JOAN DIDION

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The reportage of Joan Didion always tells us about the same thing—la situacion, the situation—whether she is reporting from San Salvador or Miami or Los Angeles, whether the subject is the water supply or a presidential campaign.

Her writing is powerful in several ways: aesthetically, journalistically, psychologically, morally, and politically. Though typically considered a journalist, Didion can also be read as an existentialist. She differs from writers like Beckett or Sartre, however, in her detail. Insistently concrete, Didion focuses always on the specificities that both mask and reveal the universal. Dense stories about unique individuals and circumstances are, for her, tales of "triumph over nothingness" (1979a, 66), what Davenport calls "a desperation of purposelessness" (1970, 903).

She also sets herself apart by the millennial tone of her writing, the flat-voiced recounting of the most horrible of tales. Millennial events are not teleological for Didion; rather, they appear within a constantly shifting environment in which meaning is ominous but unclear. As we build toward the year 2000, Didion's tone is spreading throughout the culture.

Technically, Didion is immaculate and original. As early as 1963, literary critic Guy Davenport could say, "Her prose is her servant" (371). She understands grammar as a source of "infinite power":

> To shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object photographed.... The arrangement of the words matters, and the arrangement you want can be found in the picture in your mind.... The picture tells you how to arrange the words and the arrangement of the words tells you, or tells me, what's going on in the picture. (Didion 1986, 7)

The particularities of writing style, then, are meant to have utility and to enlighten. In *Democracy*, for example, she explains the use of certain techniques in writing about Latin America: "It seemed constantly necessary to remind the reader to make certain connections. Technically it's almost a chant. You could read it as an attempt to cast a spell or come to terms with certain contemporary demons" (1984, 14).

The process by which the grammar of a situation is perceived is, for Didion, a Dostoyevskian web of migraine pain and visions:

> When I talk about pictures in my mind I am talking, quite specifically, about images that shimmer around the edges.... You can't think too much about these pictures that shimmer. You just lie low and keep your nervous system from shorting out and you try to locate... the grammar in the picture. (1986, 7)

Critics consider her an accurate and sophisticated reporter and praise the quality of her intellect, the powers of her perception, and the astonishing coherence of her vision. Though she is sometimes faulted for her overuse of certain signature techniques that cloy over time and for the resonance of certain themes,[1] Dan Wakefield considers her among the best writers of the era.

In reviewing a work by Mailer in 1965, Didion wrote of her admiration of his technical skill and the way in which he says "the right things" (1965, 329). She has also claimed Hemingway as an influence, and she used a Conrad epigraph to open *Salvador*.

Like most literary journalists, Didion thoroughly researches the subjects about which she writes. (*Miami*, for example, includes bibliographic notes.) The combination of careful research, a perceptive eye, and a belief that it is the media that tell us how to live makes Didion a particularly valuable observer of journalists themselves. A number of passages describe the activities of those around her, from the time in the 1960s when Didion, along with a *Los Angeles Times* man and a radio newscaster, interviewed black activist Huey Newton in prison, to the 1980s press conference of a Cuban candidate for mayor of Miami, or the cluster of reporters in George Bush's entourage.

Her persistence of vision and the cohesiveness of her growing oeuvre make her a good model for comparing the genres of "new journalism" and "objective journalism" (as typified by the *New York Times*). A comparison of the procedures each used in collecting and reporting facts on El Salvador in June 1982 reveals that radically different realities were ultimately portrayed, though each reported on the same place and the same time, often about the same events, affairs, and individuals. The *New York Times* is bureaucratic in orientation and Washington-centered, while Didion reported local Salvadoran chaos and terror (Braman 1985, 75–96).

Didion's own artery of short reportage was first demonstrated in book

form in her collection on the 1960s, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, which explored the lives of rock stars, hippies, and other California characters of the time. *The White Album* collects her reportage about the 1970s, covering the ground from the California water supply, to the governor's mansion, to the questioning of all premises endemic to the time. The pieces of the 1980s appear in the *New York Review of Books* (which serialized *Miami*) and *Esquire*. She writes regular "Letters from Los Angeles" for the *New Yorker*. (Didion's narrator in *A Book of Common Prayer* tried to sell the same magazine "Letter from Central America.")

There are certain recurring themes and characters. The Pentecostal minister of *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* shows up again in a 1988 *New Yorker* piece about earthquakes; the emeralds of her 1973 reportage about Bogota appear later on the hand of a novel's character. The gun runners of *Salvador* walk the streets of *Miami*.

Didion rejects the canon of objectivity that still, at least rhetorically, drives conventional journalism. "The point," she says, is to "*remember what it was to be me*" (1979a, 134–35). Her subjectivity is a deliberate stance understood to be a position of strength, the source of her credibility. Identification of the speaking voice is critical, she argues, for people are "uneasy about a story until we know who is telling it" (1977, 21). She also uses a medieval argument for the existence of God to defend subjectivity: her referents must exist, says Didion, or they would not be in her mind.

This insistence that certain images remain in her mind over time is critical to her understanding of the purpose of the writing act. The pictures in one's mind are of importance in contradistinction to dreams generated by the mass media. Didion believes that much of the world is living in a somnambulistic state created and sustained by the media. Thus, she sees communicating the evidence of one's own senses as a radical and central human effort.

