

Sphinxes and Scheherezades: The Actress and the *Femme Fatale*

Reflecting, in his preface to the 1921 edition of *The Tragic Muse* (first published in serial form in 1889–90), on the novel’s origins and in particular on his creation of the actress protagonist, Miriam Rooth, Henry James wrote: ‘I had desired for her, I remember, all manageable vividness—so ineluctable had it long appeared to “do the actress”’.¹ Twenty years later, in June 1941, Nin wrote in her diary, in the context of her friendship with Hollywood actress Luise Rainer, ‘Nothing fascinates me more than the actress’ (*Journals*, III, 122). Through the nineteenth and into the twentieth century—encompassing James, in the 1880s, planning the novel in which he would, as he put it, “do something about art” . . . some dramatic picture of the “artist-life”,² and Nin, at what is usually seen as the close of the ‘high modernist’ period, reflecting on her own fascination with the figure of femininity which occurs again and again in her writings—the figure of the actress takes centre stage as the quintessentially modernist (patriarchal) fantasy of the feminine. As Nietzsche enjoined his readers in *The Gay Science*, seven years before the appearance of the first instalments of James’s novel, ‘Reflect on the whole history of women: do they not *have* to be first of all and above all else actresses?’³

The paradoxical notion of women as essentially inessential, as mere surface, illusion, acting, the appearance of mystery which conceals no real substance—Oscar Wilde’s ‘sphinxes without secrets’⁴—has a long

¹ Henry James, ‘Preface’, in *The Tragic Muse* (London: Macmillan, 1921 [1889–90]), p. xviii.

² James, ‘Preface’, p. v.

³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (New York: Vintage, 1974 [1882]), 317.

⁴ See Wilde’s story ‘The Sphinx without a Secret’ (1891), in *Complete Works*, 205–8. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, when the Duchess of Monmouth teases Lord Henry Wotton with the challenge ‘Describe us as a sex’, he replies, ‘Sphynxes [sic] without secrets’ (*Complete Works*, 143).

history in male thought. It is particularly visible, though, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as male anxieties about the place of women within the new urban contexts of modern culture crystallized in the fin-de-siècle obsession with figures of actresses and prostitutes, ‘problematically public’⁵ women who seemed to pose a threat—simultaneously social, sexual, and epistemic—to the hegemonic order. Taking this perceived threat to the limit, male artists and writers of the period produced endless representations of the ‘fatal woman’, the beautiful but deadly *femme fatale* (personified above all in the ‘exotic’, alluring, and amoral figure of Salome); this was a period characterized, as Bram Dijkstra writes, by a ‘fascination with woman as the embodiment of evil’.⁶

‘Nothing fascinates me more than the actress’, writes Nin; and indeed her own life and self-constructions are frequently read in terms of the actress or the related figure of the veiled woman, the mysterious, myth-making (and mythic) *femme fatale*. In this chapter, I shall explore the ways in which the figures of the actress, the duplicitous, role-playing woman, and the *femme fatale*—seductive and problematic fantasies of the feminine—not only recur in Nin’s writing but can also be seen to structure it. I shall try to show that Nin’s own investment in the figure of the *femme fatale* is a complex one, raising issues of seduction, self-mythologizing, power, and control.

‘CREATURES OF SHOW’: MODERNITY AND FEMININITY

In a section of *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863) entertainingly titled ‘Women: Honest Ones, and Others’, Baudelaire describes the courtesan, a ‘shady type of beauty . . . dwelling on the fringes of regular society’, concealing ‘trickery and struggle’ beneath her ‘surface finery’. He goes on: ‘These reflections about the courtesan may, to a certain extent, be applied to the actress; for she too is a creature of show, an object of public pleasure’.⁷ The figure of the female performer, Rita Felski argues,

⁵ This term is used by Rachel Brownstein; see her *Tragic Muse: Rachel of the Comédie-Française* (Durham, NC and London: Duke Univ. Press, 1995), p. ix.

⁶ Bram Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1986), 235.

⁷ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863), in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 430, 431. Baudelaire does, however, go on to note that the actress must also be considered an artist: ‘If, on the one hand, the actress comes close to the courtesan, on the other she reaches up to the poet’ (431). See below on Henry James’s portrait of the actress Miriam Rooth, which emphasizes above all her status as artist.

easily lent itself to appropriation as a symptom of the pervasiveness of illusion and spectacle in the generation of modern forms of desire. Positioned on the margins of respectable society, yet graphically embodying its structuring logic of commodity aesthetics, the prostitute and the actress fascinated nineteenth-century cultural critics preoccupied with the decadent and artificial nature of modern life.⁸

This 'pervasiveness of illusion and spectacle' was nowhere more visible than in the great exhibitions and 'expositions'—at the Crystal Palace in 1851, in Paris in 1889 and 1900. With the Crystal Palace Exhibition, Thomas Richards argues, '[t]he era of the spectacle had begun'.⁹ The Exhibition showed that 'the capitalist system had not only created a dominant form of exchange but was also in the process of creating a dominant form of representation to go along with it';¹⁰ that, in other words, the commodity and the spectacle would now go hand in hand. In the Paris expositions, the 'sensual pleasures of consumption' were paramount; the 'consumer revolution', as Rosalind Williams argues, 'displayed a novel and crucial juxtaposition of imagination and merchandise, of dreams and commerce, of collective consciousness and economic fact'.¹¹ The Trocadéro section of the 1900 display, featuring a 'gaudy and incoherent jumble' of colonial locations and exhibits, provided an enticing and spectacular 'vision of the exotic'.¹² Similar strategies were employed in the department stores, depicted most famously by Zola in *Au Bonheur des Dames* (1883). To this end, as Williams notes, there was great reliance on fakery and artifice ('fake mahogany, fake bronze, fake marble'); the aim was purely to attract consumers' attention, to create a surface effect, a 'sense of the lavish and foreign'.¹³ At least one contemporary observer, a journalist named Maurice Talmeyr, objected precisely to this 'inherent and pervasive trickery', noting that the expositions, rather than creating any real art or architecture, used only 'stage sets'.¹⁴

As the name of the store in Zola's novel clearly suggests, however, there was a strongly feminine inflection to this new consumerism and to the commodified, specularized culture of modernity. Williams describes the way in which the 1900 Paris exposition overtly displayed and reinforced this perceived link between femininity and consumption in the symbolic

⁸ Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1995), 20.

⁹ Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851–1914* (London: Verso, 1991), 3.

¹⁰ Richards, *Commodity Culture*, 3.

¹¹ Rosalind Williams, *Dream Worlds: Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1982), 12.

¹² *Ibid.* 62.

¹³ *Ibid.* 71.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 72.

figure of 'La Parisienne': 'This penultimate [sic] female, the symbol of the 1900 exposition, was perched atop the Monumental Gateway [the massive and elaborately arched entrance on Place de la Concorde], an icon both sexy and remote, goddess and slut . . . a hybrid streetwalker-princess.'¹⁵ Women became stereotyped as the creatures of consumption par excellence, seduced in their hordes into the boudoir-like space of the department store depicted by Zola; conversely, consumption itself, and the modern society of which it is characteristic, become feminized; in Felski's words, 'the idea of the modern becomes aligned with a pessimistic view of an unpredictable yet curiously passive femininity seduced by the glittering phantasmagoria of an emerging consumer culture'.¹⁶

In particular, it is in the figures of the 'courtesan', or prostitute, and the actress—Baudelaire's 'creatures of show'—that we find the crucial representations of the feminine in, and as, modernity. Concealing 'trickery and struggle' beneath 'surface finery', these figures epitomize the theatrical fakery and the exotic fantasy so central to commodity culture. It is noteworthy, therefore, that Elisabeth Barillé, in her semi-fictionalized biography *Anaïs Nin: Naked under the Mask*, describes Nin's self-constructions in exactly the terms of these quintessential representations of modern femininity: 'Hers was the ritual of an actress, of a courtesan, of a prostitute. Three species of women: one who lies, one who flatters, one who sells herself. Three temptations for Anaïs. Pleasure, treachery, fantasy.'¹⁷

Nin herself wrote, in a 1946 letter to Leo Lerman, who had requested a 'short autobiography': 'I am a writer. I would rather have been a courtesan' (*Journals*, IV, 200). This is, of course, a peculiar statement, one which seems to enact the duplicity of the courtesan it evokes: Nin was always extremely proud and jealous of the identity as 'writer' which she appears to be dismissing here. At the same time the statement does show the fascination of the courtesan for Nin, the 'temptation' of 'pleasure, treachery [and] fantasy' Barillé picks up on. Furthermore, Nin's identification with the courtesan and the actress, the mistresses of illusion and display, is allied with a strong interest in precisely the staginess and artificiality that

¹⁵ Williams, *Dream Worlds*, 90, 91.

¹⁶ *The Gender of Modernity*, 62.

