

changes according to the slope on which the vine is planted."

In the beginning there was the mother whom she adored, and to whom she wrote a letter every day during her impulsive first marriage, which took her to the slums of Paris; and the father, whom she appreciated too late. Then her disillusionment when she catches her husband in the act of adultery; her separation and solitude; a second marriage culminating in maternity at age forty; a third marriage quickly passed over, and many inbetween loves, among them a "dissolute" young man half her age whom she immortalized in *Chéri*—such is the stuff of her life.

COLETTE swings from deep insight to light gossip with fantastic ease and unabashed disregard for literary proprieties. As adept in one as the other, she will no doubt earn literary permanence through her psychological illuminations, which bring her close at times to Montaigne and Proust, though she is more practical and earthy. With characteristic deftness, she measures the variations of human solitude:

There are days when solitude, for someone my age, is a heady wine that intoxicates you with freedom, others when it is a bitter tonic, and still others when it is a poison that makes you beat your head against a wall.

Without self-pity she describes the marital metamorphosis of love that starts with curiosity and lasts only as long as the curiosity lasts, leaving a bad aftertaste in the passing. Almost mischievously she compares the cravings for sex and for cigarettes:

I fear there is not much difference between that habit of obtaining sexual satisfaction and, for instance, the cigarette habit. Smokers, male and female, inject and excuse idleness in their lives every time they light a cigarette.

With the finesse of one who has exercised objective judgment over subjective experience she discusses natural and inverted sexual habits as degrees of shading rather than antitheses. And as she confronts old age, she watches the "undulating ribbon of the road" with grace and humor.

Colette permeates the consciousness of her readers with a style that survives translation simply because, expert as she is in her use of language, the real power of her communication lies more essentially in images so appropriate that verbal modifications do not mar them too much.

Earthly Paradise is a happy addition to Colette in translation.

Rabbis, Angels, and Demons

In My Father's Court, by Isaac Bashevis Singer, translated from the Yiddish by Channah Kleiner-Goldstein, Elaine Gottlieb, and Joseph Singer (Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 307 pp. \$5.50), a collection of autobiographical sketches, recreates the unique world that informs the author's novels and stories. Albert H. Friedlander's "Anthology of Holocaust Literature" will be published this fall.

By ALBERT H. FRIEDLANDER

FOR SEVEN generations, going back to that Reb Moshe who was a devotee of the Baal Shem Tov, Isaac Bashevis Singer's ancestors have been Chassidic rabbis. Into their courts thronged the disciples; from their lips came inspired wisdom: "Out of my father's mouth spoke the Torah, and all understood that every word was just." In this memoir, now presented in an excellent English translation, Mr. Singer gives us the foundations of that unique world that opened itself to American awareness through such works as *Short Friday*, *Gimpel the Fool*, *The Magician of Lublin*, and *Satan in Goray*. It is a world that no longer exists, described in the nuances of a language spoken less and less; it reaches us through one of the great literary artists of our time, who constantly captures the strange and the demonic in his depictions of the commonplace.

These memoirs of Singer's childhood confirm the grotesquerie of his novels and short stories. Slaughtered geese shriek when they are cooked, salesmen stop by to sell the rabbi eternal life, lovers are divorced and enemies betrothed. The Torah remembers false oaths sworn before it, miracles are affirmed because they have been proven false, and the discussion in the House of Study comes to an anguished halt while a man requests permission to sleep with his dead wife. Nevertheless, it is not the grotesque that stands out as the chief element in the world of Isaac Bashevis Singer, but its moral quality. This is not due to a moralizing approach. Singer does not view the archetype of the Yiddish world, the "*kleine menshele*," as a heroic or moral figure. He possesses too much irony, too much de-

tachment, too much private knowledge of flawed human beings to indulge that sort of didactic writing. He knows of the terrible hurt that poverty inflicts upon man; he also knows of man's inner qualities which can overcome the world's evil—for a while. In his vignettes these qualities crop out in characters who are always individuals and not paradigms of the Jew or non-Jew. The washerwoman may have "that certain pride and love of labor with which the gentiles have been blessed"; but she also has an absolute quality that can even transform the coins which pass through her washed-out hands into weary, clean, and pious likenesses of herself. Black-bearded dairymen with the voice and heart of lions practice true charity alongside saintly but unworldly rabbis. Mr. Singer, however, does not mourn for them as a type that has been annihilated by the Nazis; he recalls each one as a human being containing a spark of divinity and deserving of his own memorial prayer.

