PERSON AND PLACE IN THE WORKS OF JOAN DIDION

DISSERTATION

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By

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* * * * *

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INTRODUCTION

In this study, I take the view—in no sense a controversial one—that the literary work of Joan Didion is informed by her peculiarly western American sensibility. This western sensibility has many characteristics, but it may be described generally as having to do with a flight from authority and the subsequent search for a new home. It is, thus, a break from the past, and is accompanied by all the anxiety and uncertainty such a break can entail. Such general formulations as these can be said to describe American experience and literature as a whole—one is reminded of
Hemingway's claim that all American literature derives from Huckleberry Finn, the quintessential novel of flight from authority, if not quite so definitively of a search for a home--but Didion's western American sensibility is a particularly virulent form of the flight-and-search fever. The estrangement her work chronicles is not only an estrangement from European customs and ideas--in fact, she rarely has anything to say about European matters in her work--but from the Eastern establishment of the United States and from the American culture that derives from it. Her work begins by rejecting the Eastern seaboard in favor of the West, and ends (to date) by taking leave of the United States altogether, even, to some extent, by seeming to despair of humanity.

This last idea sounds like a taboo: why write a critical study of a writer who despairs of humanity--unless the writer is a hugely popular or clearly great one, like Mark Twain? In the first place, the issue is much more complicated than that, and in the second place Joan Didion is a serious writer. How important her work will be to American literature remains to be determined by posterity, but I feel confident in claiming that her essays are among the best written in English in this century; and as for her novels, they are certainly serious, if uneven in quality.
But there is a formal interest afforded by a study of Didion's work which goes beyond an assessment of how good a writer she is, and that formal interest is to be found in her use of setting. It is interesting and curious to note how setting, in her early work, is vivid, haunting, unforgettable, and how, in her later work, settings are skittish, jumping about, refusing to alight, creating a rather distracting effect as of a nervous person's slide show. In both early and more recent work, however, the setting is the thing one remembers most. Curiosity about this aspect of her work is what inspired this study; and the reasons for these effects, as I understand those reasons, are among this study's findings.

But they are not its only findings, for our interest in setting goes further than a limited formal interest. There is something about Didion's use of setting that seems centrally important to the meaning of much of her work, and the full scope of this study includes, therefore, the relationship of setting to meaning. My findings are presented in terms of literary regionalism, cultural conditioning, personal obsession, and formal and thematic considerations. The unifying element is intended to be the relation between a person (which may be the author, a character, or the point of view of a given piece of work, for all
three are "persons" in a grammatical sense, and usually in a psychological sense too) and a place. But because this study is also concerned with the "center," there will be times when our interest in determining just what is meant by the "center" will take us away from a discussion of setting, as it should if that discussion is not to be tendentious. My conclusion is that the "center" is most often a relationship between person and place, but that conclusion cannot be said to have been honestly reached if the center is not sought elsewhere. If the reader occasionally feels that I am digressing, I invite him or her to consider whether I am not dealing, in the offending passages, with one of three things: a sense of self, a sense of place, or a sense of the "center." For those passages in which the discussion involves none of these concepts, I accept all due censure.

***
Chapter 1: Slouching Towards Bethlehem: The Matrix

Many of the themes of Joan Didion's novels and books of journalism, as well as our sense of the author's personal values, can be traced back to her early depictions of her home. In this study of the relationship of person to place in Didion's work, I shall be using the terms "geographical home" and "psychological home" frequently. Didion, in the essay "Notes from a Native Daughter," describes her home town (her geographical home) and her feelings about it. The term "geographical home" is a self-definitive one, for the most part, but the details of Didion's geographical home are significant enough to warrant an examination, and we shall presently examine those details. As for "psychological home," I derive that concept from the essay "On
"Going Home," and shall explain what it means after having dealt with geographical home.

In the two essays named above, the person who is related to a place is Didion herself, but in some of the other essays from the same collection a different person is related to a place. By speaking of a person's relationship to a place, I mean that a person's personality and values are seen to be in some way affected by a geographical location; if that person were somewhere else, he or she would think differently, act differently—"he or she would be someone else." This does not necessarily mean that a place causes people to behave as they do, but it does mean that the people Didion writes about have ideas about where they live which affect their behavior. In some cases, these people impose their fantasies on a place, imagining it to be something it is not.

Geographical Home

First, let us examine Didion's geographical home, as she depicts it in "Notes from a Native Daughter." This long essay describes the evolution of Sacramento, California (Didion's hometown) from the dreamy farm town of its pre-World War II days to the characterless way station for aerospace engineers that it had become by 1965, the date of the essay. Her essay is both highly
personal and highly informative about the geographical features of the place. In the following paragraph, for example, she weaves together descriptions of weather, agriculture, architecture, and the control of river water, while also allowing us a glimpse of her family life. In addition, she shows us herself as a small child, one whose elders have inculcated in her a properly reverential attitude toward her native region.

When summer ended—when the State Fair closed and the heat broke, when the last green hop vines had been torn down along the H Street road and the tule fog began rising off the low ground at night—we would go back to memorizing the Products of Our Latin American Neighbors and to visiting the great-aunts on Sunday, dozens of great-aunts, year after year of Sundays. When I think now of those winters I think of yellow elm leaves wadded in the gutters outside the Trinity Episcopal Pro-Cathedral on M Street. There are actually people in Sacramento now who call M Street Capitol Avenue, and Trinity has one of those featureless new buildings, but perhaps children still learn the same things there on Sunday mornings:

Q: In what way does the Holy Land resemble the Sacramento Valley?
A: In the type and diversity of its agricultural products.

And I think of the rivers rising, of listening to the radio to hear at what height they would crest and wondering if and when and where the levees would go. We did not have as many dams in those years. The bypasses would be full, and men would sandbag all night. Sometimes a levee would go in the night, somewhere upriver; in the morning the rumor would spread that the Army Corps of Engineers had dynamited it to relieve the pressure on the city.

—Slouching Towards Bethlehem.\(^1\)
One's geographical home, then, is not only a particular set of surroundings, but one with a personal significance. It is the seat of one's past. This combination of a particular setting with a particular personal history makes one's geographical home unique. Psychological home does not share this quality, as we shall see in a moment.

The functions of human awareness in its setting, and particularly in its home, include connecting itself to geography, and connecting the present place to its past and to its possible or likely future. In "Notes from a Native Daughter," Didion identifies herself with her pioneer forefathers and is able to convey, sometimes within a single sentence, a sense of the relations between personality, history, and terrain:

... Sacramento is California, and California is a place in which a boom mentality and a sense of Chekhovian loss meet in uneasy suspension; in which the mind is troubled by some buried but ineradicable suspicion that things had better work here, because here, beneath that immense bleached sky, is where we run out of continent. --172.

"We" would seem to be a reference to the settlers who kept going ever-westward, "the peculiar flawed strain who had cleared Virginia, Kentucky, Missouri" (173); the people seeking, as
Katherine Usher Henderson puts it in her study of Didion, "a new sense of self."²

The problem with trying to achieve a new sense of self, however, is that no sooner has the new sense of self been created than it starts becoming old. The only way to have a continually new sense of self is to have an impermanent sense of self—to have the ability to drop old concepts as they become outworn, rather than to identify with them so that one's sense of personal continuity is linked to the preservation of such concepts, whatever they are. To desire a new sense of self is to desire new concepts, since the sense of self is conceptual. If the westward impetus is at bottom a romantic desire for escape, as has been claimed,³ then the only truly satisfactory moment it can offer to the pioneer is the moment of embarkation. Thus, Didion's sense of "Chekhovian loss" is tied up with her childhood belief that her pioneer family's finest hour occurred at a time when the family had not yet even reached California:

...It is characteristic of Californians to speak grandly of the past as if it had simultaneously begun, tabula rasa, and reached a happy ending on the day the wagons started west.

---172.
But it is important here to notice the as if, and the reference (which comes a couple of sentences later) to a childhood conviction. Didion is describing the romantic temperament here, not endorsing it, although the mixing of tenses which subsequently occurs in this paragraph leaves one not altogether certain that she is no longer affected by that temperament.

Influenced by John Cheever, who claimed to be "truly nostalgic for love and happiness," and by Henry James, who derived so much inspiration from the contrast of past and present/Old World and New World, Didion mines nostalgia for its trustworthy ores. Nostalgia can lead one to romanticize the past, to falsify it, but it can also be one of the earmarks of the moral conservative. To determine one’s finest hour is to make a judgment about one’s values. The moral conservative, having made such a judgment, would argue that we should then hold on to what is valuable—we should emulate ourselves in our finest hour. "Notes" is an essay that tries to determine whether the past contains anything valuable to hang on to. But in it, Didion always has one eye on her own capacity for sentimentality. When she says, "All that is constant about the California of my childhood is the rate at which it disappears" (176), she follows up with a level-headed line of
inquiry that amounts to asking, so what? And it turns out that what is melancholy to her is not the disappearance itself, but her uncertainty about what was real and what may have been all along a fantasy. One of her memories, she realizes, is "no true memory at all" but a hand-me-down, a story passed on by family members (177). This realization "unnerves" her. And a W. S. Merwin poem about a man homesick for his country and mentally exaggerating its virtues catches her up short, and she decides she must track the truth with caution.

Nevertheless, although she then sets out to try "a few irrefutable statements, on subjects not open to interpretation." she soon is describing a landscape "so flat, so impoverished, as to drain the imagination," towns that "hint at evenings spent hanging around gas stations, and suicide pacts sealed in drive-ins." And from there, the floodgates of subjectivity open up to a discussion of the "implacable insularity" of the Valley, of "the Valley sadness" and "the Valley fate, which is to be paralyzed by a past no longer relevant" (179, 181, 182, 184). Non-natives have had similar views of California. Edmund Wilson, for example, describes California's "golden air of death," and its "boundless sunlight which never becomes charged with human energies." So subjectivity
does not necessarily imply solipsism. But the more important point is that, if this imagination-draining insularity comes from the monochromatic flatness of the land, as Didion claims, then one cannot blame the New Order for it. The "state of siege," then, while it may be related to Didion's sense of loss, is not the cause of the Valley's "impiacable insularity." Rather, this insularity characterizes Sacramento "in spite of [the] infusions from outside" [italics mine]. The insularity and the sadness, furthermore, go together, but we should recognize that the incursion of civilization is another matter, one which is resented by a personified town:

Sacramento is a town which grew up on farming and discovered to its shock that land has more profitable uses.

--184.

The personification here suggests Didion's strong sense of identification with the place. One may feel sympathetic to this idea that civilization is shocking, but our sympathy is emotional; no reason has been given for the idea.

Probably in order to avoid a charge of sentimentality, Didion tries to account rationally for her resentment of the incursion of civilization. And she seems to realize she can
not do this without shifting the focus to herself. So she
shifts it to herself, but in a tricky way. The last two pages
of the essay end on a convincing note: they end with Didion
realizing that what she may have been lamenting all along is
her own lost youth and innocence. She wonders whether she has
not been "playing out unawares" the role of Margaret in
Hopkins's poem, "Spring and Fall" (186). ("Margaret are you
grieving/Over goldengrove unleaving? . . .It is the blight man
was born for/ It is Margaret you mourn for.") Yet just before
this she has lamented the substitution of a manufactured past
for Sacramento's real one. Part of that "real" past is the
true story of a rancher's daughter who went abroad, married a
title, and came home to live in a vast house with
conservatories and a ballroom. The house has since burned down,
and today, on the same site, their only son lives "by himself
on the charred site, in a house trailer" (185). What is tricky
about this is that Didion has made one last-ditch effort to
convey her own peculiarly gothic sense of attachment to the
ghost-of-Sacramento-past before tacitly admitting in her
conclusion that it has not worked, or that it does not matter
much even if it has worked. Is it so important that the
children of the aerospace engineers will never know the meaning of the house trailer on seven thousand acres outside of town? If it were, would there be this need to admit having played Margaret?

This example of the untranslatable or untransferrable emotional significance of certain local particularities is, as I said before, what defines geographical home. It helps distinguish geographical from psychological home. "Notes from a Native Daughter" will never be anthologized to the extent that "On Going Home" already has been, because the latter has a more universal significance, and thus a wider appeal. "On Going Home" suggests to us certain universally applicable values which, nevertheless, for Didion are inextricably tied up with the Central Valley and with the feelings she details in "Notes."