¹⁷ Elisabeth Barillé, *Anaïs Nin: Naked under the Mask* (London: Minerva, 1993), 43. Barillé's book could also perhaps be described, borrowing Brownstein's term, as a 'post-modern biography'. Barillé, a novelist, uses fictional interludes and reflections on abstractions such as 'Costume', 'Jazz', 'Voyeurism', to build up a portrait of Nin. In her 'Author's Note', she appears to acknowledge the link between this fictionalizing method and Nin's own self-fictionalizing: 'Anaïs Nin's words have inspired this portrait, albeit a fictional one, but woven from the very tissue of her work and her life' (n.p.).

is seen to characterize modern life and culture. In March 1935, Nin writes in her diary:

Note importance of fact that I don't care for good quality of materials, permanent values, real gems, real silver, gold, mahogany, solid woods, quality of dresses, stuffs—unimportant. Everything only for effect, as on the stage. Contented with false jewelry, lacquered woods, painted walls, imitation woods. Exactly like stage settings. Or stage costumes. Everything in [her house in] Louveciennes, on close inspection, shoddy, but beautiful. Interest in effect, in illusion. (14 March 1935 [*Fire*, 42])

Here, of course, illusion and theatricality are valued positively rather than negatively. Nietzsche, in contrast, attacks Wagner as reducing music to 'mere spectacle, theater, delusion'; he explicitly opposes the theatre, and the actor (and most of all the actress), to 'authenticity', at the same time noting the great popularity of what he is condemning: 'success with the masses no longer sides with those who are authentic—one has to be an actor to achieve that . . . [In] declining cultures, wherever the decision comes to rest with the masses, authenticity becomes superfluous, disadvantageous, a liability. Only the actor still arouses *great* enthusiasm.'¹⁸ Andreas Huyssen comments: 'Wagner, the theater, the mass, woman—all become a web of signification outside of, and in opposition to, true art [and 'authenticity' more generally]: "In the theater one becomes people, herd, female, pharisee, voting cattle, patron, idiot—*Wagnerian*"'.¹⁹ And yet Nietzsche's association of women with the theatre is not merely a misogynistic fantasy (though clearly he is using the association to misogynist ends). On the contrary, the nineteenth-century theatre was a particularly significant site for women, being (like the department store) one of the few public spaces in which women could (literally in this case) act.²⁰ The actress thus becomes the symbolic focus for questions of feminine display and sexuality, and for issues of surface and depth, 'authenticity' and 'illusion'.

'SHE WANTS TO ACT ONLY HERSELF'

Nin's preoccupation with the figure of the actress can be seen very early in her writing: in her diary in 1930 she is already recording her experiments

¹⁸ Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, cited in Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, and Postmodernism* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 51.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ The crucial difference between the theatre and the department store as public spaces for women was one of class: respectable women shopped, less respectable women performed on the stage.

with stories about actresses (*Early Diary*, IV, 329). But her most sustained portrayals of the woman who is a professional actress, in fact a film star, are her focus on the character of Stella in a section of *Winter of Artifice*²¹ and of Luise Rainer in the third volume of the *Journals*.

Stella, as her name suggests, is a ‘star’ with all a star’s accoutrements—a ‘movie star bed of white satin’, a ‘movie star apartment’ (12, 26). But Nin uses her to portray above all the tensions and conflicts of identity for which the very notion of a ‘star’, and especially a female star, seems to provide a particular focus. Rachel Brownstein begins her book on the French stage actress Rachel with a meditation on the symbolic associations of the star:

[stars] reflect, reveal and focus a problem that has preoccupied Western culture for at least two hundred years: the shape and depth of individual character, the outlines of the integral, coherent self, the relation between the substance of a self—sometimes called character—and appearances, self-presentations, temporary social roles.

A star is someone whose roles shape her character and get conflated with it, whose personal life appears to be spectacular as we watch it get theatrically played out . . . Stars are signs of anxiety about identity . . . Simply by being herself, a star poses the question of whether and how coherent, integral identity hangs on performances and fictions.²²

A star, then, highlights questions of the ‘substance’ or ‘reality’ of the self over against mere roles or performances. Stella is tormented by these very questions: Nin’s story begins with her in a cinema or projection-room watching herself on screen, and being unable to accept her screen self as (part of) herself: ‘Stella sat in a small, dark room and watched her own figure acting on the screen. Stella watched her “double” moving in the light, and she did not recognize her. She almost hated her. Her first reaction was one of revolt, of rejection. This image was not she. She repudiated it. It was a work of artifice, of lighting, of stage setting’ (9).

Just as Stella appears ‘doubled’, so there is a double response here. The key word is ‘repudiated’. In her discussion of the ‘repudiation of femininity’ in Freud’s writings, Rachel Bowlby analyses the dynamics of repudiation as follows: “‘repudiation”, even aside from its Freudian uses, is

²¹ It is important to be aware of the complex dating and publishing history of the stories that make up *Winter of Artifice* (summarized helpfully by Philip K. Jason in *Anais Nin*, 39). Although the first edition of the book appeared in 1939, under the title *The Winter of Artifice*, the ‘Stella’ story was not added until the Swallow Press edition of 1961; so that although it appears as part of one of Nin’s earliest published works, it in fact dates from much later.

²² Brownstein, *Tragic Muse*, pp. ix–x.

not, after all, just any old word. It is strong language, and seems to imply not just rejection or refusal, but also that what is rejected is somehow a part of the repudiator; that it is illegitimately cast off . . . There is the implication that what you repudiate really belongs to you.²³ This is precisely the dynamic here: while Stella refuses the image, pushes it away, her feelings of hatred and revulsion reveal her own involvement with the figure on the screen. In fact, Stella is jealous: ‘What Stella had seen on the screen, the figure of which she had been so instantaneously jealous, was the free Stella. What did not appear on the screen was the shadow of Stella, her demons, doubt and fear’ (11). In this way Nin sets up the key issue she will examine through the figure of Stella, the film-star: although Stella denies that the screen persona is ‘her’, she is at the same time jealous of her own image, recognizing in it the self that she fails to be in everyday life.

Nin examines this dynamic in more detail in her diary portrayal of the Hollywood actress Luise Rainer, on whom the character of Stella is clearly based:²⁴ ‘Luise is always saying that the Luise on the screen is not she. It is an image born of lighting, of artifice, enhanced by acting. She did not recognize or love the actress. Luise’s image of herself and the image on the screen do not match. The woman on the screen is a stranger to her . . .’ (*Journals*, III, 140). And yet, of course, the woman on the screen is *not* a stranger: although Luise sees her actress self as ‘an illusion’, she is jealous of her as a ‘heightened self’. Nin, in the diary, sees Luise’s screen self in exactly this way: ‘The exalted figure on the stage is the woman she becomes in moments of self-confidence, confidence in the actress, but this confidence deserts her when she falls back into her personal life. She needs the costume, lights, decor, challenge of another personality’ (145). She tries to persuade Luise that this screen self *is* part of her, is even the ‘best’ part of her: ‘She could not understand how I related them [i.e. ‘Luise’s image of herself and the image on the screen’], how they fed one another, how together they did represent a complete Luise, one freed by acting, the other bound, one confident, the other filled with doubt’ (140). Nin says to her: ‘“You split the two women when they could be

²³ Bowlby, *Still Crazy*, 145.

²⁴ While acknowledging that the Stella figure is in some sense clearly derived from or based on the diary portrayal of Luise Rainer, I would reject the implication that the diary portrait is therefore ‘raw material’ for the fictional character. Rather, Nin uses the portrayal of Luise much as she uses that of Stella: to focus the issues she is interested in, the actress’s conflicts of identity, the questions of ‘roles’ and ‘reality’. Her portrait of Luise is just as motivated and organized as is that of Stella. See Chapter 1 for my critique of the idea of the diary as ‘raw material’.

unified. I say they are the same, but you create the difference between them” (145); because, Luise replies, “I don’t want anyone falling in love with that other woman, I want them to love me for myself, not that heightened image” (145).

The paradox here, as Nin observes, is that while Luise rejects her screen self as a ‘fraud’ (145), she chooses her roles only in relation to herself, to the identifications she can make: ‘At the same time, when I find her reading scripts and plays, I see that she is looking for a character that she feels identified with, some affinity, some role which might be an extension of herself’ (145). Nin puts this particularly well in her story of Stella: ‘She rejects all the plays. Because they cannot contain her. She wants to walk into her own self, truly presented, truly revealed. She wants to act only herself’ (*Winter*, 33). Underlying Stella/Luise’s feeling of division or alienation, the perceived split between the acting self and the ‘real’ self, there is another feeling—that, somehow, it is *through acting* that she will truly realize her self: ‘She is a woman who has lost herself and feels that she can recover it by acting this self’ (33); ‘The acting is simultaneously a dramatization of a divided self, and at the same time she seeks through it the magic unification, two women made one through a role’ (*Journals*, III, 145); ‘She is not reading plays as plays, but as roles which might deliver her from her own dramas’ (153).

