authorship: *Écriture Féminine* – feminine writing – which encourages the woman to reconquer her lost biological, anatomical self and to write it.
3. Anaïs Nin's *Cities of the Interior* (1946-1959) consists of five novels: *Ladders of Fire*, *Children of the Albatross*, *The Four-Chambered Heart*, *A Spy in the House of Love* and *Seduction of the Minotaur*.
4. The origin of the myth of the unscrupulous Spanish libertine Don Juan is the play *El Burlador de Sevilla* (1616) by Tirso de Molina, popularized in later times

thanks to *Don Juan* (1665) by Molière, the character Robert Lovelace in the novel *Clarissa* (1745) by Samuel Richardson, *Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782) by Choderlos de Laclos, the opera *Don Giovanni* (1787) by Mozart and the play *Don Juan Tenorio* (1844) by José Zorrilla, but especially thanks to the satirical poem *Don Juan* (1819-1824) by Lord Byron.

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