Psychological Home

Just as she did in "Notes," Didion begins "On Going Home" by distinguishing coastal California (Los Angeles) from the Central Valley. In "Notes," La Scala in Beverly Hills and Ernie's Bar in San Francisco were not really California, and in "On Going Home," Los Angeles is not really "home," even though
Didion lives there with her husband and baby daughter. And those universal values I mentioned are associated with home and not with the place where she lives. Let us define those values.

The first is a general, yet somehow identifiably Victorian sense of morality:

The question of whether or not you could go home again was a very real part of the sentimental and largely literary baggage with which we left home in the fifties; I suspect that it is irrelevant to the children born of the fragmentation after World War II. A few weeks ago in a San Francisco bar I saw a pretty young girl on crystal take off her clothes and dance for the cash prize in an "amateur topless" contest. There was no sense of moment about this, none of the effect of romantic degradation, of "dark journey," for which my generation strived so assiduously. What sense could that girl possibly make of, say, Long Day's Journey into Night? Who is beside the point?

--165-6.

The answer to Didion's second question is that if home is a place where you can never return once you have morally degraded yourself, then the amateur dancer and all those who do not think the dance a significant event are beside the point; and if home is not such a place, then Didion is beside the point. And if values retain no constancy from generation to generation, then perhaps values are beside the point. Morality is important, but one can't be absolutely certain how to define it.
Didion's other values attempt to give some form to her desire for morality, however. One such value is closeness to nature. This is a value that her husband is unable to understand, perhaps because his own sense of self is not tied to a threatened patch of land:

...[My family and I] appear [to my husband] to talk exclusively...about property, particularly about property land, price per acre and C-2 zoning and assessments and freeway access. My brother does not understand my husband's inability to perceive the advantage in the rather common real-estate transaction known as "sale-leaseback," and my husband in turn does not understand...that when we talk about sale-leasebacks and right-of-way condemnations we are talking in code about the things we like best, the yellow fields and the cottonwoods and the rivers rising and falling and the mountain roads closing when the heavy snow comes in.

--164-5.

We might do well to keep in mind this unpalatable coating of jargon ("right-of-way condemnations" and so on) when we get to that part of the study dealing with language and the erosion of the self. For now, it is sufficient to recognize the strong, although fugitive attachment to nature represented here.

A sense of tradition and history is closely related to the importance of strong family ties--these are the remaining values. Didion feels that some unanswered and unknowable
question is represented by souvenirs she finds in a drawer in her family's house. Among these souvenirs are three teacups handpainted by her grandmother in 1900, and a 1910 snapshot of her father on skis at Donner Pass, that last and deadly checkpoint for the westward settlers at which the survivors persevered by cannibalizing their dead. These images of the past give way to an image of decay as Didion visits the broken and overturned headstones in a family graveyard, and in a memorable amplification of this image of decay into an image contrasting youth and decay, she describes a scene in which her baby daughter plays with dust motes in a shaft of afternoon sunlight as her aging aunts try to remember who she is and where she lives, slipping her a dollar bill with which to "buy a treat" (167). Although she never names her values, preferring to let her details speak for themselves, her re-emphasis on such details in the closing paragraph demonstrates that they do indeed represent her concept of home, and it is only one step, then, to infer the values they can be said to represent.

I would like to promise [my daughter] that she will grow up with a sense of her cousins and of rivers and of her great-grandmother's teacups, would like to pledge her a
picnic on a river with fried chicken and her hair uncombed, would like to give her home for her birthday, but we live differently now and I can promise her nothing like that. I give her a xylophone and a sundress from Madeira, and promise to tell her a funny story.

--167-8.

We may also infer from the essay the concept of "the way we live now" (a phrase from Trollope, which Didion often uses). In this case, "the way we live now" is tied to coastal California—the girl in the topless bar in San Francisco, the new home in Los Angeles where Didion's daughter will grow up knowing only material possessions and funny stories—stories without deep significance, without a rootedness in tradition, history, or morality. So there are two lifestyles for Didion in her golden land, but only one of them could be considered life at home. And because this life belongs to the past, it is a home only in the mind—a psychological home.

Psychological Home in the Essays

A sense of morality based on closeness to nature, strong family ties, and the sense of tradition and history: this is the principle represented by the metaphor home. If we take this view, rather than a nominalist one which would leave the
details uncategorized, we soon notice how many of the remaining essays in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* have to do with one or more of these values. And we also notice the frequent recurrence of the image of home or of a special place under siege by the loss of these values, or by an uncertainty about the nature of the self. "One runs away to find oneself, and finds no one at home," Didion writes in "On Self-Respect" (148). The title essay, "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," suggests most readily a pattern of the absence of psychological home. Here are the homeless hippies with their spurious "families," drugged and promiscuous teenagers so completely without a feeling for the past that they console Didion for having reached the advanced age of thirty-two. In "Letter from Paradise, 21 19' N., 157 52' W.," Didion describes a situation reminiscent of that one in Sacramento in which a manufactured past is substituted for a real one. In Hawaii, "the dislocations of war became the promises of progress":

Whether or not the promises have been fulfilled depends of course upon who is talking, as does whether or not progress is a virtue, but in any case it is war that is pivotal to the Hawaiian imagination, war that fills the mind, war that seems to hover over Honolulu like the rain clouds on Tantalus. Not very many people talk about that. They talk about freeways on Oahu and condominiums on Maui and beer cans at the Sacred Falls... --203.
This is the voice of a moralist with an historic view. And her
disappointment and disdain for revisionist and developer alike
(they seem to be one and the same) is most biting when she
employs her characteristic note:

[People in the travel business] talk about The Product.
"The reports show what we need," one travel man told me.
"We need more attention to shaping and molding the
product." The product is the place they live.
--203.

What could be worse than thus to betray the place you live?

In "Rock of Ages," Didion is able to be almost upbeat,
because her subject, Alcatraz Island today (ca. 1967), has been
reclaimed by nature. It is "a ruin devoid of human vanities,
clean of human illusions, an empty place reclaimed by the
weather..." It is covered with flowers now and she
apparently wishes she could stay longer. In "The Seacoast of
Despair," Didion's moral conservatism is also an aesthetic one,
one that seems almost atavistic, since she is attacking the
ugliness of fin-de-siecle stone cottages in Newport, Rhode
Island, and thus finds herself criticizing "the Industrial
Revolution carried to its logical extreme." The cottages serve
to illustrate that "the production ethic led step by step to unhappiness, to restrictiveness, to entrapment in the mechanics of living." Newport is "an American morality play in which money and happiness are presented as antithetical" (210, 213, 212). But nature is not always merely the victim of man's intrusion. Sometimes, it is seen as a drug, an escape, as in "Guaymas, Sonora," which describes Didion's failed attempt to get away from herself in Mexico. And sometimes, as in "Los Angeles Notebook," the anxiety seems to result from a kind of natural complicity between man and nature:

Los Angeles weather is the weather of catastrophe, of apocalypse, and, just as the reliably long and bitter winters of New England determine the way life is lived there, so the violence and the unpredictability of the Santa Ana [wind] affect the entire quality of life in Los Angeles, accentuate its impermanence, its unreliability.

--221.

In this passage, the weather first "determines," then "affects," then "accentuates." An absolute precision is neither possible nor necessary if we accept that in Didion's work weather and the self, weather and the human being, are involved in a symbiotic relationship.

The reader will have noticed, in these examples, not one but several relations between the self and place, some
contradictory. "Home" is the self and the self is threatened; this is undesirable. Yet the self is oppressive and must be eluded by escape to another place. One desires to be close to nature, yet nature in some places is ominous and threatening; elsewhere nature is benign and better off without man. These contradictions will become more problematic later on.

Places In the Mind

Besides the recurrence of the values of psychological home in the essays, there is another idea at work in Slouching Towards Bethlehem, one which is related to the idea we saw in "Notes from a Native Daughter." It is that the outside world exists subject to the dreams people impose on it (just as one's home town is subject to our prejudices about it). Thus, all of the essays in the first division of the book, "Life Styles in the Golden Land," have to do with California as a land of dreams: romantic, cinematic, idealistic, political, naïve, tacky dreams—all are grafted onto California, often but not always with absurd or disturbing effects. The book's third division, "Seven Places of the Mind," (in which "Notes" appears) maintains this same type of connection between person and place, but it depicts places other than California, and it
takes its dreams and illusions from the mind of Didion herself, whereas the "Life Styles" section studied several different minds, including the mind of the public at large. (See "Where the Kissing Never Stops" and "John Wayne: A Love Song.") In a sense, "Seven Places of the Mind" combines the motifs of the first two sections: the second is "Personals," a group of autobiographical or personal opinion essays.

Dreams and Paradoxes

Since the purpose of this study is not to provide an overview of Didion's work, but to pursue this connection between person and place and its connection to the "center," it is not necessary to comment on each of the remaining essays in Slouching Towards Bethlehem. However, in preparation for what follows in this study, I wish to discuss briefly two of those essays. The first, "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream," is significant as a precursor of the theme to be examined in Chapter 2. The second, "On Morality," is significant not only in terms of that theme but in terms of the problems one encounters in writing about Didion's work.

"Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream" is a journalistic account of a woman, Linda Miller, who murdered her husband in
an attempt to fulfill certain romantic fantasies learned from
Hollywood films and James M. Cain novels. It depicts Southern
California as a place lacking the moral stability of places
further east, a land with no past:

The hot wind blows and the old ways do not seem
relevant...it is a long way from the bleak and
difficult East, a long way from the cold, a long way
from the past...time past is not believed to have
any bearing upon time present or future, out in the
golden land where every day the world is born anew
...--4, 19, 28.

This lack of mooring to the past has unfortunate consequences:

A lot of California murderesses live here, a lot of
girls who somehow misunderstood the promise.
--25.

We see from passages such as these that a desire for
freedom from the past can be a dangerous as well as a promising
thing. This view of Didion's is important to keep in mind. It
comes up again and again, arising out of her fascination with
the settlers of the West, appearing as a theme in her first
novel, and as a motif in many of her essays. It represents a
source of conflict which Didion has perceived in American
history (for the history of her home territory is not only part
of American history, but a microcosm of that history on a
larger scale). As a novelist, she is naturally interested in this source of conflict, and so shall we be.

It should be clear from all this that Didion, like any serious novelist, is a writer who confronts moral problems. One of the difficulties in her work is that, in developing her issues, she often leaves her reader uncertain about how much she intends the reader to see, how many conclusions to draw. In analyzing and writing about this work, one is aware of using words and concepts that Didion herself would never use. (My use of the word "feminist" in Chapter 3 is a good example.) We may suppose that part of the reason for this difficulty is that, in spite of her instinct to examine a moral problem, she is reluctant to seem a moralizer. Her essay "On Morality" demonstrates this reluctance. In it, Didion makes clear that her primary moral belief, and virtually her only one, is a belief in what she calls "primary loyalties" or "loyalty to the social code," and this apparently means little more than loyalty to the members of one's family (159, 162). One could even argue, so nominalist is she in her explanation ("my mind veers inflexibly toward the particular") (157) that loyalty to the social code means nothing more than that family members
should not eat their dead, as the members of the Donner-Reed party did. For Didion turns out to be one of those people who has noticed that the idea of morality and of conscience is often used by madmen and murderers for their unpleasant purposes and who has decided, therefore, that morality and conscience are inherently dangerous concepts. Thus, "right and wrong," "good and evil," are beyond knowing, and must be written with quotation marks around them. To perceive a moral imperative is probably an indication that we have joined the ranks of those she calls "the fashionable madmen." (Henderson points out that this essay has to be read in the context of the Viet Nam War era, in which it was written. In that context, "fashionable madmen" is a term that could be applied to people on either side of that issue.) Any morality beyond the adherence to primary loyalties is potentially mendacious. Characteristically, this view of things is described as arising from her surroundings:

Particularly out here tonight, in this country so ominous and terrible that to live in it is to live with antimatter, it is difficult to believe that "the good" is a knowable quantity.

—159.
This passage represents for me the only false note in a book that ought, by rights, to be riddled with false notes. Here her hyperbole is too strong. But Didion, in her early work, is a writer who takes chances. So daring is she as she leaps from stone to stone in the stream of prose that it is amazing she has not fallen in ankle-deep before this—and it is only the hyperbole I am referring to, stuffed uncomfortably in its subordinate phrase—the "living in antimatter" and not the claim that good is unknowable, a discussion of which must end in paradox.