Nin seems, then, to be exploring the paradoxical idea of acting one’s own self, realizing (in the fullest sense of that term) what one most truly is precisely through acting it out.²⁵ In one sense, the actor/actress is the one who most reveals the ‘secret being’ of a person. He or she reveals more, communicates more deeply, than anyone else: ‘Nothing fascinates me more than the actress who makes visible, expressive, every mood and feeling, whose every gesture reveals, communicates, fascinates one’ (122); ‘The actor allows us such intimate glimpses of human beings in a state of love and openness . . . On the stage you are taken into the secret being of another and witness the exposure of a human being usually only uncovered in moments of love’ (139). Yet this ‘secret being’, this heightened reality of the self, is only available through acting; in Brownstein’s words, it ‘hangs on performances and fictions’.

It is particularly interesting, then, that while Nin describes Luise’s search for roles that are ‘projections’ or ‘extensions’ of herself, she men-

²⁵ See Chapter 5 for discussion of the (more radical) idea that any identity is constituted through an endless series of performances—is, in Judith Butler’s term, a ‘performative accomplishment’.

tions only one role by name, that of Rachel Félix: “Now you have found Rachel, which you want to do” (159).

‘SOMEONE MAKING HERSELF UP’

Rachel Félix was born in 1821, the daughter of extremely poor French Jewish peddlers; when she died of tuberculosis in 1858 she was, in the words of one theatre historian, ‘the most celebrated actress on earth’.²⁶ Having joined the Comédie-Française in 1838, she had her first major success in the role of Camille in Corneille’s *Horace*, and went on almost single-handedly to restore the fortunes of the Comédie-Française and the popularity of classical French tragedy, the plays of Corneille and Racine, through her extraordinarily powerful performances of the great tragic heroines, most notably Racine’s *Phèdre*. She toured Europe and America, was noted for her scandalous love life, and, after her early death, became, in John Stokes’s words, ‘an essential component in the mythic figure of the great performing woman’.²⁷ She appeared as the actress Vashti in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853); she is also the inspirational role model and artistic icon for James’s Miriam Rooth, who declares that she wants to be ‘the English Rachel’.²⁸ For Miriam, the Théâtre Français is the ‘holy of holies’, imbued with Rachel’s spirit: ‘I feel them here, all the great artists I shall never see. Think of Rachel—look at her grand portrait there!—and how she stood on these very boards’.²⁹ It is underneath this iconic portrait that Miriam stands—a physical, visual enactment of her allegiance—in her confrontation with Peter Sherringham, when he first asks her to give up acting and marry him.³⁰

Rachel Brownstein’s ‘biography’ of Rachel (she was always known simply by her first name) does not, however, aim to provide a factual record of Rachel’s life and work. Brownstein states that she is ‘interested, above all, in how Rachel and her life were embedded in legends. I want to map that fantastic forest, to suggest that the interlocking branches of fact and fiction there cannot be disentangled’.³¹ Perhaps taking her cue from James himself and his portrait of Miriam Rooth, Brownstein argues that it is precisely through ‘people’s reflections of and on Rachel’ that we can

²⁶ John Stokes, ‘Rachel Félix’, in Michael Booth, John Stokes, and Susan Bassnett, *Three Tragic Actresses: Siddons, Rachel, Ristori* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), 115.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ James, *The Tragic Muse*, 181.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 315.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 327.

³¹ Brownstein, *Tragic Muse*, 67–9.

best see her.³² She analyses Rachel's symbolic valency—as actress, as sexually voracious woman, as exotic 'foreign' beauty. Brownstein notes the 'deeply and fundamentally contradictory' aspects of the nineteenth-century attitude towards actresses, seeing this as a limit case of attitudes towards women and 'the feminine' more generally:

On the one hand actresses were condemned for pretending to be who they weren't—and weakening what characters they had by pretense. They were also rated for merely playing themselves. In the misogynist imagination, actresses are false—artful, artificial, duplicitous, like women in general—and on the other hand excitingly, transgressively true to the passions and the imagination. In a culture that confusedly conceived of female sexuality as an excess of either nature or artifice, they were taken to stand for Woman.³³

Rachel, who at first was seen as 'chaste', later became associated (after news broke of some 'compromising' letters) with this excessive female sexuality; and this identification was bound up with the roles she played: 'The actress's growing reputation for greed and sexual excess bled easily into the images of murderous Roxane [the exotic mistress of a sultan in Racine's *Bajazet*] and incestuous Phèdre; as Rachel moved from role to role, it was as if to prove that one crime leads to another'.³⁴

Rachel's role in relation to the nineteenth-century French preoccupation with national identity was also intriguing: her status as patriot, even national symbol, created through her dramatic on-stage recitations of the 'Marseillaise', could not but be complicated by her Jewishness—which she never tried to disavow, but, on the contrary, emphasized throughout her life and career. And this very Jewishness was central to her exotic, erotic appeal, through the operation of a certain kind of Orientalism: 'Rachel's popularity coincided with an aesthetic-erotic vogue for exotic women', a taste for 'Semitic feminine beauty'.³⁵ It could also be seen to exacerbate, perhaps, the actress's already liminal status: like the actress, the Jew in the fin-de-siècle period might be 'in', but would never quite be 'of', European society. Again, Miriam Rooth is described by Peter

³² Brownstein, *Tragic Muse*, 27, 44. In his Preface, James notes his apparently paradoxical strategy of making Miriam the 'centre' of the book despite her only ever being seen through others' eyes: 'we have no direct exhibition of [Miriam's consciousness] whatever . . . we get at it all inferentially and inductively, seeing it only through a more or less bewildered interpretation of it by others' (*The Tragic Muse*, p. xvi). I shall go on to examine the 'bewildering' aspect of the actress in more detail below.

³³ Brownstein, *Tragic Muse*, 43.

³⁴ Ibid. 166.

³⁵ Ibid. 31. Both Mary Ann Doane and Gail Finney also note the Orientalist aspect inherent in the fin-de-siècle fascination with the exotic, sexual woman, the *femme fatale*; I shall return to this point later.

Sherringham as being ‘of Rachel’s tribe’; that is, she is ‘more than half a Jewess’³⁶ (an affiliation with Rachel she is happy to claim); and there is, perhaps, an implied link between the statelessness and rootlessness of the actress or the artist, and that of the Jew.³⁷

As Brownstein argues, these processes of symbolic association, of myth-making, are not one-directional. If ‘a star is someone whose roles shape her character and get conflated with it’, that shaping or conflation is not simply something imposed from the ‘outside’: it is also a process in which the star herself is actively involved. Rachel, Brownstein suggests, ‘seemed to flaunt the fact that she was a fiction and a fabrication, someone making herself up’.³⁸ On the other hand, we should avoid overstatement here. While Brownstein wishes to approach Rachel through her identity (or non-identity) as a ‘star’ and therefore a ‘legendary’ character, rejecting the idea of a factual reality ‘beneath or beyond the layers of spectacle and symbol and stereotype’,³⁹ she is also careful to make the point that Rachel did have a historical existence and agency, that she cannot be reduced to ‘only a shimmer of language’.⁴⁰

This point is important in thinking about the question of the actress’s roles and her ‘identity’—the question that concerns Nin in her portrayals of Stella/Luise—because it allows us to formulate the issue in a more nuanced way. If Rachel is ‘making herself up’ through the roles she enacts (and ‘roles’ here can encompass both her on-stage characters and the symbolic roles I have been discussing), these roles are not chosen at random. ‘Rachel’ is not merely an empty signifier, a blank that becomes filled by the role she plays. Rather, there is a negotiation. Certainly, she is in a sense created through the roles; as Brownstein argues, ‘the heroines she played and the structure of the plays she starred in shaped her self and her life story’.⁴¹ But she also ‘makes herself up’, creates, shapes, enacts, her self and her life *through* these roles. The role is not simply given, but is always interpreted—and this interpretation, even alteration or ‘distortion’, may be part of a self-enacting. John Stokes relates, for instance, that when Rachel played Jeanne d’Arc, she altered the text so that, in the trial scene, she was handed a French standard rather than a Bible—thus pointing up

³⁶ James, *The Tragic Muse*, 181, 51.

³⁷ Peter Sherringham ‘guessed easily enough the dolorous type of exile of the two ladies, wanderers in search of Continental cheapness, inured to queer contacts and compromises’ (ibid. 125). The language of ‘exile’ and ‘wandering’ here is suggestive of Miriam’s ascribed Jewishness. Miriam herself describes her lack of interest in any national or ethnic identity: ‘I’m of the family of the artists—*je me fiche* of any other!’ (181).

³⁸ Brownstein, *Tragic Muse*, p. xiii.

³⁹ Ibid. 27.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. x.

⁴¹ Ibid. 41.

the complexity of her situation as a French Jew playing a French Christian patriot-heroine.⁴²

What we see here, then, is another example of the ‘double-jointedness’ identified in Chapter 1 in the context of (to use Susan Stanford Friedman’s phrase) ‘textual self-fashioning’: acting, like the signature, like autobiography, is double-jointed, pulling in both directions at once, appropriating the role for the actress, expropriating the actress into the role. This seems to provide the best way to explicate the apparent paradox that Nin elaborates in relation to the actress—the problem that, while the acting self is seen as a fraud, a ‘fiction’, nonetheless it is through acting that the ‘self’ will truly be realized: ‘She wants to walk into her own self, truly presented, truly revealed. She wants to act only herself.’ The actress’s identity does not lie in some ‘real’ self, removed from the sphere of acting, nor entirely in the roles she enacts on-screen, but in the negotiation between the ‘fictional’ and the ‘historical’ that she makes in her interpretations of roles as ‘projections’ or ‘extensions’ of her self.