Both skepticism and faith have their place in Singer's writings. His story of a family and a rabbinical court is based upon his conviction that "there can be no justice without godliness, and that the best judgment is one accepted by all litigants with good will and trust in divine power." His earlier chronicles of the demonic and sexual aspects of Jewish mysticism are here balanced by recognition of the ethical and rational strata which scholars like Gershom Scholem and Leo Baeck have stressed as its foundation.

SEEN in its full clarity in "A Major Din Torah," the court is at once in the world and outside it, founded upon that divine authority which reaches through three millennia of Jewish life and finds its voice in the quiet judgments of the rabbi. The judgment may not always be of consuming brilliance. But when the litigants have taken hold of the rabbi's kerchief and have submitted to his decision, a moral dimension enters human existence that cannot be swallowed up by the outer darkness.

This memoir has to be read on a number of levels. On the one hand, it is an autobiographical account that brings us to an understanding of the differences between the brothers Singer. The elder, Israel Joshua prepared the way for the younger when he broke away from the Chassidic tradition and entered the

world of Yiddish literature through such highly accomplished novels as *The Brothers Ashkenazi* and *Yoshe Kalb*. Isaac Bashevis followed him into that world, different, uncertain, but possessed of a talent that led him beyond his brother into a uniquely personal area containing more of his father's influence than he perhaps realized, and much of his mother's skeptical rationalism, which he freely acknowledged.

Hidden within that story is the private life of a young Chassidic boy who yearns for the wild cows and the green grass beyond the Vistula, far from the narrow streets of Warsaw's slums; who listens avidly to the strange secrets whispered

behind the closed doors of his father's court; a boy who loses his past as he surrenders to the outside world of the present, but who preserves his roots; a dreamer who to this day lives in the dreams which he has made his reality. Those dreams became the fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer; but in this memoir the fiction is validated. Krochmalna Street, Radzymin, and Bilgoray come to be recognized as evocations of a world that truly existed, and which will live as long as we listen to stories. If there are occasional lapses in the spinning of the tale, the total contents of this memoir still make it one of the truly outstanding books in its genre.

Miss Nin was disciplined, logical, a "petite fille littéraire," as one called her, meticulous in thought and dainty in word, self-questioning, busy discovering for herself the discovered world. When she is reflective and philosophical, she is an earnest, papa-pleasing little girl; when she looks up from the pages of her writing, she sees the world as a sensitive observer; when she allows herself to feel rather than reflect, her pages take on the color of life rather than of literature. To the critical reader, seeking a self-portrait between these lines, Miss Nin appears above all as a troubled pre-adolescent pursuing a dream of reuniting her parents and recovering her father; and this is why so much of this journal is devoted to her attempts to make peace between substitute figures, Henry Miller and his estranged wife.

The present excerpts are important above all for the subjective, and probably refracted, "portraits" of Miss Nin's psychoanalysts. Readers will be particularly interested in her account of her analytic sessions with Otto Rank, Freud's brilliant if erratic disciple. Through the blur of Miss Nin we glimpse Rank expertly unveiling to her the defenses she has created in her life by her diary-keeping, not least the ways in which the diaries prevent her from developing as an artist by making her an annotator rather than a creator. Miss Nin gives the impression that she conducted the sessions as if she were the analyst. By her account both her French analyst, René Allendy, and the Viennese Rank become fathers and lovers; the symbolic house of incest (the title of her first novel) is recurrently revived.