But we must deal with that claim, too. In fact, all morality, including family loyalty, is "potentially mendacious." By its definition, morality includes the possibility or existence of evil, which in turn includes the evil use of the idea of morality and conscience, the misuse of the word "good." One could argue that Didion's impulse in "On Morality" is a deeply moral one, that her dislike of the idea of "morality" arises from her perception of its evil uses; but it would probably be more accurate to say that her position arises from a feeling which we would like to call moral, rather than from a moral concept. That is, we recognize her
perception as moral, and she deliberately does not do so, not wanting to do anything to perpetuate the misuse of the idea of goodness because, secretly, she so loves it. We see here Didion's nominalist tendency. She hates categories because people do ugly things with them, whether that ugliness is called "evil" or not. She hates imprecision, and goes in fear of abstractions. Later in this study, we will examine some of Didion's objections to the clumsy and unpleasant things people do with abstractions and categories. For now, it seems sufficient to observe that Didion's position is pessimistic and probably idealistic as well. That is to say, Didion may believe she can save the idea of goodness by disallowing its use by the stupid masses. If so, her position is not snobbish, because she includes herself and all humanity in the prohibition: the stupid mass of humanity.

This conscious reluctance to be a moralizer, which is a reluctance to draw a general principle from a particular fact, is in conflict with her instinct to examine moral problems. It results in a body of work that is suggestive and complex, but hard to pin down. The conclusions that seem indicated begin to evaporate as soon as one draws them. They often contradict one
another. Therefore, when we talk about Didion as a moral conservative, our characterization of her is only half-true: she is half a moral conservative. She is a moral conservative by instinct and not by design—or not entirely. And when we draw logical conclusions and inferences from her work, we are doing so not from her intention, but from her half-intention. We will go into this matter in more detail in Chapter 4. For now, we should consider that if Didion’s ideas, taken together, do not hold water, it is not because of any failure of conscious purpose, but because she herself is not interested in them. "On Morality" was written at the request of The American Scholar, and if the reluctant thinker who seems to be saying, "Oh, you know, I don’t like this idea of morality in the first place," contradicts the young woman who is shocked to find that not everyone feels a sense of degradation in public nudity, it is because Didion is interested in feelings and not doctrine. One should not hold every essay in Slouching strictly to the theme of "things falling apart," she states, but "whatever I do write reflects, sometimes gratuitously, how I feel." (preface, xiii) This would be a less palatable declaration if she were not enough of an artist to evoke feelings as well as "reflect"
them. And since feelings are evoked with particulars, it is possible for Didion to skirt universals to a great degree. She is not even a nominalist, as I keep wanting to say, because the word connotes a position taken. Nevertheless, her feelings are, in fact, often moral in nature, and her work often "argues" from that felt morality, even though Didion herself may back down when confronted on the issue. The problem one encounters so often is that of finding a satisfactory solution to the moral dilemmas her work confronts and develops. But in order to begin examining this problem in detail, I should like to turn to her first novel.

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Chapter 2. RUN RIVER: The Saga of Geographical Home

Self and Setting

INTERVIEWER
Was [the abortion] a narrative strategy in Run River?

DIDION
Actually it was the excuse for a digression, into landscape. Lily has an abortion in San Francisco and then she comes home on the Greyhound bus. I always think of the Greyhound bus and not the abortion. The bus part is very detailed about the look of the towns. It's something I wrote in New York, you can tell, I was homesick.

--The Paris Review.

This sort of comment by a novelist always makes the researching critic uneasy. We, as critics, want to see orderly systems of thought controlling the details of a novel, rather than whims and longings. (We are wrong to want this, but we cannot help

31
Statements like the one above raise all sorts of hair-splitting questions: has the author's homesickness led her into an uneconomical passage of descriptive prose? Has it caused her to add a superfluous event (the abortion) to the plot? Does the author's admission undermine attempts to see recurrent themes or events as symbolic? (One critic contends that abortions in Didion's fiction are metaphors for the desire to escape from past failures.² What happens to such generalizations as a result of the above statement?) Do the psychological facts of the composition of a given work--the author's homesickness in this case--even have anything to do with a discussion of artistic intention? of artistic effect? Is there such a thing as an implied intention, akin to Wayne Booth's "implied author," which can be drawn from effect and not from the actual intentions of the author? Is the author being serious in the interview? And on and on.

While it is true that some of the interesting facts at the author's disposal, and not at ours, may be irrelevant to a discussion of how her novel works for the reader, this one is interesting because it offers some insight into how Didion's mind works. We have already seen how her sense of self is related to
her sense of home. The comment reveals that her sense of home affects the way she writes fiction. She re-emphasizes this point in the same interview, when asked to comment on her tendency to depict "danger and apocalypse":

DIDION
Well, I grew up in a dangerous landscape. I think people are more affected than they know by landscapes and weather. Sacramento was a very extreme place. It was very flat, flatter than most people can imagine, and I still favor flat horizons. The weather in Sacramento was as extreme as the landscape. There were two rivers, and these rivers would flood in the winter and run dry in the summer. Winter was cold rain and tule fog. Summer was 100°, 105°, 110°. Those extremes affect the way you deal with the world. It so happens that if you're a writer the extremes show up. They don't if you sell insurance.

--The Paris Review, 163.

So it just "happens" that a novel has a certain tone and subject matter and plot, and so on, because the author has grown up in a certain place. Geographical home explains the work of art.

It will be seen that Didion's statement implies a certain attitude toward the novel, which is that the novel somehow inevitably expresses the identity of the author. The author, whose very self is made up of "extreme" qualities that are the imprint of her early environment, is unable to write a novel in which these extremes do not appear. The artist does not stand sovereignly above and behind the work of art, paring his or her fingernails, as
Joyce's Stephen Dedalus proclaimed s/he ought to do. S/he merely pretends to. The implied author may not intrude his own unwelcome voice on the narrative, but the author's self is nevertheless suffused throughout the work. (Surely this is as true of Joyce's work, as it is of anyone else's.) Even so, Didion's remark has a certain casualness to it which allows us to release her from an implied view that the novel is merely self-expression, which every reasonably serious novelist knows it is not. Our view of the novel is that its elements have to be considered as deliberate decisions and not as some sort of automatic expressions of the author's being. At the same time, however, it seems undeniable that those very decisions come out of that self which is the "author's being." Thus, the abortion in *Run River* has to be considered as an event which either fits or does not fit the pattern of the novel—and the scenery has to be judged effective or not—indepedently of the interesting and irrelevant inside information about how the author felt about those two elements of her book. And so, too, the tendency toward danger and apocalypse: it has to be effective, in addition to expressing the self. But its relation to the self is a part of how it works. The distinction is between artistic decision and a decision-influencing
psychology. The artist is responsible for the former, not for the latter.

Having said that, we can go on to a discussion of how place and self are interrelated insofar as character is concerned. What we are interested in is not, as the quotations might suggest, a relationship between a real place and a fictional story with fictional characters, but a fictional setting’s relationship to that story and those characters. I want it to be clear that I consider any setting in a work of fiction to be "fictional," by definition. But some fictional settings are depictions of real places, such as Run River’s Central Valley setting, and others are depictions of places that do not exist, such as Boca Grande in A Book of Common Prayer. For my purposes, I shall designate the former type of setting as a "real fictional setting," and the latter type as an "imaginary setting." Both types of fictional setting are to be distinguished from non-fictional settings, such as those in Slouching Towards Bethlehem, but not necessarily because they are different in nature or name. They are sometimes not, as we shall presently see.

The real fictional setting in Run River and the non-fictional setting in "Notes from a Native Daughter" are the same: they are
both Didion's geographical home, except that "Didion" does not exist in the California of Run River. The Knights and the McClellans do, as does one Ryder Channing. The Sacramento Valley these characters inhabit is, like Didion's, undergoing rapid changes, as we learn in the first chapter. Amid a scene of "incendiary" heat in which, in these pre-air conditioning days, the apparent protagonist, Lily Knight McClellan, languishes about her house in her slip, we learn that such exotic things as paperback bookstores are beginning to appear in Sacramento. And new industries are changing the face of the town, as they do in "Notes": "...Aerojet General and Douglas Aircraft and even the State College were bringing in a whole new class of people, people who had lived back East, people who read things." In the face of these changes, Lily's generation is paralyzed by an irrelevant history. While her son, Knight, has awakened to the changes, she and her husband, Knight feels, will "go right along dedicating their grubby goddamn camellia trees in Capitol Park to the memory of their grubby goddamn pioneers."4 Tradition and history, those elements of psychological home, are assailed by the new way of life.

And the other elements of psychological home are also assailed as the geographical home undergoes change. The spokesman for the
assailants is Ryder Channing, who seduces first Lily's sister-in-law, Martha McClellan, then Lily. He has a number of get-rich-quick schemes, from "ad agencies" to subdivisions with artificial lakes. His seductions are Lily's and Martha's failures of loyalty and honor, their betrayals of the family, as well as their capitulations to the destroyer of nature. Such capitulation amounts to self-destruction, because the Knights and McClellans are themselves emblems of the land they farm by virtue of their symbiotic relation with it, and this symbiotic relationship with the land is, in turn, the basis of their symbiotic relationships with one another. The land is all-important; one might even say that the hero of the novel is the land in its pre-subdivision state: the hop farms and the rivers.

_Run River_ begins with its climactic event, the death of Ryder Channing. It is August, 1959, 12:43 a.m., and Lily, just out of the shower, hears a pistol shot from the dock on the river near her home. It turns out that her husband, Everett, has shot Ryder dead, and the novel is one long flashback intended to put the best light possible on Everett's action before adding the surprise second climax of Everett's suicide. This double death represents a pair of moral imperatives cancelling each other out: on the one hand,
murder is an evil act which cannot be condoned, and on the other hand, it is evil to outrage the sacred land and its people, and the reader is glad to see Everett avenge not only the outraged families but the outraged hop farms as well. When the core of her cherished attachments is tapped by Everett’s death, Lily speaks to his body, revealing the importance to her of the familiar sites of geographical home, as well as the symbiosis with the loved one:

Remember, Everett baby once at the Fair, you lifted me onto the golden bear in front of the Counties Building and we laughed. And remember we used to lie in bed mornings, sometimes with Knight in bed between us and I would say don’t go to sleep, he’ll smother, remember how it was and remember the day we took the children to the Cosumnes and it rained and we all sat drinking Cokes under the cottonwood and the rain coming through remember Everett baby remember. She hoped that although he could not hear her she could somehow imprint her ordinary love upon his memory through all eternity, hoped he would rise thinking of her, we were each other, we were each other, not that it mattered much in the long run but what else mattered as much.

--247.

What does not come across in an excerpt is that the Knight-McClellan symbiosis (it involves Martha McClellan and Walter Knight, Lily’s father, as well as Lily and Everett) is a result of, or at least a part of, the attachment these people have to their geographical home. It is clear, for example, that Everett and Lily
would never have married each other in the first place had not each felt mystically and practically linked to the same land. This feeling is so strong and so pervasive that there is not even any conscious will to speak of in their decision to marry; instead, the marriage is something inevitable, taken for granted. Chapter 16, written from Everett's point of view in third person, makes this point. It describes his sexual history, and the following passage begins as he realizes, in a kind of torpor of belated awareness, that he actually cared for one of his girls before Lily:

Nonetheless, Naomi Kahn had not been, any more than Annis McMahon or for that matter Doris Jeanne Coe had been, someone with whom he could have lived on the ranch. During those four days when he wished he had married Naomi he never once thought of living anywhere with her: they were always driving someplace together, or he was putting her on an airplane, or they were registering at the Fairmont in San Francisco...

...Even as he imagined himself registering at the Fairmont with Naomi Kahn, Everett knew without thinking that what he would do was live on the ranch with Lily Knight, knew it so remotely that if he had heard, during the years he rarely saw her, that she had married someone else he would have wished her well and gone on thinking about Naomi Kahn at the Fairmont, and only somewhere in the unused part of his mind would he have begun wondering, with an urgency he would not have understood, what he was going to do with the rest of his life. Lily required no commitment: Lily was already there.