There is a final twist to Luise Rainer’s appropriation of, and expropriation by, the role of Rachel. In 1849, at the height of her fame, Rachel starred in a play written especially for her. Entitled *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, it was the story of the eighteenth-century tragic actress, the biggest star of her day, who led a turbulent personal life and died young in mysterious circumstances. Stars, Brownstein suggests, are ‘translations, representations’ of other stars. In playing *Adrienne*, Rachel ‘re-presented’ her own career as a performer;⁴³ she staged the myths and symbols surrounding her own identity as a legendary actress. She also, clearly, ‘identified’ with *Adrienne*: Ernest Legouvé, co-author, with Eugène Scribe, of *Adrienne Lecouvreur*, recounted in his memoirs ‘how he came upon her rehearsing *Adrienne*’s death scene alone in a darkened theater, tears rolling down her cheeks, and she told him that she was mourning her own death in *Adrienne*’s’.⁴⁴ We may wonder whether Nin, when writing the story of Luise’s identification with Rachel, knew about *Adrienne Lecouvreur*. In any case, it creates the vertiginous effect of a hall of mirrors. Rachel is the ideal choice of role for Luise, seeking to resolve the paradoxes of her own identity as actress precisely through acting them out. Not only is Rachel the perfect symbol of, and as, the actress: in her own stagings and interpretations, most of all in her playing the role of *Adrienne*, she too highlighted, and perhaps sought to resolve, the paradoxes of identity in exactly the same way as Luise (and Stella)—through acting.

⁴² Stokes, ‘Rachel Félix’, 110.

⁴³ *Ibid.* 105.

⁴⁴ Cited by Brownstein: *Tragic Muse*, 212.

'BEAUTIFUL, ACTUAL, FICTIVE, IMPOSSIBLE'

'To make up one's mind about an actress is, of course, the most troublesome of tasks.'⁴⁵ Thus Virginia Woolf, reviewing in 1911 a book about Rachel Félix with the title *Rachel: Her Stage Life and her Real Life*. The author of the book she is reviewing is—as his title suggests—intent on separating the actress's 'stage life' from her 'real life'; his argument is that Rachel was a tragic figure because her 'real' life, her 'own' life, was overshadowed by the 'unreal' life of her acting, her playing of roles. Woolf, on the other hand, is concerned precisely to question this distinction, to grapple with the issues of acting and identity, reality and illusion. Her (apparently casual) remark about the difficulty of 'making up one's mind' points to the problem raised by the figure of the actress, the epistemic unease—or, as Henry James puts it, bewilderment—she engenders.

This is one of the central themes explored by James through the figure of Miriam Rooth. Peter Sherringham, fascinated from the first by Miriam's 'variousness',⁴⁶ and unwittingly falling in love with her, finds himself suddenly confronted by a startling, even horrifying, *mise en abîme*:

It came over [Peter] suddenly that so far from there being any question of her having the histrionic nature she simply had it in such perfection that she was always acting; that her existence was a series of parts assumed for the moment . . . Interested as he had ever been in the profession of which she was potentially an ornament, this idea startled him by its novelty and even lent, on the spot, a formidable, a really appalling character to Miriam Rooth. It struck him abruptly that a woman whose only being was to 'make believe', to make believe she had any and every being you might like and that would serve a purpose and produce a certain effect, and whose identity resided in the continuity of her personations, so that she had no moral privacy, as he phrased it to himself, but lived in a high wind of exhibition, of figuration—such a woman was a kind of monster in whom of necessity there would be nothing to 'be fond' of, because there would be nothing to take hold of.⁴⁷

Peter's attitude towards this revelation shifts about through the book. At times he finds Miriam's 'labyrinthine' nature beautifully attractive: "And do you think I haven't a character?" As he hesitated she pushed back her chair, rising rapidly. He looked up at her an instant—she

⁴⁵ Virginia Woolf, review of *Rachel: Her Stage Life and her Real Life*, by Francis Gribble (London: Chapman & Hall, 1911), in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 20 April 1911; repr. in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, I (ed. Andrew McNeillie; London: Hogarth Press, 1986), 351.

⁴⁶ James, *The Tragic Muse*, 143.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 167–8.

seemed so “plastic”; and then rising too answered: “Delightful being, you’ve a hundred!”⁴⁸ At other times he is overwhelmed by ‘the demon, the devil, the devourer and destroyer’ aspect of Miriam.⁴⁹ In the end, Miriam must stand for unresolved and unresolvable contradictions: ‘a beautiful, actual, fictive, impossible young woman of a past age [yet, in Gabriel Nash’s vision, ‘drawing forth the modernness of the age’], an undiscoverable country, who spoke in blank verse and overflowed with metaphor, who was exalted and heroic beyond all human convenience and who yet was irresistibly real’.⁵⁰

For Nin, these questions of illusion and reality, surface and depth, had been raised most insistently by her encounter, in 1931, with a woman who was not a professional actress but, in Nin’s eyes, ‘an actress every moment’: Henry Miller’s wife June Mansfield. Already involved in a passionate affair with Miller, Nin became equally fascinated by Mansfield, who would appear as a central character in her journals and provided the model for Sabina, the *femme fatale* in Nin’s fiction. The fascination of the *femme fatale* for Nin lay above all in her status as enigma, spinning endless tales around herself which, rather than presenting a clear self-portrait, ‘confuse all the images’ (*Spy*, 10), simultaneously provoking the desire for knowledge and blocking that knowledge. There is, in fact, in Nin’s treatments of the *femme fatale* figure a striking emphasis on this epistemic dimension, rather than on the bodily or sexual dimension which we might expect to be dominant; and I shall go on to show how this is connected, for Nin, to issues of power, control, and authorship.

Nin’s portrait of June⁵¹ focuses immediately on the problematics of identity raised by her theatricality and role-playing. June’s first appearance in *Henry and June* and in the *Journals*, and Sabina’s in *House of Incest*, are presented in terms of an actress’s first entrance on stage. Sabina appears, her face ‘suspended in the darkness of the garden’; the darkness, the night, functions as a backcloth, ‘a photograph unglued from its frame’

⁴⁸ James, *The Tragic Muse*, 187.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 224.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 286; Nash’s ‘joyous, amused, amusing’ vision of Miriam as quintessentially modern is on pp. 173–4. It should also be noted that what Miriam most fully and finally represents in James’s novel is the artist—as Peter Sherringham, despite himself, has to recognize (‘Wasn’t she the artist to the tips of her tresses—the ambassadress never in the world . . . ?’ [283]). James’s novel thus represents a fuller development of Baudelaire’s concession that, if the actress ‘comes close to the courtesan, on the other [hand] she reaches up to the poet’; and indeed could be seen as a counter to the predominantly negative fin-de-siècle representation of the actress—if Miriam sometimes appears to Peter as a ‘monster’, she is also a genuine and triumphant artist.

⁵¹ As with the case of Luise Rainer, so here my use of June’s first name is intended to point up her status as a *character* in Nin’s story.

(*House of Incest*, 180). In *Henry and June*, Nin describes June's entrance more dramatically: 'As she came towards me from the darkness of my garden into the light of the doorway I saw for the first time the most beautiful woman on earth' (14). In the *Journals*, the theatrical nature of this setting is made explicit in a retrospective description: 'June and I, arriving at the house, stand under the light over the front door, the light like a stage light which illumined her the first night I saw her' (*Journals*, I, 142).

June is 'an actress every moment', taking poses: 'she stood for a second halfway up the stairs where the light set her off against the turquoise green wall' (*Journals*, I, 26; *Henry and June*, 16). Nin sees her as the theatrical character pushed to the limit: 'Her role in life alone preoccupies her . . . I saw in her a caricature of the theatrical and dramatic personage. Costume, attitudes, talk. She is a superb actress. No more. I could not grasp her core' (*Henry and June*, 14). June, in fact, comes to stand for 'the theatre': 'She was the essence of the theatre itself, stirring the imagination, promising such an intensity and heightening of experience, such richness, and then failing to appear in person, giving instead a smoke-screen of compulsive talk about trivialities' (*Journals*, I, 27).