Henry Miller, with understandable partiality and consistent exuberance, has described Miss Nin's diaries as destined to take their place beside the confessions of St. Augustine, Petronius, Abelard, Rousseau, and Proust. Whether this is true of the millions of unpublished words we cannot say; but the present "sampling" offers a modulated and low-pitched portrait of the early Depression years in Paris after most American expatriates had fled. The myth of D. H. Lawrence prevailed; and life in the Villa Seurat had not yet become the Miller-Durrell legend. Miss Nin is a child of the Lawrentian revolt and of the Surrealists, that phase of the movement which looked inwardly into the distortions of the dream. Literary history will probably place her with that last backwater of Romanticism before World War II.

Her diary contributes much to that history, and one hopes for more of the 150 volumes. But they should be quarried, it might be suggested, with caution, lest they become like Frankenstein monsters, too large for Miss Nin's own child-like, lotus-flower essence.

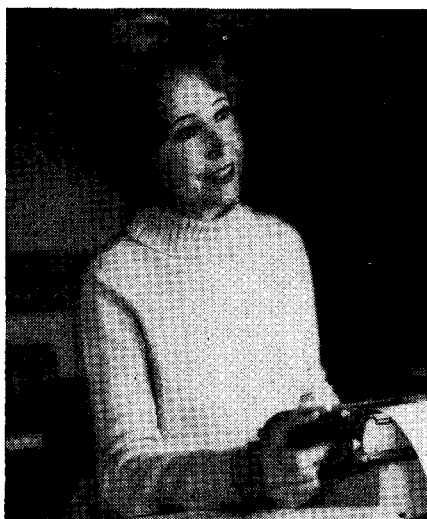
Life Without Father

***The Diary of Anaïs Nin: 1931-1934*, edited by Gunther Stuhlmann (The Swallow Press and Harcourt, Brace & World. 368 pp. \$6.95), covers four years of the journal-keeping novelist's life in Paris during the early 1930s. Leon Edel, biographer and critic, wrote "The Modern Psychological Novel."**

By LEON EDEL

DIARY-KEEPING belongs to a curious and special order of literature; it is the imagination held at bay by the self—the individual so preoccupied with personal experience that he must re-rehearse it compulsively on a sheet of paper. It is inevitably an act of self-absorption; in the process it becomes also an act of self-revelation—in spite of all that it attempts to conceal. Its interest for the reader resides in its offering glimpses into private worlds—worlds to which we do not otherwise have access.

Anaïs Nin's diary, kept with consistency (and almost, one might say, addiction) over many years, is thus primarily a document rather than an act of creation, a record of self-contemplation in many mirrors—public rather than private mirrors. She began keeping it as a child. Her father, the Spanish composer Joaquín Nin, had left her Danish mother, and the latter took her children to America. To fill the absence of the father, the young Anaïs began to write down all that happened to her, in the hope that some day she might show it to him. She wrote her diaries wherever she went, carrying them with her as a musician carries his instrument. Her voluminous notebooks of the self thus fulfill many purposes. They were, for Miss



Anaïs Nin — "self-contemplation in many mirrors."

Nin, a way of giving herself concrete proof of her own existence. The diary also became, as it were, her father; and we catch in these pages the straight, questioning look of a little girl interrogating life and trying to be well-behaved and dutiful. But there is something more complicated as well: the diary is that of a daughter, living or imagining a life that would be pleasing to the absent parent.

That life is divided (in the more adult years of 1931 to 1934 here published) between bourgeois respectability and a kind of anarchistic Bohemia. Miss Nin lived on the edge of Paris, at Louveciennes in the *paysages* exquisitely preserved for us by Pissaro's canvasses. To her orderly home came the literary anarchists of the Depression era, and especially Henry Miller. Thus we have in these pages the double image of an intellectual bluestocking who can also be a haunter of bistros and visitor of brothels.