--157-8.
In this passage, the unconsciousness of Everett's attachment, the association of Lily with life on the ranch, and her status as a given, all point to the three-way symbiosis of Everett, Lily, and ranch. They reveal the voracious quality of the self which makes the Knights and the McClellans members of one incestuous family. Throughout the novel, the incestuous attraction of Everett and Martha McClellan is emphasized, and in the passage above it is not hard to see that Everett's love for Lily in many ways resembles the love of a brother for his sister. (He would not have been jealous if she had married, he takes her for granted, he associates her with his home.) For Everett, Lily and his two sisters, Martha and Sarah, are all components of himself. He marries Lily because "to risk losing [her] would be to risk losing Martha and Sarah and himself as well, [and] she alone could retrieve and keep for him the twenty-one years he had already spent" (158).

I will return to the incest theme when I discuss Martha's character. Actually, it is hard to keep the themes of incest, attachment to the land, and pioneer tradition (the family/nature/tradition-and-history triad of psychological home) separate, because they are all part of a mystical or religious urge toward Oneness. All the Knights and the McClellans have this urge,
and Everett is no exception. In Chapter 3, Everett remembers driving home on the river road at night with Lily, with their walnut bed awaiting them. "Lost in the night fields, his body, Lily's body, the house ahead: all one, some indivisible trinity" (23). There is an affinity, in the depiction of the urge toward Oneness (though it may not be a conscious one on Didion's part) with Western novels as a genre, in which, according to Mark Porter, "oneness with the land [is] a theme so recurrent that it provides the major and distinguishing motiv [sic] of the Western American novel." ⁵ In his intriguing article, "Mysticism of the Land and the Western Novel," Porter writes that "in Eastern and Southern American writing and that of Europe, the land serves mainly as an interesting backdrop of the conflict of ego and superego. In the American West, where civilization has made so few inroads upon the vastness and fierceness of the land, it still exerts a primary influence upon the physical and psychological character of the inhabitants." ⁶ This is certainly true of Didion's characterization of Everett. It is because Everett is a Westerner that he rarely leaves the family ranches, even though, as the descendant of pioneers, he has an impulse always to suggest to Lily and Martha both that they go away on a trip somewhere as a panacea for all
ills. "Whenever Everett could think of nothing else to do with [Martha], he urged her to take a trip. There was nothing like a trip (189)." And he tells Lily: "You and the kids take a trip and when you come home it'll be all right (226)." He feels the need to go away himself when there are difficulties, but, except for his stint in the service during the war, he can never bring himself to do it, and Lily has to take the children to Europe without him in the summer of 1957. He is too tied to his hop farms to leave, and he makes sure that Martha remains on the ranch even in death, although it is probably against the law to bury her there. In addition, one cannot help but realize that when he kills himself as an act of moral responsibility, he also prevents his own removal from the land.

**Lily**

Of the union of the self with the land or universe, the mystical impulse toward Oneness, Mark Porter writes that "the dualisms of the conscious world are annihilated. Good and evil are no longer distinct because they have the same source and cannot exist separately." He adds that this leads, in Western novels, to "a refusal to make value judgments concerning the land. The land is no longer good or evil, beautiful or ugly, . . . the Western
author's attitude toward it is not schizophrenic, for the land is
the source of all, and to categorize it is to misunderstand it."

Western novels often are patterned after the archetype of the
Eternal Quest, and where this involves an Anglo-American, he is
searching for his American roots from which he is alienated.

"Proceeding on his search, the character passes through a 'dark
night of the soul,' a death to the world of confused values, and a
rebirth into clarity and wholeness--to a sense of place."

Although Run River is not technically a Western, it is
surprising how much of this pattern fits Lily's experience. Her
behavior seems an attempt to break down the distinctions between
good and evil. For one thing, she is totally promiscuous. At one
of the river parties she goes to, Ryder Channing proclaims he owes
money to five of ten men there, and Lily realizes she has slept
with seven of them, four without any recollection of where or
when. She regrets this behavior as being all "one error in
taste"--with not a thought for the ethics of the matter. And
although one can devise plausible reasons for her affairs with Joe
Templeton and Ryder Channing--Didion handles her motivation
somewhat obliquely--there is no plausible moral defense. Lily
might have been buying off Joe Templeton so that he would not
attempt to get control of the Braden Place in Auburn, which belongs
to the McClellan family, but this is not her motivation. Instead,
pressured by Everett's absence during the war, Lily merely finds
Joe "interesting." Since her college days, she has learned to
appreciate the possibilities in men she does not like. But if
there is no moral defense, there seems, at least at first, to be no
strong indictment either; in this environment, there simply are no
moral distinctions. And apparently it is the sun's fault, because
when Lily comes home from her abortion of Joe Templeton's baby in
San Francisco, we learn that "the heat drained the distinctions
from things—marriage and divorce and new curtains and overdrafts
at the bank, all the same". . . . She wonders "how she had gotten
pregnant in the first place by somebody she did not much like or
why, the heart of the matter, she had thought it made any
difference" (165-6). It will be noted that this blurring of moral
distinctions is not so much the result of an understanding of the
landscape, as merely a reaction to it. Lily is controlled by
forces larger than herself. In that sense, the novel is closer
here to naturalism than to the romanticism of the Western novel.
But the blurring of moral distinctions is true to the Western
pattern.
Also true to Porter's pattern of the Western novel, Lily does not impose judgments on the land, although or because, as we have seen, her psychology is so tied up with it. Sarah complains that "Lily never writes about anything but the weather." (233) and Lily's crying bouts usually mirror some distress on the ranch itself. "Lily's was the cry [Everett] heard those nights the kiln burned, the levee broke, the ranch went to nothing" (128). Inarticulation, love, and nature are linked in Lily's psychology, the dark intuitive impulses of Mother Earth; and reason, separateness, and subjugation of nature exist in opposition to this linkage. That is why she rejects Leonard Sachs, the New York man she meets in Berkeley. Visiting her home, he tells her it will be good for her to get away and go with him to New York, that she will develop there. Her response is to reprimand him for throwing a cigarette out the window of his car. "We" don't do that here, she tells him. "It starts fires" (50). By contrast, when she loses her virginity to Everett, their dialogue pleases her because of its inconsequentiality. In a scene also emphasizing Everett's sibling-like qualities, the land leaves its symbolic mark on her thigh in the form of a scratch made by a root submerged in the river. This scratch is infected by the river water and becomes a permanent scar, the brand of love.¹
The Eternal Quest is also present in the novel; it is perhaps the chief theme, and affects not just Lily but every character. The question each character would like to ask the other is *What do you want?* and only at the end does Lily realize that it is "a question she might have asked them all" (246)—meaning all the westward settlers restless seeking freedom from themselves, freedom from old ways of life. The pioneer psychology which has controlled Lily's family since the middle of the 19th century holds that "the real Eldorado is still further on." For Lily's mother, this means a succession of river parties; for Lily it means a succession of lovers. She does not seek fulfillment in these affairs; rather, she seeks—as did the pioneers and indeed the first American colonists—to reach a point at which she is no longer defined by others in any way. This is clear when, in Chapter 23, she picks up a man on an airplane who speaks obscenely and offers her three hours of sex and nothing else.

What held her in trance was his total lack of interest in anything else about her, his promise of being what she had looked for over and over: the point beyond which she could not go, the unambiguous undiluted article, the place where the battle would be on her terms. There could be no question of whether he liked her or disliked her, no question of approval or disapproval, no roles at all: three hours he said and three hours he meant. —229-230.
The last frontier, the end of the quest, is the total freedom from roles, from definition by the other, the place where the battle is on one's own terms. It is an escape from morality, which is a social condition, into a world where the self is alone and, ironically, where the self cannot be said to exist, since it exists only in relation to the other. Lily is prevented by circumstances from consummating this affair. We can see a conflict here between the tradition-component of psychological home and the family-component. Pioneer psychology, the desire to be free of social restrictions, is the tradition to which Lily is being true here (and granted, it is more of an impulse than a principle) but it would lead her to adultery.

It should be pointed out, vis a vis the Eternal Quest theme, that Edenic mythology as part of the pioneer ideal is satirized in Run River. It is Henry Catlin, the midwesterner who robs Walter Knight of his seat in the state legislature, and thus frustrates his chance of ever becoming governor, who tells his Okie following that "California. . .was promised us yessir I mean in Scripture" (42). Lily despises Catlin, of course, and Walter Knight ridicules him in terms which parody the Annunciation. Catlin is, Walter Knight tells Lily, "an agent of Divine Will, placed on earth
expressly to deliver California from her native sons. He was conceived in order to usher in the New California. An angel came to Mr. Catlin's mother. A Baptist angel, wearing a Mother Hubbard and a hair net" (43). So the idea of geographical home as Eden is undercut. In a psychological sense, though, paradise exists in the state of innocence, for Lily's marriage is likened to the exile from Eden, and that exile resulted from the act of eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Thus, it is possible that Lily's sexual promiscuity, which is a desire to escape the moral responsibility of roles, is really an attempt to regain the state of innocence associated in her mind with her early closeness to her father. (Escaping the fallen role returns one to a state of innocence, in other words—a logical fallacy.) And her father would obviously be cast in the archetypal role of God. The irony is that, strive as she might for freedom from morality, all Lily can achieve is immorality, because she is already and irrevocably in the fallen (married) state. Again, Lily's impulses are blind to social morality. She simply has no capacity for following the rules. And yet her feelings are all dictated by the conditioning she received as the daughter of pioneers. That conditioning has created impulses within her that are continually
in conflict not only with each other, as we saw in the episode of the airline passenger, but with the more conventional values of the rest of society. She cannot quite grasp that marriage is a moral state, as well as a legal one. Her innermost impulses resist the idea. But she cannot escape the morality of society by fleeing from it any more than Adam and Eve could escape the consequences of their action by hiding from God. (The paradox in both cases is in the desire to return, by hiding from God, to a state in which one was in the good graces of God.)

We might conclude from all this that the mystical power of the land is to frustrate the human will which seeks to dominate it, just as the moral law of humanity frustrates the attempt to elude that moral law. Adam and Eve cannot hide from God, the pioneers cannot escape the moral definitions inevitably imposed by social groups, and Lily cannot regain that sense of herself which was innocent and associated with her father. "I am not myself if my father is dead," she says (73), but neither is she herself if she violates her family loyalties, because even pioneer psychology dictates that one is defined by such loyalties. Lily's love-words to Everett, "keep me, please Christ Everett keep us" (226) are pathetic because Lily herself is the one who frustrates the
intention of this incantation. But the point is that she cannot help it, because her psychology contains the seeds of her own moral unravelling. Thus we see that the "land"—in the broad sense which includes human history and is the basis of Lily’s self—does, in fact, make distinctions of good and evil self-defeating, if not quite impossible. Alienation from one’s roots is as inevitable as the loss of one’s father, and the dark night of the soul does not end with a hopeful clarification of values so much as with a sense of tragedy. Good and evil are finally inextricable. Licking the blood of her dead husband from her own arm, Lily tries to think of a way to characterize him, wanting to be able to say that he was a good man. "She was not certain that he had been but it was what she would have wished for him, if they gave her one wish" (248).

Other Principals

Martha McClellan is more glamorous than Lily, and her incestuous feelings toward Everett are more openly portrayed than Lily’s similar feelings toward her father, not that Lily’s feelings are overly subtle. Martha never outgrows her childhood preoccupation with the idea of marrying her brother, and even though Everett and Lily plan to live on the McClellan farm, she weeps when they marry and accuses Everett of leaving her alone.
(Lily understands this emotion, for obvious reasons.) Martha advises Lily on an obstetrician, as someone might who is obsessively protective of the seed of a loved one; and when Everett goes off to war (almost), taking Martha's gift of The McClellan Journal of 1848, it is Martha who makes the last romantic run at his departing train and who breaks down emotionally, while Lily takes this philosophical view of the meaning of marriage: "Someone could take care of you or you could take care of someone; you could be told or you could tell the comfortable loving lies. . ." (96). Her view may result from the sense of being defeated in love by a rival, or it may result from the lethargy she exhibits at feeling separated from her father by marriage to Everett. Either alternative fits the incest theme.