Nin sees June as representing her own fantasy of womanhood: "You're the only woman who ever answered the fantasies I had about what a woman should be", Nin tells her (*Journals*, I, 30; or, in *Henry and June*, "You are the only woman who ever answered the demands of my imagination" [16–17]). The fantasy June represents is that of no self, no 'core', no 'sincerity', as Nin tells her in a speech which is itself a fantasy:

I wanted to run out and kiss her fantastic beauty and say: 'June, you have killed my sincerity too. I will never know again who I am, what I am, what I love, what I want. Your beauty has drowned me, the core of me . . . Deep down, I am not different from you. I dreamed you, I wished for your existence. You are the woman I want to be. I see in you that part of me which is you.' (*Journals*, I, 27–8)⁵²

June's appeal resides in the fact that her character 'seems to have no definable form, no boundaries, no core'; she is merely an endless play of roles and illusions. She cannot be 'sincere' because the very notion of sincerity depends on a stable self (similarly, Miriam Rooth produces in Peter Sherringham 'the sense that if she was sincere it was the sincerity of execution, if she was genuine it was the genuineness of doing it well'⁵³). June

⁵² This dynamic of identification—seeing part of oneself, or a fantasy self, in the other—is central to Nin's depictions of relationships between women. I shall focus on this in more detail in Chapter 5.

⁵³ James, *The Tragic Muse*, 220.

is a locus for the erotics of multiplicity I ascribed to Nin in Chapter 2, the fantasy of the self as myriad, unconstrained, and non-conflictual. The importance of this fantasy for Nin is the liberatory potential it suggests for avoiding definitions, which she sees as equivalent to limitations, constraints: 'As soon as someone defines me, I do as June does: I seek escape from the confinements of definition' (*Journals*, I, 35). This evasion of definitions is repeatedly ascribed to Sabina in the novels: 'She was always trespassing boundaries, erasing identifications' (*Albatross*, 123). The confusions and vagueness of Sabina's endless stories are above all smoke-screens to prevent any clear points of identification or definition: 'At first she beckoned and lured one into her world; then, she blurred the passageways, confused all the images, as if to elude detection' (*Spy*, 10). Her multiple self-portraits are always blurred, so that there is no definition, and therefore no limit or boundary.

However, just as for Peter Sherringham, for Nin the fascination of the enigma also contains frustration and even fear. While June's evasiveness and fluidity exert a strong appeal for Nin, they also trouble, confuse, and frighten her: 'The extent of her falsity was terrifying, like an abyss. Fluidity. Elusiveness. Where was June? Who was June?' (*Journals*, I, 27).⁵⁴ While on the one hand she exults in June's destruction of sincerity and identity ('I will never again know who I am, what I am, what I love, what I want'), on the other hand, June's elusiveness provokes in her an almost violent desire for 'clarity', a desire to expose June and 'force' her into reality:

June's elusiveness, her retreat into fantasy, suddenly enrage me, because they are mine . . . I want to force her into reality (as Henry does). I, who am sunk in dreams, in half-lived acts, I want to do violence to her . . . Her subtlety makes me desire frankness; the quicksands of her evasions make me, for the first time, demand clarity. At times I feel as she does, like taking flight from selves I do not know, and at other times I feel like Henry, like pursuing and exposing these selves to crude daylight. (*Journals*, I, 34)

Here we can see Nin setting up the issue of the epistemic difficulty represented by this figure of elusive femininity. We can also see (and I shall return to this point later) an interesting sliding of identifications on Nin's part: she oscillates in this passage between her identification with June,

⁵⁴ Ironically, Miriam Rooth uses the word 'abyss' to describe—admirably—Mlle Voisin, the older actress she encounters on her visit to the Théâtre Français: 'She's strange, she's mysterious . . . She showed us nothing—nothing of her real self . . . she's so perfect . . . Her charming manner is . . . an abyss—it's the Wall of China' (*The Tragic Muse* 328–9). Miriam here, just like Nin, is seduced by and identifies with the enigma.

the position of femininity and enigma, and her identification with Henry, the position of masculinity, directness, and potential violence.

REVEALING AND CONCEALING: THE *FEMME FATALE*

While this notion of epistemic difficulty, a mysteriousness or evasiveness which defies the structures of knowledge, may be associated with 'woman' in general, both in Nin's texts and in the wider field of representations it is particularly bound up with certain kinds of woman or versions of femininity: the actress, as we have seen, and the *femme fatale*. Mary Ann Doane writes: "The femme fatale is the figure of a certain discursive unease, a potential epistemological trauma . . . She harbors a threat which is not entirely legible, predictable, or manageable . . . a secret, something which must be aggressively revealed, unmasked, discovered."⁵⁵

Both Doane and Gail Finney analyse the characteristics and cultural significance of the 'fatal woman' as she was represented, almost obsessively, through the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. The nineteenth-century *femme fatale*, Finney writes, "frequently takes the form of the *allumeuse* (literally, "a woman who ignites"), who excites men's desire without satisfying it. But the essential, defining quality of her nature, combining as it does beauty and death, is its two-sidedness."⁵⁶ *Allumeuse* is, in fact, the perfect description of Nin's character Sabina: "Sabina brought in her wake the sound and the imagery of fire engines as they tore through the streets of New York, alarming the heart with the violent gong of catastrophe. All dressed in red and silver, the tearing red and silver siren cutting a pathway through the flesh. The first time one looked at Sabina one felt: everything will burn!" (*Ladders*, 92; see also *Spy*, 7, 104-5)

In *House of Incest*, she is clearly associated with both beauty and death—her beauty is itself deadly: "from the eyes a simoom wind shrivelled the leaves"; "beneath the skin of her cheeks I saw ashes" (180, 183). Further, the motif of two-sidedness to which Finney draws attention is a repeated motif throughout *House of Incest* in the image of the two faces of woman, the division between night and day. Sabina and the narrator

⁵⁵ Mary Ann Doane, *Femmes Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 1.

⁵⁶ Gail Finney, *Women in Modern Drama: Freud, Feminism and European Theater at the Turn of the Century* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1989), 52.

are the two sides of woman, opposites but indissolubly linked together: 'I am the other face of you. Our faces are soldered together by soft hair, soldered together, showing two profiles of the same soul . . . Only our faces must shine twofold—like day and night—always separated by space and the evolutions of time' (185–6).

The figure of the *femme fatale* represents the point of convergence of various key discourses of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, including urban modernity, psychoanalysis, and the 'society of the spectacle'. Above all, the *femme fatale* is a focus for anxieties about both female sexuality and the stability of the self. The former anxiety was particularly bound up with the discourses and experiences of modern urbanization and consumerism (the 'streetwalker-princess' figure of 'La Parisienne'); the latter, with psychoanalysis. Thus, Doane argues, the *femme fatale* is 'a clear indication of the extent of the fears and anxieties prompted by shifts in the understanding of sexual difference in the late nineteenth century'; and she is 'an articulation of fears surrounding the loss of stability and centrality of the self, the "I", the ego'.⁵⁷ The *femme fatale* articulates these anxieties through her 'overrepresentation' of the body and the unconscious.⁵⁸ She is associated not with consciously controlled, ordered knowledge and reason but with 'deception, secretiveness, a kind of anti-knowledge'; and if this deceptiveness and 'anti-knowledge' are viewed as problematic (even traumatic), they may also be transvalued, situating the woman as 'privileged conduit to a—necessarily complex and even devious—truth'.⁵⁹ Thus 'woman' in general and the *femme fatale* in particular may come to represent the locus of a battle over illusion and reality, deception and truth, knowledge and 'anti-knowledge'. As we have seen, Nin sets up her portrait of June in the *Journals* in terms of just such a battle; as I shall go on to show, her 1961 story 'Sabina' (which is largely based on the text in the first volume of the *Journals*) is focused explicitly on this issue.

The deceptiveness of the *femme fatale* is represented particularly through the imagery of the *veil* and, relatedly, the striptease. The veil is inherently ambiguous in function: 'it simultaneously conceals and reveals, provoking the gaze'.⁶⁰ Functioning in this ambiguous way as a

⁵⁷ Doane, *Femmes Fatales*, 1.

⁵⁸ Cf. *ibid.* 2.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 3. The notion of women's privileged access to some realm of truth, meaning, or authenticity (cashed out, for example, in terms of 'closeness to nature' or 'connection with the unconscious') can sometimes be seen to underlie theories of a 'female' or 'feminine' language or writing. I discuss these theories in Chapter 4.

⁶⁰ 'Veiling over Desire: Close-Ups of the Woman', in *Femmes Fatales*, 49.

bodily/sexual tease, both revealing and concealing, the veil can then also function symbolically to figure the epistemic ‘tease’ represented by the *femme fatale*: the ‘structure’ of the veil, Doane argues, is ‘clearly complicit with the tendency to specify the woman’s position in relation to knowledge as that of the enigma’.⁶¹ The same structure is found in the striptease, which also puts into play ‘the dialectic of concealing and revealing’.⁶²

It is also important to note here that the veil is traditionally associated with the East, indicating the Orientalism mentioned earlier. This aspect of the fin-de-siècle *femme fatale* can be seen particularly in the endless representations of the figure of Salome. This minor biblical figure⁶³ became—for the French Symbolists and Decadents in particular—the quintessential representation of the *femme fatale*, appearing in paintings, poems, opera, and of course Oscar Wilde’s Symbolist play, first performed (in French) in 1893. Bram Dijkstra writes that ‘[in] the turn-of-the-century imagination, the figure of Salome epitomized the inherent perversity of women . . . Salome became the endlessly multiplied image of woman’.⁶⁴ With a certain relish, Nin associates herself with Salome in a series of diary entries in 1929 recounting a theatre director’s attempt to persuade her to take the role in a production of Wilde’s play: ‘The two producers and the Director still want me for Salomé, because they have the idea that she was like me—young, innocent-looking, dreamy, and yet devilish!’ (15 May 1929 [*Early Diary*, IV, 183]). In his 1924 novel *A Passage to India* E. M. Forster draws on the image of the enigmatic Eastern *femme fatale* to convey the epistemic threat that India represents to its colonizers and would-be conquerers:

How can the mind take hold of such a country? Generations of invaders have tried, but they remain in exile. The important towns they build are only retreats, their quarrels the malaise of men who cannot find their way home. India knows of their trouble. She knows of the whole world’s trouble, to its uttermost depth. She calls ‘Come’ through her hundred mouths, through objects ridiculous and august. But come to what? She has never defined. She is not a promise, only an appeal.⁶⁵

⁶¹ Ibid. 54.