The millennial connection is spelled out in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and *The White Album*. Both resonate with pentecostal modes of thought, starting with Yeats's poem "The Second Coming." The mood this writing generates is perceived by some critics as pessimistic or anxious, while others find it realistic. Eason sees Didion's position as that of a realist at a point in history "when events are ambiguous, the imposition of narrative self-consciously arbitrary and the meanings not satisfactory" (1977, 126).

Latin American themes (or the theme that is Latin America) run throughout Didion's work. Writing autobiographically in *The White Album*, she commented on her belief that writing about a place to some extent *creates* that place both by bringing it to life and by replacing impressions readers may have received elsewhere (1979b, 147).

She calls California the nerve center of the world, the perfect place from which (and about which) to report, with its many sites of the other, Hispanic, culture within our midst. She is certainly telling us what is seen from one

of the strands of early and continuing Hispanic penetration north. Hollywood lives surrounded by Latin pueblos, and Latin angels carry her sets and still pick her fields. Didion tells us about the Hispanic colorations at the center of America's image machine, which she believes is so powerful.

Didion's work on the interactions of Hispanic cultures with others in the Americas must therefore include those pieces about California, as well as "In Bogota," describing a 1973 trip to that city; *A Book of Common Prayer*, a novel set in an unidentified Central American country; *Salvador*, which reports on San Salvador during June 1982; and *Miami*, 1987 reportage focusing on the Latin American forces that shape that city.

In this group of writings, in particular, Didion's need to "remember what it was to be me" takes on the character of witness, a term in use for at least 1,500 years to mean "attestation of a fact," a bringing of evidence, as to a courtroom. While she does not ask for judgment, one is helpless not to judge. It is significant that Didion always brings her characters back to the United States, for it is here that the effects are felt, the facts are accumulated.

This lineage reveals a counter-hegemonic tracery in her work—rather than working from the center out, Didion travels from the periphery in, back toward the center. Her most powerful writing about Latin America is in her book about a U.S. city. In Miami she sees arms deals. Contras. People's lives bought and sold. Training. Cubans—rich, powerful, and insistently monolingual in a language that is not our own.

Toward the close of *Miami*, Didion reminds us of the Santa Fe document, a 1980 policy paper on Central America generally seen as a blueprint for Reagan Administration activities. This document portrays Central America as the World War III battlefront, in a war largely ideological (and therefore image-driven).[2]

Didion, the journalist, tracked down the resulting White House Outreach Working Group on Central America—a group not at all friendly to the media—and heard it asked why Central American countries should be needed as surrogates for the United States in its battle against communism. The Administration's response was to point to the enemy within—the media, liberals in general, a number of individuals by name.

Though Didion's work drives one against U.S. policy in Central America, her politics are not to be simply taken. She admits to voting for Goldwater and voting in few presidential elections thereafter. She wrote in *Morning After the Sixties*: "If I could believe that going to a barricade would affect man's fate in the slightest I would go to that barricade, and quite often I wish that I could, but it would be less than honest to say that I expect to happen upon such a happy ending" (1979b, 208).

Perhaps the closest she comes to such barricades is in the close of a *New Yorker* "Letter from Los Angeles" of 1988. These letters are elegantly segued reportage on a number of subjects that have caught her attention. This one opens by noting, "People brought up to believe that the phrase 'terra firma'

has real meaning often find it hard to understand the apparent equanimity with which earthquakes are accommodated in California" (80). She describes the wait for the earthquakes expected to destroy San Francisco: "At odd moments . . . people would suddenly clutch at tables or walls. 'Is it going?' they would say, or 'I think it's moving,' They almost always said 'it,' and what they meant by 'it' was not just the ground but the world as they knew it" (80).

This same letter goes on to discuss the Los Angeles real estate market, the new house of Candy and Aaron Spelling, and the strike by the Writers Guild of America, a group that includes screenwriters who work for people like Spelling and others in Hollywood. Didion's fury is finally triggered by the refusal of producer/director Paul Mazursky to cross Hollywood class lines and loan her his floor pass at the 1988 Democratic National Convention.

Here Didion finds her barricade, and it turns, as might be expected from her work, on style and manner. (Style, she notes in a piece on painter Georgia O'Keeffe, is character.) It is in these social forms that Didion comes closest to locating moral order. Narrative is among those social forms; she sees a decline of literacy, a loss of understanding of the sentence.

It is here, at the conjuncture of the sentence, of the construction of meaning and social coherence through style, one's own experience as expressed in personal manner rather than mass media-provided facts and behaviors, that the convergence of vision and narrative form that characterize the mid-twentieth-century genre of "new journalism" is so exquisitely realized in the work of Joan Didion.

Though the sensitivity to the issues of the 1960s and seventies has died down, all "new journalists" walk political ground to some degree through the simple but radical choice to adhere to their own version of the facts, their own experience, in a traditional Lockean sense. Although today the dogma resisted is not of the Church, but of the mass media, the doctrine has political consequences just as it did when first enunciated.

Didion, however, walks a finer line, or a sharper edge, than most. It cannot be said that Didion is documenting the impact of by now decades-long war in Central America on U.S. society. She is simply reporting on what she remembers in a time when helicopters float slowly past apartment windows in Brooklyn, cars are randomly stopped and searched on Nebraska roads, and the color of our television models' skin slowly darkens, the bones beginning to widen.

NOTES

1. See Duffy 1979, 43–44, Friedman 1984, Johnson 1971, Weber 1974, and Winchell 1989.

2. In the mid-1980s, dancing and singing guerrillas with machine guns introduced the Clio awards, the annual prizes for the best television advertising.

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