The difference between Martha and Lily lies in Martha's greater ability to play Scarlett O'Hara; Lily had this ambition in her youth, but she has a sense of irony and detachment which, while it allows for tragedy, does not allow for that kind of tragedy peculiar to a romantic heroine. There is a sense of irony, for example, in Lily's remark to Martha, in the train departure scene just mentioned, that "He's got The McClellan Journal [even though he forgot Martha's flowers]. That's what matters" (94). The same
is true of her thought when Martha presents the journal to him. "Everett and Martha, she thought, forward into battle with the Cross before" (91-3). The journal, along with Martha's childhood games—all imaginative psychodramas having to do with the settlers of the West and in which Martha always casts herself in the role of tragic heroine—demonstrate the same gene-obsessive psychology present in the supervision of Lily's obstetrics. The historical obsession is gene-obsession, and is thus related to the incest theme. These obsessions form the basis of a tragic and romantic view, embodied in Martha; Lily, although similarly afflicted, is capable of enough irony and detachment to be considered a more realistic character.

Lily's intellectual detachment and her similarity to Martha enable her to see the pattern in Martha's behavior that leads to her suicide, whereas the fact that she is a suicide is only dimly suspected by Everett and Edith Knight. Both of the latter say of Martha that "she knew better" than to take a boat out on the flooding Sacramento River, but Lily sees the "tiger's face in the treetops"—Didion's version of the figure in the carpet (Chapter 21). Lily, moreover, has been the only one to read Martha's diary entries, with separate pages headed "REASONS NOT TO LOVE RYDER,"
"REASONS NOT TO LOVE EVERETT," "REASONS NOT TO REMEMBER DADDY WITH LOVE" (212). Presumably, what Lily understands at some level of consciousness or unconsciousness, is that Martha has succeeded in cutting herself off or in feeling cut off from these attachments. In Chapter 19, after Ryder Channing's marriage to Nancy Dupree and after Martha engages in sexual games that leave her feeling she is "no better than Lily" (193), we see Martha as having achieved an "insular victory" of the type that Lily wishes for, but fails to achieve:

Thinking herself victorious, she despised all the vulnerable: all those who liked or disliked, wanted or did not want, damaged themselves with loving and hating and migraine headaches. She imagined that she had emerged triumphant, and that the banner she planted read Noli Me Tangere.

--194.

As in Lily's case, the pioneer psychology that governs Martha contains the urge to unite with family and the urge to separate from socially-induced anguish, and this dynamic is a destructive one. Martha, like Cathy in Wuthering Heights, is both attracted to and repelled by the man she does and does not love (cf. Ryder and Edgar Linton), and like Ophelia she suffers from melancholia—which leads to her drowning—and is buried illegally on the McClellan farm with mementoes of her pioneer past.
Katherine Usher Henderson refers to Ryder Channing as the "emblem of change that destroys the McClellan family," but the more closely one examines both Lily's and Martha's motivation the more one feels the need to qualify this claim. Both Martha and Lily, for example, refuse to lay any serious charges at Ryder's feet, and this is because, for both of them, he is a diversion, a deflection of the powerful and destructive desire for incest. He represents, at least for Lily and arguably also for Martha, the movement toward isolation and erosion of the self, which becomes a betrayal of family loyalties. To put it another way, the social mores of the pioneer are so insular as to be incestuous; incest violates existing social mores, and thus leads to erosion of the self; reaction against this process is a more deliberate erosion of the self. Nobody wins. And as for Ryder Channing, granted that he lights the fuse to the McClellan dynamite, someone else would have come along and lit it if he had not. Furthermore, although change destroys the McClellans, they deserve to be destroyed.

But Ryder is not a mere diversion. He is a crucial one. He first becomes involved with Martha just after Everett goes away to help the war effort in Texas. Understandably lethargic after this loss, and pressured by her father, Martha feels the need to find
someone to marry. "It doesn't much matter who, does it?" she says. She does not believe in a love that lasts more than two weeks, except with members of one's own family, but time is running out for her. "There's no time at all... Everybody's going away, and half of everybody's going to die, and the war may go on twenty years, and Everett's gone away—" (96). She wants someone, anyone, to assuage the loss of Everett, the only specific point of loss in that dropped sentence. And no one better fits the description of someone, anyone than Ryder Channing.

Actually, Ryder is no wraith. He comes from Tennessee, and it is a mark of Martha's ultimate inability to be interested in anyone outside the family that such facts do not seem quite real to her. After Ryder's engagement to Nancy Dupree, he telephones her, stiffened by a few drinks. Martha thinks: "Drinking or not, his character was nothing to write home about. Even to his home, wherever and whatever that was" (185). In fact, she knows where Ryder is from, but because she cares for nothing but her own little patch of turf, she takes this flippant attitude: earlier, she taunts Ryder with her father's joke about Ryder's place of origin: "It's all Del Paso Heights to me" (117)---Del Paso Heights being a low-class, high-crime neighborhood in Sacramento, which no one
frequents who does not live there. Ultimately, Martha develops a powerful love-hate relationship with Ryder, who, we are told, looks like a "spoiled" version of Everett (114). But somehow, in spite of that relationship, she remains, throughout, curiously detached from him. Her crying fits are not caused by him; rather, he is a palliative. She rejects the job he gets for her at a television station in Sacramento (read, the technology of the future), saying, "I don't want anything from him" (176). Most telling of all, when confronting the desire to hurt both Ryder and Everett, her action reveals where her true emotion and sense of attachment lie:

Her first thought had been that it was Everett's car and Ryder had no right to slap her in Everett's car, but then she had remembered that Everett surely cared as little for her as Ryder did, and all during the two-hour drive to Sacramento she sat rigid against the door, trying to think how to hurt them both. What she had done finally was spend the night in Ryder's apartment, an injury to Everett which, because he had assumed she was staying in Piedmont anyway, escaped him.

--183.

Here we can most clearly see how Martha's relationship with Ryder is in fact a reaction to her more serious feelings for Everett, which cannot be consummated. What Martha really wants, as she says, is "a nice ordered life
right here on the river just like we've always had" (113). That means land, and The McClellan Journal of 1848, and a big brother who takes care of you and carries you upstairs to bed at night."

Ultimately, Ryder's significance is not only as an emblem of change, but as a symbol of the American success ethic, which is hollow at the core. Furthermore, his psychology is fundamentally similar to pioneer psychology in one important respect: the desire to escape from social responsibility and its attendant unpleasantness. This is a "disorder" in his personality which Lily is able to recognize, even though she does not recognize the same disorder in herself. She imagines that she is "committed" to him (see the end of Chapter 22) whereas he is incapable of commitment, as the following passage suggests.

The disorder had been there always. Even Martha had seen it: He's the kind of man, she had once said, who when your father's dying or you're having a miscarriage or a note's due at the bank, depend on him, he won't be around.

—221.
Ryder augments the pioneer psychology of escape by having no geographical or personal loyalties whatsoever. He is portrayed as someone who wants to use people and to use the West for his own schemes of self-enrichment, but at the same time he is the spokesman of "the American way," defined by Lily as "wanting things and working to get them" (174). Ironically, Lily is echoing her father here, who described the pioneer forebears of the present-day Knights in similar terms. So, as a result of this augmentation of pioneer psychology, Ryder has the significant function of de-regionalizing what would otherwise be a regional novel, making it a novel about America and Americans.

**Point of View and Reader Sympathy**

One of the most difficult problems this novel presents is that of precisely determining the nature of our intended sympathies, and to a lesser extent, of determining with whom they are ultimately supposed to lie. If we address the latter (and easier) question first, it seems clear that we are not to sympathize with
Ryder, nor with Saran. The fact that, of the principal characters, these two are arguably the least blameworthy for the evil that occurs is an indication that the novel is, in fact, realism, rather than romance (on the theory that, in a romance, the unsympathetic characters are the villains). But this presents an interesting question: if Ryder is only doing what comes naturally for the All-American boy, and if Sarah is only doing what she must (rejecting pioneer psychology) to survive, and if the true source of tragedy and evil lies in pioneer psychology, then what is it that makes Ryder and Sarah more unsympathetic than Lily, Martha, and Everett?

One answer is that Ryder and Sarah are both excluded from the point of view. They are the only two principals, out of the five, who are so excluded. Henderson writes that "of the total of twenty-six chapters, fifteen are narrated from Lily's point of view, six are written from Everett's point of view, and in five the author writes as omniscient narrator." This is true, but some of the passages in the omniscient third person turn out to be a "close third" person point of view following Martha.
(See Chapter 19, for example.) That is, we are privy to her thoughts and feelings and we are seeing the action at least partially through her eyes. By contrast, we only infer what Ryder and Sarah think and feel when they speak or do something, and there is no way to confirm our inferences. For example, we infer Ryder's unhappiness when, drunk, he telephones Lily on the night of Martha's burial and accuses Lily of having lied about her (Martha's) death. This selective omniscient point of view directs our sympathy toward those places where it has an outlet. By refusing to enter the minds and hearts of Ryder and Sarah, Didion is signalling to the reader that his/her sympathy is not to lie with those who have sold out their geographical and/or psychological homes. It is not that they are bad people, but that they simply do not matter much in the end. They do not have souls, character, a sense of place--all roughly equivalent for Didion. These characters would matter more if they could be bad people; Ryder's death is not tragic, it is unnecessary, and can be covered up, if only Everett would go along with the plan. This clearly implies
inconsequentiality. Of course, this is Lily's view, and we, as readers, have more sympathy for Everett's view, but even Everett sees, post facto, that Ryder's death is unnecessary. And, too, it is Everett's death that we lament in the end—the murderer's death.

The other question we are concerned with involves the nature of our sympathies. The answer begins to come into focus when we respond to this question of who is sympathetic. Our sympathies are with the people of greatest moral consequence, but as we have seen, the capacity for good and evil is the same capacity, arising in this case from pioneer psychology, which turns out to be, in the final analysis, a kind of commitment to non-commitment. That is, Lily is "committed," as a character, to seek to escape social roles; and Everett, more complex perhaps, is committed to a loyalty to Lily and his family so strong that it overrides the commitment to respect and to preserve human life (his own and Ryder's). He preserves his marriage and his way of life by killing Ryder, and he saves his family from the ordeal of his trial by killing himself. Together, Everett and
Lily epitomize the twin characteristics of pioneer psychology (desire to escape society and intense family loyalty)—and they end in a cannibal-like fashion worthy of the Donner-Reed party, emphasized by the image of Lily licking Everett's blood from her own arm.

As pat as this sounds, however, the effect of reading *Run River* is not nearly so much of two people who have come to a bad end through faulty heredity, as it is of a voracious landscape snuffing out, like insects, the lives of its would-be oppressors. *Run River* is the story of a climatically hot territory and a moral void into which man comes, willy-nilly, trying poignantly to make sense of things and not having much success. This is the void mentioned in the last chapter of the novel; Henderson speaks of it much the way Didion speaks of the Golden Land in her essay "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream"—as a place where Californians project their fantasies. And here again, the alternation of point of view leaves one feeling that no one particular set of fantasies is more important than another, that no one character is at the center of things, or is the controlling force, although it
is true of this novel, as of others, that character is plot. The character is that of a group of people in the West, and of the West itself. The view of that character, which is a kind of void-on-void (people and land), might be considered sentimentally pessimistic if one did not take into account Everett’s assertion of values at the end, when, after carrying pioneer psychology to its logical extreme, he breaks with it by accepting both the past and the isolation of the self. The former is demonstrated by his disagreement with Lily when she contends that his action does not matter because he "wouldn’t do it now;" and the latter is demonstrated by his desire to be left alone, which Lily tries to accept, intellectually, if not emotionally (243–4, 246).

Closely related to point of view is the authorial stance, or tone, and in this regard Didion provides another equalizer, this one tongue-in-cheek, in the form of the songs she has her characters sing or hear played. (There is a lot of singing in the novel.) Nearly all these songs have titles or themes about places. It is quite a litany: "Big Noise Blew in from Winnetka," "The
Battle Hymn of the Republic," "The Yellow Rose of Texas,"
"There'll Always Be an England," the score of Oklahoma!
"America the Beautiful," "There'll Be Bluebirds over the
White Cliffs of Dover," "Don't Fence Me In," "California
Here I Come," "O Little Town of Bethlehem"--the only
exceptions are a couple of tunes hummed by the older
folks, and of course Ryder Channing's contribution. He
sings "As Time Goes By."

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Chapter 3. A WOMAN IN A MAN'S WORLD: PLAY IT AS IT LAYS

"It occurred to Maria that whatever arrangements were made, they worked less well for women."
—Play It As It Lays, Chapter 10.