⁶² ‘*Gilda*: Epistemology as Striptease’, in *ibid.* 108.

⁶³ She is described only as ‘the daughter of Herodias’ in Matthew (14: 3–12) and Mark (6: 17–29), but named as Salome by Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews* 18.5.4). The account of her dance and John’s subsequent beheading does not appear in Luke or John.

⁶⁴ Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity*, 384.

⁶⁵ E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985 [1924]), 148–9.

India itself (or 'herself') is personified here as seductive but eternally enigmatic Woman, luring the mind of the (male) 'invader' *en abîme* through her sex/speech, her 'hundred mouths'.

We can see this Orientalism at work in Nin's depictions of Sabina. Her 1961 story begins with her favourite image of the labyrinth, here explicitly associated both with Oriental cities and with Sabina, who is thereby herself symbolically linked to the Orient:

Certain cities of the orient were designed to baffle the enemy by a tangle of intricate streets. For those concealed within the labyrinth its detours were a measure of safety; for the invaders it presented an image of fearful mystery.

Sabina had chosen the labyrinth for safety. ('Sabina', 45)

Later, Sabina is explicitly compared to the veiled Eastern women: 'Sabina was like those veiled figures glimpsed turning the corner of a Moroccan street, wrapped from head to foot in white cotton, throwing to a stranger a single spark from fathomless eyes' (46). Here again the veiled Oriental woman seems to stand as a (male) fantasy of ever-elusive Woman: 'Was she the very woman one had been seeking? There was a compulsion to follow her' (46).⁶⁶ Similarly, 'the Arabs' represent evasiveness and mystery, providing a (symbolic) racial origin for Sabina:

Sabina remembered reading that the Arabs did not respect the man who unveiled his thoughts. The intelligence of an Arab was measured by his capacity to elude direct questions. The questioner was always suspect. Sabina was of that race. Did she truly originate thousands of years ago from the people who veiled their faces and their thoughts? Where did she come from that she understood so well this racial dedication to mystery? (47)

(In *The Four-Chambered Heart*, however, Nin refers to Sabina's 'Semitic labyrinthian mind'; she walks 'with the poise of Biblical water carriers' (162). The Orientalist stereotyping is inherently vague: any 'eastern' race will do, it seems, to suggest veils, labyrinths, and mysteries.)

Sabina's easternness, though, is always figurative: her veils are linguistic rather than material. From her first major appearance in *Ladders to Fire*, through her subsequent appearances in *A Spy in the House of Love*, briefly in *Seduction of the Minotaur*, and finally in the 1961 story, Sabina is characterized through her *speech*, the endless stories she tells, or half-tells. Sabina talks 'profusely and continuously', but her stories are

⁶⁶ In *Mrs Dalloway* Virginia Woolf puts a strikingly similar fantasy into the mind of Peter Walsh, entertaining himself by following through the London streets an attractive young woman who 'seemed . . . to shed veil after veil, until she became the very woman he had always had in mind' (Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* [London: Triad Grafton, 1976 (1925)], 59).

chaotic, unfinished, fragmentary, filled with ‘indistinct incidents’, ‘hazy scenes’ in which it is impossible to distinguish places and persons:

A broken dream, with spaces, reversals, contradictions, galloping fantasies and sudden retractions. She would say: ‘he lifted my skirt’, or ‘we had to take care of the wounds’, or ‘the policeman was waiting for me and I had to swallow the drug to save my friends’, and then as if she had written this on a blackboard she took a huge sponge and effaced it all by a phrase which was meant to convey that perhaps this story had happened to someone else, or she may have read it, or heard it at a bar, and as soon as this was erased she began another story . . . (*Ladders*, 92–3; repeated almost verbatim at the beginning of *Spy*, 7–10, and again at the end, 104–9)

Subjects and objects are blurred; persons cannot be distinguished, but merge into each other: ‘The faces and the figures of her personages appeared only half drawn, and when one just began to perceive them another face and figure were interposed, as in a dream’ (*Ladders*, 93). Above all, it is Sabina herself who is hidden and blurred in these stories: while she appears to be revealing herself and her life history, in fact she is always keeping these pictures of herself out of focus, evading definition.

This emphasis on the epistemic and linguistic dimensions of the *femme fatale*—her status as enigma—is noteworthy because it contrasts with the emphasis on the body and on (excessive or perverse) sexuality which is central to most accounts of the *femme fatale*. For example, Cassandra Laity, in her analysis of H.D.’s use of the figure of the *femme fatale*, puts far more stress on the ‘threatening materiality’ associated with this figure, using terms such as ‘visceral’ to describe the ‘exploded and explosive female bodies’ she finds in H.D.’s work.⁶⁷ Certainly, Nin does characterize Sabina in terms of sexuality. In *Ladders to Fire* we are told that Jay (the Henry Miller character) ‘hates’ her because she is sexually free, ‘the woman without fidelity, capable of all desecrations’; because ‘he knew instinctively that she regarded him as he regarded woman: as a possible or impossible lover’ (*Ladders*, 94, 95). *A Spy in the House of Love* traces Sabina’s movement from one lover to another, her attempts to live out this sexual freedom without experiencing a disintegration of self. It is perhaps in the prose poem *House of Incest* that Nin approaches most closely the ‘visceral’ dimension of the *femme fatale*, with intensely imagistic descriptions of Sabina’s deadly beauty and sexual power: ‘She stared with

⁶⁷ Cassandra Laity, *H.D. and the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Gender, Modernism, Decadence* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), 119, 125. Bram Dijkstra also discusses the association of ‘woman’ in general with an engulfing materiality: woman is ‘lodged in the earth, needing the earth . . . the very personification of instinctive physical greed whose primary natural function [is] to try to catch, engulf and, if possible, absorb the male’ (*Idols of Perversity*, 237).

such an ancient stare, heavy luxuriant centuries flickering in deep processions. From her nacreous skin perfumes spiralled like incense. Every gesture she made quickened the rhythm of the blood and aroused a beat chant like the beat of the heart of the desert, a chant which was the sound of her feet treading down into the blood the imprint of her face' (180).

Particularly in the later works, though, it is Sabina's enigmatic speech, her association with deception and 'anti-knowledge', that predominates. It is in her speech that Sabina enacts the dialectic of revealing and concealing that structures both the veil and the striptease; she represents above all a block to knowledge, a point of resistance to orderly structures of thought, Doane's 'potential epistemological trauma'. Doane's analysis of the *femme fatale*, in fact, fits Nin's texts so well precisely because, while both acknowledge the 'imbrication of knowledge and sexuality' in the figure of the fatal woman, both also tend to emphasize the epistemic rather than the sexual dimension.

This imbrication of issues of knowledge and sexuality in the figure of the woman is brought out particularly well in Nin's short story 'Sabina'. Here, once again, Jay is cast as Sabina's opponent, the one who is troubled by her elusiveness and mystery. Jay, with his 'love of facts', hates mystery and indirectness, wants to get to the bottom of everything, to find the reality behind the illusion; he has a 'passion for stripping, unveiling, exposing the truth' ('Sabina', 48). Paradoxically, and inevitably, just this hatred of mystery draws him to Sabina, the feminine mystery *par excellence*: 'They were drawn together by his need to expose illusion, her need to create it. A satanic pact. One must triumph: the realist or the mythmaker' (52). Once again, the woman becomes the site of a battle over knowledge: 'from the first day [Jay] was trapped by what he believed to be a duel between reality and illusion' (47).

The sexual dimension in this battle is implicit from the beginning of Nin's story, with the language of 'stripping' and 'unveiling' and the characterization of Jay as having 'the primitive urge of the invader' (47). But it is rendered explicit later in the text in an exchange between Jay and his confidante Djuna:

'I want the key, the key, the key to the lies. I thought that with passion I could break her open, break her elusiveness, find a naked woman who would give all of herself.'

'You make it sound like rape . . .' (58-9)

Here Jay's desire to break Sabina open epistemically, to find the 'truth' behind her mysteries, is figured as a sexual desire to 'break her open', to

reveal her nakedness. The epistemic trauma Sabina represents for him, the 'trauma' of withheld or inaccessible (or possibly non-existent) truth, is also the 'trauma' of inaccessible sexuality, the frustration of the (male) spectator of the striptease artist: 'Her symbolic resistance to nakedness of thought and feeling became associated in his mind with the image of the strip tease, women exposing gradually areas of their bodies and vanishing when they were about to be seen completely' (52). What is noteworthy here is that the epistemic 'trauma'—the mystery—is the *primary* concern; what Jay wants *above all* is 'the key to the lies'.

In several places in this text, Nin seems clearly to valorize the 'feminine mystique' of Sabina, setting it against and denigrating a masculine directness and drive for knowledge. Jay is presented as clumsy and even violent in his attempts to 'penetrate' Sabina's mysteries; he represents a limited, one-dimensional masculine perspective which fails in the face of Sabina's elusiveness: 'He had believed only in what he saw, in one dimension, like a candid photographer, and he now found himself inside rows of mirrors with endless reflections and counter reflections' (46). Jay appears as a failed analyst, not subtle enough to understand Sabina's indirect discourse: 'Jay suspected that much was being hidden from him; it was hidden not by Sabina, but by his own purely external vision. Among the chaotic confessions, the rambling talks, the flow of fiction, he had not been able to detect the revelatory ones. Sabina escaped direct questions, but offered other clues' (51). Sabina's fluidity is set against Jay's crude and constraining drive for knowledge: 'Jay often attacked her, denigrated, disparaged. He wanted to fix her dispersed attention, to contain her chaos and her fluidity. He hated the multiple changes and transformations which were like so many unknown, foreign Sabinas to be pursued, tracked down, possessed. A distracting harem' (55).

This value-laden opposition might suggest a clear identification, on Nin's part, with the figure of feminine mystery over against the masculine drive for knowledge. And yet, as we have seen, Nin's identifications around this issue are more complex. In the *Journals* text she admits her own ambivalent response to June's evasions and mysteries, her identification with Henry's desire to 'expose' the truth—or, perhaps, to expose the fact that there is no 'truth' because, behind the veils and smoke-screens, there is nothing 'there'.

In her story 'Sabina', Nin worries away at the question: *why* does the *femme fatale* present these mysteries and evasions? Once again it is Djuna who puts her finger on this as the important issue, while Jay searches blindly for the answer to the riddle of Sabina: 'He did not ask the correct

question of the Sphinx. He did not say to Sabina what Djuna said to her later: "I am not concerned with the secrets, or the lies, or the mysteries. I am concerned with *what made them necessary*" (53). Nin suggests various possible answers to this question. In the statement at the beginning of the story that 'Sabina had chosen the labyrinth for safety', there is a clear implication that Sabina's elusiveness is a *defence*—against the dangers of definition, as I have already suggested; against the 'judgment' she fears from Jay (47) or from others; against 'distortion' ('She feared to see a distorted image of herself in him' (49)). This interpretation of elusiveness as defence is also found in *A Spy in the House of Love*, in a passage which reveals once again the imbrication of the epistemic and the sexual: 'Before he could speak and harm her with words while she lay naked and exposed, while he prepared a judgment, she was preparing her metamorphosis, so that whatever Sabina he struck down she could abandon like a disguise, shedding the self he had seized upon and say: "That was not me"' (58).

Or again, Sabina's elusiveness is perhaps a feminine tactic, the deliberate creation of mystery in order to maintain a hold over the man: 'Sabina created mysteries as a natural flowering of her femininity. How else to hold his interest for a thousand nights?' (52). Here there is a clear allusion to Scheherezade, who told stories to save her life, and the lives of other women, from the despotic sultan. But it is Sabina's overwhelming need for reassurance in her own powers, her need to be loved (50), that drives her myth-making. The paradox here, then, is that if she creates mysteries as a 'natural flowering of her femininity', this femininity seems not to be 'natural' in the sense of any kind of independent drive or essence, but merely to revolve around the figure of the man. And Nin does in fact suggest that Sabina has no 'nature' of her own: 'No passion or desire springing from independent desires of her own, but from the desire to be loved' (50–1). A passage in *Children of the Albatross* makes the point more strongly: '[Sabina] eluded tabulations only to place herself more completely at the disposal of anyone's fantasy about her. She kept herself free of all identifications the better to obey some stranger's invention about her' (124).

There is, then, another side to the *femme fatale* in Nin's writing: she begins to appear not as the all-powerful, unfettered woman, but as a far more passive and dependent creature. Doane suggests that the *femme fatale* blurs the distinction between active and passive; she is 'an ambivalent figure because she is not the subject of power but its *carrier*'.⁶⁸ I would argue that it is precisely this ambivalence that Nin reads in the fig-

⁶⁸ *Femmes Fatales*, 2.

ure of the *femme fatale*, and which is particularly central to her portrait of June in the *Journals*. This issue of power is strongly bound up, for Nin, with questions of authorship and with the importance, as Diane Richard-Allerdyce puts it, of being ‘capable of drawing one’s own self-portrait’.⁶⁹

June appears in the *Journals* as a powerful and fascinating figure; at the same time, Nin sees her as lacking power or control: ‘She seemed at once destructive and helpless’ (*Journals*, I, 33). Nin sees June as acting unconsciously, unable to direct her own power: ‘If there is any calculation in her whose destiny is beyond her control, it comes only afterwards, when she becomes aware of her power and wonders how she can use it. I do not think her power is directed. Even she is baffled by it . . . her destructiveness is unconscious’ (34, 39).

Ultimately, however, Nin believes that the power June lacks is the power to control her own representations, to ‘draw her own self-portrait’. Although this appears to be exactly what June does—in her endless spinning of tales around herself, she seems constantly to make and remake ‘portraits’ of herself—Nin comes to believe that June’s stories are, in fact, only reflections of what she and Henry want June to be. She suggests that June lacks independent existence; there is no ‘core’ behind or underneath the play of roles and illusions: ‘She lives on reflections of herself in others’ eyes . . . There is no June Mansfield. She knows it’ (*Henry and June*, 15). The power that June lacks is the power that Nin attributes to herself and to Henry, grounded in their identity as *writers*: ‘The same thing which makes Henry indestructible is what makes me indestructible. The core of us is an artist, a writer’ (*Journals*, I, 76). June is ‘the powerful, fictionalized character’ (48); that is, she is powerful for Nin because Nin constructs her as the figure of her fantasy, the *femme fatale*. On this view, it is the writers, the ones giving out the roles and drawing the portraits, who really have the power. June is endlessly written and rewritten by both Miller and Nin, but she herself remains a beautiful ‘empty box’ with ‘no ideas, no fantasies of her own’ (55–6). Whereas, Nin thinks, she and Henry are ‘indestructible’, June is vulnerable; in fact, Henry has ‘killed’ her in his writing (141). Nin sees June’s sense of self destroyed in the face of Henry’s endless writings and rewritings of her: ‘Now she stands before the bulk of Henry’s writing and cannot tell whether she is a prostitute, a goddess, a criminal, a saint’ (151). Nin tells June that she will ‘rescue’ her from Henry’s literary ‘ravages’, by making a different portrait of her: ‘“I will make a great character out of

⁶⁹ Richard-Allerdyce, *Remaking of Self*, 13.

you, June, I will make a portrait you will like” (155). But, of course, this merely underscores June’s dependence, and her difference from Henry and Nin: she is scripted, they are the scriptors. Nin goes on: ‘Henry cannot impose a pattern on me, because I make my own. And I can make my own portrait too’ (155).

In her depiction of this three-way drama, then, Nin attempts to nullify June’s seductive power over her (grounded in her own identification with June, her recognition that they are both obsessive self-mythologizers) by invoking the superior power of the author, or rather (as Roland Barthes writes it) ‘the Author’, figure of authority and control.⁷⁰ As Richard-Allerdyce notes, Nin’s identification with June, the ‘actress every moment’, breaks down over this issue of self-authoring: ‘The difference between June and her, Nin writes, is that June remains unconscious of the role of self-construction through tale-telling, while Nin herself is self-consciously embracing the role of inventor creator.’⁷¹ Richard-Allerdyce’s overall argument is that, for Nin, the ‘right to author her own life’⁷² took on great importance as part of her lifelong attempt to recover from the emotional and possibly sexual abuse she experienced as a child from her father: ‘Creating one’s own pattern was an especially important idea for Nin, for on it would depend her ability to mourn her past trauma in fiction and to create herself anew in her own rather than in her father’s image.’⁷³ Certainly, from a very early age Nin identified writing with control; in her diary in 1916, at the age of thirteen, she wrote: ‘I am nothing but dust, made to be walked on. Only I am a little bit ambitious, and I who am dust, I want to spread myself on a lot of paper, turn into lots of sentences, lots of words so that I won’t be walked on’ (25 November 1916 [*Early Diary*, I, 145]).

⁷⁰ See Barthes, ‘The Death of the Author’, *passim*.

⁷¹ Richard-Allerdyce, *Remaking of Self*, 177 n. 42.