By now we have seen what happens to homes in Didion's work: they erode. They change their character. We have seen the winless paradox of those who would seek to find themselves by fleeing, have

65
seen that it is themselves that they flee from. And we have seen that the promised land is a void which mirrors the flawed characters of its chosen people. We have confronted this void as Eden and as promised land, and we have been exiled and beaten back. The next step is to confront the void as void.

The significant place in *Play It As It Lays* is no place. The subject is nothingness. The heroine is a woman whose character (if she can be said ever to have had one) and whose mental health have deteriorated to the point where life does not seem possible to her. She has no past and desires none. Her home town no longer exists. Her list of Thou Shalt Nots is climaxed by a prohibition against carrying a Yorkshire terrier in Beverly Hills. She inhabits motel rooms, hangs out in gas stations, and drives on the freeway at high speed with the radio blaring, in an attempt to avoid thinking. She never asks why Iago is evil, because "to look for 'reasons' is beside the point." Her most pervasive intuition is of "the dead still center of the world, the quintessential intersection of nothing" (p. 67).

Naturally, this is a Hollywood story. Hollywood (or Southern California) is often the great Nowhere of twentieth century literature—in such novels, for example, as *The Loved One, The Day*
of the Locust, and The Deer Park. It is also the national dream factory, and the place where poor girls, if they are pretty enough, can be discovered and make it big. Success in Hollywood is a gambler's payoff, a gambler's dream, and Maria Wyeth, the heroine of Play It As It Lays, is, on one level, the incarnation of a gambler's dream.

The gambler is her father. He has lived his life at Nevada's gaming tables, waiting for his luck to turn good. Life itself, he has taught Maria, is a crapshoot. Apparently recognizing that Maria has a salable commodity in her beauty, he sends her to New York to try to get lucky in show business; he keeps her there, more or less against her will, because she "can't win if she's not at the table," as he tells Maria's mother (p. 88). And Maria has some early success, so in that sense her father's dream is realized.

Unfortunately, this dream is a wrong-headed one; and as we saw in "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream" and in Run River, having the wrong dreams can lead to big trouble. Nearly everything in the world of Play It As It Lays has the taint of evil, of corruption, and the reader cannot help but feel that this condition has its roots in someone's wrong-headedness: these characters are all sick. "But," we protest, "not everyone in the world is sick." If
only Maria would get out of Hollywood, we tell ourselves, if only she would get away from these sado-masochists with whom she associates, and learn to think differently--! But we sense that a moral purpose guides the narrative, rather than an effort at fidelity to a more complete mimetic accuracy. Life can be this nightmarish under certain conditions, and it is those conditions that concern us. We feel the more humane qualities to be missing, and this adds to our feeling of Noplace, but these humane qualities have been suppressed. We therefore begin a discussion of Noplace by discussing the suppression, and the suppressors, of humaneness. It seems natural to start with the bad ideas of Harry Wyeth, since that is how Maria started life.

The idea that has governed Maria's life from the beginning, and that is responsible for who and where she is today, is her father's idea that life is a crapshoot. And life is a crapshoot if one conceives of life as no more than a set of economic risks and incentives. The gambling metaphor is a lens for viewing any and every activity and phenomenon in life, and it is the metaphor of economic risk and incentive. As such, it is an appropriate metaphor for the dynamic of American business, of capitalism, of the land of opportunity, of the nation whose business, as Calvin
Coolidge said, is business. To confirm this set of associations, Didion uses three cities not so much for purposes of setting as for points of symbolic reference: New York, the economic power base; Hollywood, the dream factory and moral void; Las Vegas, the gaming capital, where the only dream is to get lucky, and where the only kind of luck is the kind that brings in money. (All three cities are, of course, entertainment capitals as well.) It is immediately clear that this approach to the myth of America is broader in scope and less parochial than that taken in Run River, with its regional emphasis. We should also remember that coastal California is associated, in Didion's work, with "the way we live now," and thus Play It As It Lays is an assessment of that way of life, circa 1970. (This is the date of the book's publication. As Henderson points out, there are no years named in Play It As It Lays, whereas Run River takes place over a period from 1938 to 1959. There is, of course, no time in Nowhere-land, although one gets older there. But the flavor of the late sixties is omnipresent in Play It As It Lays.) And as we move away from geographical home, we lose our moorings to the past, to nature, to family ties, to morality—to psychological home.
The actual settings of *Play It As It Lays* are not the three metaphorical points of reference as often as they are non-places, location-images of impermanence, destruction, and nothingness. Much of the action takes place in motel rooms out on the desert, and one scene occurs during a bomb blast on the nuclear testing site where Maria's home town of Silver Wells, Nevada used to be. The Hollywood scenes do not really show us much of Hollywood; they show us the Los Angeles freeways with their green signs floating overhead, or they show us more motel rooms, or the bare room in Encino where Maria has her abortion. The New York scenes are brief and done in flashback, and Las Vegas is merely the Strip, the gaudy, clockless row of casinos in the middle of a desert.

Unlike Didion's previous work, *Play It As It Lays* uses no extensive descriptions of setting, nor of anything else, for that matter. Spareness is the right method to evoke the void. Also, a clipped, cinematic technique is proper for evoking the mind of a spaced-out movie actress. *Play It As It Lays* is a novel written virtually as a film,* and this is because, as we shall see in the

*I have not seen the film version of *Play It As It Lays*, which Didion wrote with her husband, John Gregory Dunne.*
works that follow, old-fashioned narrative has no place in a meaningless world, one where, as Maria says, "nothing applies."

Movie technique, like the dream process, involves juxtaposition of images; missing from it is the rhetoric that explicitly connects one scene to another and explains their meaning. The question of what makes Iago evil, or of why a coral snake needs two glands of neurotoxic poison, are not questions that film technique can answer; rhetoric can try to answer them, and a film could be made with a narrative overdubbed, explaining the answers to such questions, if they have answers, but images by themselves are not well-suited to answer why. Maria's point of view, her refusal, because reason is beside the point, to ask why, controls the style of Play It As It Lays, and the marked difference between this style and Didion's earlier technique (plenty of weather and so on) ought to be a clue to the reader of the distance between author and heroine. Someone who had not read the earlier work would have no such clue, and might feel that the novel, because it asks us to sympathize with a virtual zombie, is merely depressing, pessimistic, and "negative," whereas the novel is actually depressing, pessimistic, and "positive" at the end. And we find this to be so because having read the earlier work and having thus
understood that Maria lacks something Didion values (home), we understand at the outset that our sympathy must be qualified. We perhaps realize more fully at the end that Maria’s decision to "keep playing" is rather a startling act of sudden positive-thinking, for her.

Certainly, the story is not uplifting, because even with a positive choice as its ultimate statement, the novel is, on the whole, in the nature of a negative example. The pared-down style and the symbolic settings create an atmosphere almost as of a moral fable, yet there does not seem to be anything to learn, as we go along, except how oppressively bad everything is. And I do mean bad—not simply empty of meaning. The world Maria lives in is positively horrifying. This sort of lesson is bound to lose many readers, but if one sticks around to try to find out why the author should want us to feel oppressed, one learns, first of all, that this gimcrack moral void is a man’s world. And a man’s world is a world of total egocentricity; money and sex are means of glorifying the male ego, and nothing else matters. The male’s modus operandi is to drive a wedge between mother and daughter, to isolate the female so that she can be dominated by violence and by her own dependence on the male resulting from this isolation. Men do this
because they are homosexual, or because they are incapable of love, or because they love only themselves, but in any case they do it because they do not love women. This is perhaps the most sickening symptom of moral decay in the book: the failure of men to love women.

Again, Maria's father bears some blame in this regard. His failure to love is shown by his being the first cause of dispossessions in Maria's life. He gambles away their home in Reno when she is nine years old. Even at age thirty-one, Maria cannot stand to see his best friend and business partner, Benny Austin, because: "I have trouble with as it was" (p. 7). During her New York years, Maria flies out to Silver Wells to visit her mother (Chapter 27), and there is a sense of tension as we learn that something is "wrong" with Francine Wyeth, as we feel Francine's isolation among men (Harry Wyeth and Benny Austin, talking business), and as we see the women concerned for each other's well-being while the men ignore them. The scene is Sunday dinner, and Maria responds to an offhand comment of Benny Austin's:

"You into zinc?" Maria said finally. She was watching her mother but her mother looked just as she always had.

"We've been buying a few rights." Harry Wyeth began whistling though his teeth.
"Meal fit for the Queen of Spain," Benny said. "Francine, you could make a fortune in the take-out spare-rib business."

Francine Wyeth laughed. "Maria and I can always open a hash house. When we get sick of you all."

"Hash house on 95," Harry Wyeth said. "Pretty picture."

"Not on 95," Francine Wyeth said. "Somewhere else."

Maria closed her eyes.

"I'm talking about a quality operation. Franchises, you rent out your name and your receipt." Benny Austin talked as if nothing had happened at the table. "Franchised services, that's where the future lies."

"I don't want to go back," Maria said.

"That's natural." Harry Wyeth did not look at his wife or daughter. "That's only natural. Don't think about it, you'll be out again in a month or two, plan on it now."

"She's too thin," Francine Wyeth said. "Look at her, see for yourself."

"She can't win if she's not at the table, Francine," Harry Wyeth threw down his napkin and stood up. "You wouldn't understand that."

--87-88.

I quote this passage at length because it so clearly illustrates the polarity of male and female, and the male principle of divide-and-conquer. Harry Wyeth is right to recognize the natural affection of the daughter for the mother, and he is right to accuse Francine of not understanding that the gaming table counts more than the dinner table. When Maria expresses the desire to remain in Silver Wells she is responding to her mother's wish for solidarity with her, and this is solidarity against the male:
sick of you all. Harry must root out such ideas. So the women are divided. Not long after this last meeting between mother and daughter, Francine has a car accident outside Tonopah and her body is torn apart by coyotes out on the desert, an obviously symbolic death.

The opening paragraph of Chapter 25 offers another example of the opposition of mother (sympathetic) to father (hateful) in Maria's mind. In this scene, she tries mentally to strengthen herself for her abortion by remembering her mother's Red Cross Handbook while fighting to keep the image of her father out of her thoughts. One of the novel's more pervasive and obvious symbols is used in this scene, as Maria recalls that "rattlesnake bite was why her mother made her read [the handbook]" (81). The rattlesnake is of course a symbol of the evil serpent. It is phallic and its tail rattles like dice: a perfect symbol of the male principle and of Harry Wyeth in particular. The rattlesnake also lives in the desert. So while the male (Harry) is at home in this barren world, the female (Francine) is isolated in it, and ultimately destroyed by its denizens.

It is important to remember that the dictum "play it as it lays" is Harry's; that is, it is a male dictum, and it takes on
correspondingly hideous overtones when we consider Maria's sexual relationships. Once isolated from natural sympathies with other women, she becomes easy sexual prey for smooth-talking emotional-sugar daddies like Ivan Costello, her first boyfriend in New York. "Who's your friend," Ivan catechizes, "who loves you" (145). He plays upon her dependency with stock lines, because sex is a game to him, a set of strategies. He continues to rely on such lines even after his and Maria's separation and Maria's marriage to Carter Lang. He telephones her in the middle of the night to get her to tell him how much she "wants it," because Maria is no more than an object to be played with for gratification of his ego (71). He takes advantage of her sexually, just as all the other men in the book, the actors, bellhops and boys, treat her like a whore whenever they sense her isolation and vulnerability. In a man's world, woman is a toy. Play it as it lays.

Maria's husband, Carter, is unfaithful, a "bad friend" whose loyalties only last as long as the good times do, and whose two movies featuring Maria seem exploitive, although María feels that her character in Angel Beach is admirable for seeming to be in charge of her life. (She holds this belief in spite of the fact that this character is gang-raped by outlaw bikers in one scene.)
Carter engages in typical male behavior, threatening to separate Maria from their daughter, Kate, unless Maria gets an abortion. Here again, as with Harry Wyeth, the male's role is to divide mother from daughter and more generally to oppose life. Maria goes through with the abortion as a form of final payoff to the male sex: "She would do this one last thing and then they would never be able to touch her again" (74). But this concession is a mistake, for after that last, scraping separation from her own offspring she is even more vulnerable than before. She goes from one sexual encounter to another with every male scum available, from Ivan Costello to Larry Kulik to Johnny Waters, the actor whom she momentarily likes because he does not know who she is. This is a pathetic lapse into a male-defined role, reminiscent of her gang-banged character in Angel Beach. And although Maria supposedly no longer believes in the gambler's luck her father taught her about as a child, these encounters seem nothing so much as a gambler's last desperate spin of the roulette wheel.