⁷² *Ibid.* 50.

⁷³ *Ibid.* 28. Noël Riley Fitch’s biography of Nin, which came out in 1993, was structured around the plausible but unverifiable hypothesis that Nin was abused as a child by her father. Fitch argued that many of Nin’s adult behaviour patterns, notably her promiscuity, her drive for control, and her highly problematic relations with ‘father figures’, fit the patterns typical of victims of childhood incest. Richard-Allerdyce’s study focuses on the effects of trauma in Nin’s work and her attempts to overcome this trauma in and through her writing: ‘We do not know whether Nin was sexually abused by her father as a child . . . What we do know is that Nin’s lifelong writings show the effects of severe traumatization around the issue of the paternal, and she suffered throughout her life from these effects’ (*Remaking of Self*, 42). According to the ‘unexpurgated’ diary volume *Incest*, Nin and her father engaged in a passionate (and consensual) sexual relationship in the summer of 1933. Even if this account represents a fantasy on Nin’s part rather than recounting ‘real events’, it clearly suggests (in tandem with her obsessive returns, both in her life and in her texts, to the ‘issue of the paternal’) what Richard-Allerdyce describes as a lack of normal boundaries in the father–daughter relationship.

With her invocation of the power of the Author, then, Nin moves from an identification with June to an identification with Henry ('the same thing which makes Henry indestructible is what makes me indestructible'): she arrogates to herself the traditionally masculine position, the position of the artist rather than of the muse.⁷⁴ Writing is the way, or the place, in which to regain mastery of one's story, oneself. The irony here, though, is that for Nin writing is also the territory onto which the battle to seduce, to spin veils around oneself, is shifted; the *femme fatale* returns, or, perhaps, was there from the beginning.

'COURTING THE WORLD': WRITING AND SEDUCTION

In a sharply revealing passage in the sixth volume of the *Journals*, dated 'Fall 1957', Nin writes:

Every act related to my writing was connected in me with an act of charm, seduction of my father. Every act was accompanied by guilt and retraction. Every act was doomed. I was doomed by the enormity of my sin (the wish to charm my father) to be punished, to fail.

Every act from selling a book, accepting a dollar, involving others, was charged with direct sexual associations: courting the world. In my dreams I did not publish *Under a Glass Bell* but I bought a vulgar parrot-green dress, a whorish dress. In my dreams at night I did not achieve a work of art and present the world with it, but I lay naked on a bed (with an invisible lover) and all the world could see me. (*Journals*, VI, 109)

Here Nin admits the extent to which, for her, writing is charged with a thoroughgoing and painful sexualization (focused once again around a guilt-ridden sexual association with her father). The process of writing, producing her story, offering it to the world, is felt as an attempted seduction—or, more strongly, as whoring. But it is also felt as a painful and

⁷⁴ Barthes writes: 'The Author is thought to *nourish* the book, which is to say that he exists before it, thinks, suffers, lives for it, is in the same relation of antecedence to his work as a father to his child' ('The Death of the Author', 145). It is difficult to say whether Barthes is here suggesting a critique of the masculinization of 'the Author' or simply reproducing it. (It is worth noting that in the 'moral rights' clause of a publishing contract, the author—male or female—is obliged to assert his or her 'moral right of paternity in the work'.) On the subject of muse and artist, Nin portrays the following exchange between herself and June: "[Gabriele] D'Annunzio," June said, "was only [Eleonora] Duse's mediocre penman. Even some of his plays were born of Duse and would never have been written if she had not existed." . . . "But," I agreed bitterly, "Duse is dead, and D'Annunzio has done the writing, and he is famous and not Duse." (*Journals*, I, 43)

humiliating exposure: in putting her texts on view, she puts herself on view as a sexual and shameful spectacle (the ‘invisible lover’, following so closely on the guilty admission of the previous paragraph, might indeed suggest the ‘unspeakable’ act of incest or incestuous abuse). We can see in this passage, then, an understanding on Nin’s part that the dynamic of seduction—simultaneous movement towards revealing and towards concealing—might be at work in her writing.

Precisely this dynamic, in fact, has been noted, particularly in relation to the edited *Journals*, by several critics and commentators on Nin’s work. Julia Casterton, in a 1982 article, focuses on the ‘delusion’, central to the reading of confessional texts such as diaries, of intimate access to the writer: ‘we imagine it is she [Nin] we are reaching through her narratives (as though the narratives themselves were webs, enticing yet distorting vision)’.⁷⁵ The image here is implicitly that of veils (‘webs’), recalling Doane’s analysis: like the veil, the stories Nin spins around herself both provoke the gaze, the desire for knowledge (‘enticing’), and frustrate it (‘distorting’). Casterton argues that while Nin (as we have seen in Chapter 1) ‘emphasizes the immediacy, honesty, accuracy of her confessional skills’, she is ‘ingenuously denying the artifice of the diary, its *simultaneous secrecy and exposure*’.⁷⁶

Other critics make the point more explicitly. Fitch, in the introduction to her biography, writes that Nin ‘hide[s] from her reader behind a million words, enticing, yet camouflaging herself with a labyrinth of mirrors. A literary striptease.’⁷⁷ And Nancy Scholar, in a section entitled ‘Autobiography as Seduction’, argues that Nin’s mythic self-construction and ‘revelations’ in the diaries must be seen as an extended striptease, directed ultimately at the seduction of the father, and more generally at the seduction of all her readers, who may be taken as standing in for the father: ‘In exposing her psyche . . . to the reader, Nin performs the same striptease her father demanded of her, only in literary form. From the inception of her journal, in fact, Nin associated writing with charming

⁷⁵ Maxine Molyneux and Julia Casterton, ‘Looking Again at Anaïs Nin’, *Minnesota Review* 18 (1982), 93. This article has a particularly interesting structure: it consists of a transcription of an interview with Nin recorded by Molyneux in 1970, framed by an introduction and commentary by Casterton dating from 1982. Casterton, in the introduction, explicitly sets up the article as both a retrospective, critical examination of the interview text and an attempt to get to grips with Nin’s problematic, ‘uneasy’ status in relation to women’s writing and feminist analysis. The article is noteworthy since it is one of very few critical attempts to historicize Nin in this way, and perhaps the only example I have encountered of feminists self-consciously looking back at Nin’s place in an earlier feminist context.

⁷⁶ ‘Looking Again’, 94, my emphasis.

⁷⁷ Fitch, *Anaïs*, 5.

and seducing, since the diary began as a way of winning back the father's love.⁷⁸ The striptease, the seduction, operates, as we have seen, through revelation and concealment: 'the writer invites and excites her readers with intimate suggestions, and then vanishes behind her mask . . . Nin draws us into the labyrinth of her life-book, leading us on with a seductive wave of her scarf, but the closer we get to her down these winding passageways, the further she seems.'⁷⁹ Scholar neatly returns us here to the image of the Orient, the labyrinthine cities of the east which, as we have seen, are used to figure Sabina's elusiveness and mystery, and which Nin associated with her own life: in 'Through the Streets of My Own Labyrinth', she describes 'the ancient city of Fez, which was so much like my own life, with its tortuous streets, its silences, secrecies, its labyrinths and its covered faces' (*Under a Glass Bell*, 71).⁸⁰

The *femme fatale*, then, returns not only as a figure within Nin's texts but also in the *structure* of those texts, especially her diary texts. Like Sabina, like June, Nin is 'impelled by a great confessional fever' (*Ladders*, 93), a desire to tell stories, to create a sense of intimacy, to court and entice; but, again like Sabina, she remains hidden behind her veils, 'throwing to a stranger a single spark from fathomless eyes' ('Sabina', 46). This is why, I would argue, Nin's portrayals of June and Sabina focus so much on story-telling, rather than on the body or sexuality itself, as the sphere of mystery and seduction; why, for Jay in the 1961 story, Sabina's status as a 'sphinx', an epistemic tease, takes priority over—while being clearly bound up with—her status as a prick-tease, a sexual frustration. In her repeated returns to Sabina's 'profuse' talk, her spiralling, indistinct stories, Nin presents an image of her own writing, especially her diary texts. This renders ironic, then, her attempts to invoke the power of the writer over against the *femme fatale*, to set herself, as the author, firmly in control of this teasing figure and reduce it to a fantasy at her disposal. As the passage cited at the beginning of this section acknowledges, and as is suggested by her emphasis on June's and Sabina's 'stories', it is in writing above all that we can see Nin compulsively enacting the seductions and myth-making of the *femme fatale*.

⁷⁸ Scholar, *Anaïs Nin*, 38.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.* 40.

⁸⁰ Her experience of Fez (on a visit in April 1936) as 'the image of [her] inner self' (*Fire*, 239; see also *Journals*, II, 80) inspired the title and structuring idea of her *roman fleuve*, *Cities of the Interior* (made up of the five novels from *Ladders to Fire* through to *Seduction of the Minotaur*). Taken as a whole, the *Cities* text to some extent repeats the 'labyrinthine' structure, with its narrative loops, repetitions, and lack of closure.