The question arises as to whether Maria, as a woman in a man's world, is ever really sympathetic, as opposed to merely pathetic. Or, put another way, are women totally helpless victims or not? If not, then this means they must have some responsibility. When
Maria says, "I'm sick of everybody's sick arrangements" (48), we are sympathetic, but only if she is willing to do something about it—only, that is, if she is willing to take some responsibility for her own life and separate herself from the sick arrangements. Some of the most pathetic scenes in the book are those in which women fail other women, but these are examples of responsibility defined in a negative way, of a failure of responsibility, or of responsibility for contributing to the male-induced divisions among women. I am thinking in particular about the scene in Ralph's Market in which the emotionally disturbed woman seems to ask for sympathy from Maria, and when Maria tries to respond, screams, "Get your whore's hands off me" (102). Such woman-failing-woman episodes demonstrate that the morally bankrupt man's world relies for its continuance upon the complicity of the female, her refusal or inability to accept responsibility for her own self-esteem. Even though much of the book is anti-male, there are these episodes that show that the male is not the source of all evil, nor are heterosexual relationships. Maria's love for Les Goodwin, although it does not work out, has none of the sick quality of her other relationships; and her disgust at homosexuality (which gives her the dry heaves in Chapter 10) shows that that lifestyle is not a
good escape from the problems between women and men. So responsibility must come into play. Maria is right when she says to Carter, Susannah, BZ and Helene, "You're all making me sick" (190), but it is up to her to do something about it, because they are not going to change.

This she finally does. Her movement toward self-definition is almost imperceptible, primarily because in the desert of nothingness it is hard to attach clear meanings to anything that is said or done. For example, after Susannah Wood is beaten up and Maria learns that Carter was present when Harrison did it, she admits to BZ that male-female relations do, in fact, "make a difference" to her (195). Whether she realizes it or not, this appears to be a reversal of her earlier claim to Ivan Costello that sex has nothing to do with her. Both statements are true in a way, not true in another. When one has no character, no sense of self-definition, then any relations one has are necessarily impersonal. This seems true of Maria's relationships, for she is so uncertain of her self that she wonders where her body leaves off and space begins, or she moves to make a phone call because she wants to hear the sound of her own footsteps, or she talks not to communicate but to hear her own voice (see Chapters 1, 50, 65). At
the same time, if personal and sexual relationships truly made no difference, then Maria would not be so disturbed to begin with. EZ thinks that Maria would have done away with herself by now if things mattered to her, but he mistakes her sickened numbness for indifference. If Maria had a greater capacity for self-determination, she would recognize that what she wants to do is resist Ivan Costello on the one hand, and have her marriage mean something on the other. In other words, when she says she is not affected, she means she does not wish to be, and when she says she is affected, she wishes to be. But in both cases, Maria is not powerful enough to define realities, because only men define realities.

In the same chapter where this apparent reversal occurs, Carter hurls the crucial fact of personhood in Maria's face when he tells her, "You're going to get old." In this negative way, he confirms her sense of being a particular woman, which she has initiated by deciding that something matters (at least momentarily). From this chapter on, we may interpret the unexplained, existential details of Maria's experience as tending toward the self-definition with which the book ends. Her shooting at road signs may simply be an act of irrational desperation, or it
may be an act of defiant outrage at the circumscribed paths of nothingness on which she has, up to now, travelled. Also, the coffee shop lady who has "made a decision" may signal to Maria that choice is the key to how to live amid existential meaninglessness. Then, in Chapter 74, written in first person from Maria's point of view, Maria remembers the two lessons her father taught her, that life is a crap game and that overturning a rock is likely to uncover a rattlesnake; she says the lessons "hold up" but do not "apply." This statement may be meaningless, but it may mean that she finds that the two rules accurately describe a man's world, but that, being a woman, she does not feel they are appropriate for her. Even as she begins, however, to react against a male-defined world, she can take no positive action until reaching a "climactic" state of absolute zero.

This occurs in Chapter 75, when BZ reveals that Carter is having an affair with Helene. There is no good reason for this; Helene is not even young and pretty like Carter's starlet paramours. With BZ's one-line catechism ("Tell me what matters," BZ said. "Nothing," Maria said.) (202) he and Maria are at the same level of despair—complete despair. What then becomes interesting to try to puzzle out is why Maria defines herself
differently than BZ defines himself, for despite the absence of
reasons (why? and why not? both supposedly imply absence of
reasons) the choice to live, or not to take one's own life upon the
attainment of complete despair, is a different choice than suicide
at the same moment. It implies a different self-definition.
There is no evidence to suggest that Maria herself is aware of
this; her why not is, to her, simply another random color for
splattering on an empty canvas. But as we have been seeing for
ourselves all along, without any obvious help from the narrative,
existence does not quite precede essence; it merely gets out of
hand, if one does not assert oneself. To put it another way, what
we as readers, as well as Maria, have been reacting to all along
has not really been nothingness, but the ugly absence of anything
redeeming. She and we react this way because we are not nothing.
Just so, at the end, while BZ defines himself as a dead man, Maria
in effect defines herself as a mother, and as a mistress of canned
fruit. As long as she is alive she is not nothing, and so defined
she is not what men say she is (a whore, a cunt, and so on). She
is, rather, what she herself chooses to be, modest and without
ultimate reasons as that is. As much as Didion's mind may veer
inflexibly toward the particular, she knows this as well as any
reader. So we return to our question, which we now phrase thus: what brings about these two different responses to absolute existential despair?

The answer may lie, to some extent, in the feminist slant that we have been discussing. More particularly, it may have to do with the echo of Hemingway in Chapter 83 and all the novel's similarities to an early Hemingway novel--pared-down sentences, non-existent exposition, laconic characters. And there is also the emphasis on nada, as well as the existential response based on courage and "art" (the art of canning). All of this would seem to suggest that Maria's story represents an updated and peculiarly female response to the earlier "waste land" motif in the novels of Hemingway, Fitzgerald and others. The echo, by the way, is in Maria's remark to EZ that "it would be very pretty" to think that there is anything worth breaking a bottle over. The phrase, of course, is the one used by Jake Barnes at the end of The Sun Also Rises, and its meaning is much the same here: it would be very pretty to think that our lives mattered. But a comparison of the particular situation in each case--Jake's tragic and hopeless love for Brett as against the drunk in the bar across the road from the motel---suggests parody, particularly since The Sun Also Rises is
full of drunks raising hell in bars. In that novel, the drunks are the heroes.

If we also remember that Maria comes finally to diagnose her problem as a temporary loss of her sense of humor, we are tempted to take the suggestion of parody more strongly. As a parody of a Hemingway novel ("That's a queen's way of doing it." Maria tells BZ) (212) Play It As It Lays is much less depressing, almost amusing. However, parody does not seem strongly enough indicated to treat the novel primarily that way. It does seem hinted at enough so that we can view Maria's final decision as Didion's rejection of the macho heroism of the Hemingway man confronted by nada. Again, BZ understands the mentality of the bikers' gangrape: macho mentality is homosexual mentality. BZ, even though he beats Helene, is not quite a man, but that is the point. Suicide is egotistical if it means that one feels one must have reasons to live, and egotism is what all these non-men in the desert waste land are about. Enough of them; get Kate; do some canning.

At the end of the book-length negative example is something very positive: a new person, one without reasons. Not one who asks why, but one who asks why not, and expects only silence. There is a sense of self being forged here, but as yet there is no new place
to contain this new self, only a sanatorium. We continue to worry about Maria at the end, because we do not know where she can go. Most of the places in *Play It As It Lays* have belonged to the negative example: the three symbolic cities of the American dream, the desert of male games and exploitation in which the female is isolated and endangered, the road and the motel representing homelessness and the parodied waste land. Maria has only her sanatorium in which to make her positive decision and try to get well—only the sanatorium in which to "watch the hummingbird." The sanatorium represents order for Maria; and, in the parodic fashion described above, her canning jars represent her "art." The idea of refuge, of sanctuary, has now become consciously artificial (or at least medical) in Didion’s work. Sanctuary is no longer to be sought in a geographical home, because bombs and greedy men have blown away the beauty of nature and the feeling of relatedness. The next phase of Didion’s work will take us more deeply into the political realities underlying these unpleasant changes, and into the artificial substitute for the vanished sanctuary of home, namely the art of the writer.

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Chapter 4. The White Album and Salvador: Canning

Narrative and the Center

Maria Wyeth's desire to "do some canning" is a metaphor for the desire to artificially impose order on a meaningless universe. This desire may be the major theme of post-World War II literary fiction. In the nuclear age, we all need to know that there are good reasons not to blow up the world, and it sometimes seems that we are at a loss to know where to look for such reasons. There is a sort of official pessimism that makes human life seem unnecessary: God has been officially dead for some time now. Socialist utopias inevitably turn into totalitarian states. Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness metamorphose into isolation, license, and the pursuit of the dollar. Cultural unity gives way
to uniformly lower standards, and so on. The responses of fictional people to such a world, except those who replace God with sex, tend to be unique, even quirky and arbitrary. Lessing's Anna Gould tries to order her existence by writing it down in notebooks of different colors; Bellow's Henderson, at the promptings of an obscure inner hunger and hollowness, flies to darkest Africa seeking fulfillment; the hero of Cheever's Bullet Park becomes obsessed with a house, the only place where he feels safe from his psychological béte noire; Barth's Jacob Horner does not know what to do, becomes paralyzed, and has to take orders from a quack doctor who advises him to act on principles of sinistrality and antecedence. Examples are easy to come by. This is a pretty bleak bunch, for the most part; or if the characters are brave, then the disease from which they suffer is certainly a mean one. To judge from its literature, the twentieth century, and particularly the last half of it, seems to be mercilessly bent on shredding away whatever dignity western man may have derived from his culture. For it is usually culture that gives human beings a sense of order, security, and purpose.

Regardless of how the puppets cope with nada, however, the puppetmasters continue to act in more or less the same fashion:
they tell stories. But telling stories becomes increasingly
difficult to do without self-consciousness. Samuel Beckett and
Donald Barthelme, for example, are two contemporary writers who
make us aware of the artificiality of telling stories. Didion, in
her own way, becomes self-conscious about narrative, but in her
work we can see steps leading to this state. And the first step
comes about in our consciousness of having shed geographical home,
and of having seen how evanescent psychological home is in its
absence. What Maria Wyeth wanted, and did not even realize she
wanted, was psychological home—to be with mother (or daughter)
somewhere away from the desert, to have things matter. She wanted
her equivalent of family, nature, and tradition. But she lived in
the wrong place, modern America. So the only positive response
left to her—although "canning" is, admittedly, an ironic
metaphor—was artifice, a response as old as Cro-Magnon man's cave
drawings.

"We tell ourselves stories in order to live," Didion begins
The White Album. "We live entirely, especially if we are writers,
by the imposition of a narrative line upon disparate images, by the
'ideas' with which we have learned to freeze the shifting
phantasmagoria which is our actual experience." But she finds
herself in a dilemma, because, in the late 1960s, she has begun "to doubt the premises of all the stories I have ever told myself"1. Just as the values constituting psychological home, in Slouching Towards Bethlehem, are suddenly found to be "beside the point," so, in the essay "The White Album," "the narrative on which many of us grew up no longer applies" (205). This shifting of the metaphor for one’s values, from the concept of home to the concept of narrative, seems to suggest that Didion is having a progressively more difficult time keeping things from falling apart; this is because narrative is more artificial than nature and family, if not necessarily more artificial than tradition. Or, if we prefer to speak of narrative and home as simply two metaphors for the same thing—coherent values—then at the very least it is clear that Didion is offering the same message as before. Alfred Kazin has referred to Didion’s message as "a constant theme of decline and fall."2

Kazin, in his Bright Book of Life, also gets to the heart of an important critical problem when he suggests that the moral ills Didion is always not quite diagnosing may be more properly located in the individual than in the changing times and the exile from Eden. Of Run River, he writes that "sometimes female 'fright' says
more about despair than what happened to Sacramento" (Kazin, 194). Apropos of *Play It As It Lays*, he writes: "[Didion's] real subject is the individual woman who is mysteriously a torment to herself" (Kazin, 195). And of her first three books in general, and the theme of the center not holding, he observes that "the 'center' is that inner space, that moral realm" (Kazin, 198). This issue of properly locating the "center" deserves attention. It is related both to the metaphor of narrative ("the narrative on which we grew up") and to that of home.

Kazin seems to feel that Didion should be more aware of the possibility that the center is "inner space." (Bright Book of Life, it should be pointed out, was written when Didion had only three books to her credit.) The term "inner space" is sufficiently vague as to make us uncertain whether or not it refers to any perceived intention of Didion's, so it is possible that Kazin's remark is intended to be prescriptive. Then, too, the "center" in "The Second Coming" is an ambiguous and suggestive concept. It suggests a cultural center, a moral center, even a psychological center. The "widening gyre" describes an orbit, which suggests a planet-like quality, and makes one imagine the world. Also, the historical context of the poem, from which the twentieth-century
mind draws the meaning of the ambiguous allusions in the poem ("the best lack all conviction, while the worst/Are full of passionate intensity," for example) is clearly western civilization as it moves from a period of economic disaster and political turbulence into the nightmare of the second world war. And yet Yeats is describing, in terms that will seem like mere truisms to future generations, a moral disaster that transcends the merely social, a terrifying invasion of "inner space." Perhaps it is the image of the unheard falconer in the center of the "gyre" as much as the overt echoes of Christianity in the title and in the closing lines that give this poem the power to frighten even a fallen Christian fifty years after the political and social upheavals that seem to have inspired it. The poem's "personal" effect, in other words, has outlasted its "political" one. In the same way as Yeats in this poem, Didion seems to be highly sensitive to political and social upheaval, to the fabric of her particular place and time, and yet, after she has transformed experience into literature, it has this quality of being ultimately personal, rather than political and social. Her "center", like that of Yeats, is complex and seems even more personal, which makes it difficult to understand. Moreover, the synthetic processes of Didion's mind
tend to confound our ability to write an evaluation of her work that does not seem to contradict itself in every other line. "The lady is a moralist in an old-fashioned tradition," Mr. Kazin writes. "She feels 'intellectually,' she lays it all out, and somehow it is all so mod, empty, American, that you feel for her" (Kazin, 192). Old-fashioned mod. Feeling intellectually. Moralism that leaves you worrying about the author, not yourself. This is an impression of contradiction.

Perhaps we can understand these contradictions by trying to determine precisely what it means to refer to Didion as an old-fashioned moralist. Let us consider some contrasts. From our vantage point in the 1980s, Dickens looks like an old-fashioned moralist. But Dickens lived in a society that was homogeneous and culturally unified to a degree that ours never has been; moreover, the greatest influence of that cultural unity on Dickens's moralism was a deeply felt Christianity that could be taken for granted by both the author and his readers. Later, George Orwell, powerfully influenced by Dickens and yet writing in a time when, according to his own conviction, religious belief was passé, substituted a belief in democratic socialism for Dickens' Christianity. He was disillusioned by Russian totalitarianism and by the hypocritical
pacifism of those who should have been his allies, and out of that disillusionment he produced his greatest works, which were also his lasting moral lessons: the distopias and "Politics and the English Language." In our time, Didion, who refers in The White Album to having "reread all of George Orwell" (13), is a writer who virtually never mentions religion except as a kind of outdated metaphor and who expresses no faith whatsoever in political solutions of any kind. On what basis, then, does her moralism rest? And can it be called "old-fashioned" if it rejects both religion and politics?

Didion herself is coy about her beliefs. A novelist need not be a philosopher, but it is strange to think of a "moralist" who is reluctant to state her moral principles. Again, by way of contrast, Didion is more reticent than those novelists and prose stylists who are sometimes considered as having influenced her, such as Camus and Hemingway. This reticence is seen in her fiction, rather than in her commentary. If we compare the thematic functions of Didion's fictional characters to those of characters created by either Camus or Hemingway, it seems clear that, unlike a Mersault or a Nick Adams, there is no character in Didion's work whose existential response to life is as "full" (in her own way) as
is the response of the author herself—whose work is her response. It would not say much for Didion's moralism if we believed that Didion herself was no more in control of her novels than her heroines are in control of their lives. Even her strongest characters are people who do not have any idea of how to respond to life. They do not go down wishing for howls of execration; they do not know how to fish the stream. Alfred Kazin found Lily Knight McClellan to be authentic precisely because she was "not on top of things" (Kazin, 196); and Didion's later heroines are similarly submerged (although Grace Strasser-Mendana makes perhaps the most valiant of futile efforts to make sense of the "shifting phantasmagoria").

Clearly, Didion is superior to her characters. Moreover, a character like Maria Wyeth is not only a less capable person than the author, but she is less capable than ourselves as well (and in most reading experiences, the reader identifies with the author he or she imagines). This makes Didion an ironist, according to Northrop Frye's definition of the ironic mode, and the more deeply we get into irony as a mode, the more difficult it is to talk about "old-fashioned moralism." Irony, in Frye's sense, is related to
absurdity, and absurdity is an absence of values, whereas "old-fashioned moralism" rests on solid values of some sort.

My argument, to this point, has been that values can be inferred from Didion's work, but the problem we are encountering here is the problem of how and where those values are blocked. We can see that they are blocked when, proceeding from this impression that Didion is in some way an old-fashioned moralist, we look for the sources of her values in the traditional places--religion (as in Dickens) or politics (as in Orwell). It is religion, or some substitute for it, that creates that "inner space" Kazin speaks of, and it is politics that, theoretically, provides a practical outlet for the social conscience in a democratic society. Didion, as far as I can tell, has virtually no religion and no politics. (I am speaking of orthodox religion here; Didion claims to be "quite religious in a certain way" and it is that "way" that I shall discuss later on.) The various dilemmas she describes and her nostalgia seem, rather, to form a meditation on her own awareness of this fact.

Let us consider first this absence of orthodox religion in her work and what it means. This is pertinent if we are interested in whether or not the center which is not holding is really an "inner
space" rather than a regional home or a society palpably going to
seed. It is true that organized religious bodies tend to exert
political influence--one thinks of the pope's world tours, or of
black Baptist churches and civil rights, or of the agenda of
evangelical groups for the New Right, just to cite contemporary
examples--but traditionally, one of the functions of religion for
the individual has been to create for him an allegiance which is
different from, and superior to, all other allegiances; i.e. the
allegiance to one's God, for the religious person, always overrules
worldly allegiances, whenever the two conflict. How much of this
religious allegiance translates into a transfer of power from
political leaders to churchmen depends to some extent on religious
denomination: Protestants are traditionally less willing to accept
the authority of their own religious leaders than are Catholics,
for example. (This is of course what made them Protestants in the
first place.) And even when one's allegiance to God denies the
moral authority of all other human beings, the belief still carries
political weight, in some cases precisely because the religious
hierarchy is also a "political" one. It was not Caesar who
positively condemned Jesus for failing to render him his due, but
the rabbis. Political consequences notwithstanding, however, the
primary personal or psychological function of religious belief seems to be the creation of an "inner space," of an illusion of invulnerability, or of an impregnable silent spiritual sanctuary which stands apart not only from authority but from time and space. It is the ultimate freedom, for it is a freedom not only from other people but from oneself. It seems that the achievement of this sense of silent sanctuary is by definition a religious act, regardless of whether or not one employs the word "God" in connection with it. Therefore, when we speak of inner space as something separate from the world, we are speaking of that silent sanctuary of the individual, arrived at by religious experience, however we define a religious experience. And when we imply that the identification of the "center" ought to be with this personal/impersonal sanctuary, we imply also the belief that such a sanctuary is attainable; or else we imply that the artist ought to be bemoaning a loss which can never be recouped.

For a writer in the 1960s, it may still have been appropriate to proceed on Yeats's assumption that the center was not holding, but for a writer in the 1980s it seems truer to assume that the center has already slipped. Didion's early career lies on the cusp of these periods. She was born in 1934, when democratic socialism...
and perhaps even God were still possible. She remembers World War II, in which the Allies were, by universal consensus. In the Right. But her writing career got into full swing during the Viet Nam era. The White Album chronicles the end of the sixties, a period of turmoil and transition that may have been the death throes of old-fashioned moralism. And Didion's attachment to landscape and to the past, the characteristics of her work leading up to The White Album, is her nearest approximation to religious experience; it is a certain kind of holy worldliness in place of an otherworldliness or a non-worldliness that is no longer possible.

The impulse toward Oneness in Run River, that novel's obsessive and incantatory evocation of place—these are impulses toward sanctuary. The essays in Slouching Towards Bethlehem that seek to find meaning and permanence in the concept of home describe failed attempts to find what religion used to give us. But these themes and motifs are not offered as overtly religious themes and motifs. The center has slipped; there is no "inner space;" one attaches oneself to the world out there.

Politics and the English Language

Of the books discussed in the first three chapters of this study, it is, ironically, Play It As It Lays that has the most
overtly "religious" motif: in Chapter 77, for example, Maria tells a significant anecdote about a man who walked out of his housetrailer to talk to God and died of a rattlesnake bite. Similarly, Maria no longer asks questions, because she has gotten the answer, and the answer is nothing. She was bitten by the rattlesnake. One thinks of this rattlesnake—this serpent—when she says, in Chapter 82, that "if Carter and Helene aren't careful they'll get the answer too" (Play It As It Lays, 210).

Religion, as an ironic motif, has not been dealt a death blow with Play It As It Lays, because the next novel is entitled A Book of Common Prayer. But home has been cleared off the map, and home was the substitute for God. The White Album begins to shift the emphasis away from the implied concept of sanctuary to the more overtly-handled subject of politics. (Dickens doesn't work, so try Orwell.) The essays in this collection are variously dated from 1968 to 1978, and came out in book form in 1979. (A Book of Common Prayer appeared in 1977, but I shall deal with that novel in the next chapter.) This is a belated interment of the sixties, and most of these seventies essays are marked by the same stunned quietude that marked that more recent decade—the essays on architecture, for example. More important, one notices the same
deliberate quietism of that decade when the subject of politics arises.

In this regard, her definition of herself as a child of the fifties is significant. Didion reverses the claims usually made about the fifties and sixties generations: she holds that college students in the fifties were politically quiescent not from naivete, as is normally claimed, but from too much sophistication about the way of the world. It is in fact naive, she implies, to think that political activism produces any improvement in the lot of human beings, because—to recall Auden's phrase—error is bred in the bone. "If I could believe," she writes, "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" (208). She admits that her generation was dispirited and "historically irrelevant," but at the same time they were the last generation to "identify with adults." "We were silent because the exhilaration of social action seemed to many of us just one more way of escaping the personal, of masking for a while that dread of the meaningless which was man's fate" (206-207).
Similarly, Didion’s attitude toward the women’s movement is one that claims the high ground of moral sophistication, while taking a tone of condescension to those who would favor political activism. She refers to “the coarsening of moral imagination to which such social idealism so often leads,” to “Stalinist thinking,” to “these high-strung idealists,” to a “litany of trivia” that did not do justice to the more “grave and awesome” feminism of de Beauvoir. Lesbian factions in the movement reveal its tendency toward aversion to adult sexual life; the movement’s enthusiasts are virtual children who want “not a revolution, but ‘romance’ and ‘fun.’”

These remarks begin to sound more than anything else like the Orwellian hatred of the language of “the party line,” of fervid political reformism—except that Orwell believed in reform. Orwell held progressive political ideals in combination with a keen moral sense and a desire to preserve the meanings of words. The concern for, and outrage on behalf of the working class and the poor that he saw in Dickens, and that he himself felt from having lived among those people, was something he wanted to translate into practical reality. But the political movements which claimed to speak in the interests of the working class used a dialect he could not stomach,
one with which they corrupted themselves. Yet he never lost sight of the goals of socialism. Didion, in her hatred of the rhetoric of the women's movement, shows no concern for the goals of feminism, never really taking them seriously. "The creation of [a] revolutionary 'class' was from the virtual beginning the 'idea' of the women's movement," she writes in her opening paragraph. The sarcasm in the quotation marks is evident. Yet even with this basic dissimilarity between Didion and Orwell (and we must not overlook the fact that feminism and socialism are two different issues), points of comparison remain. Just as Orwell's deep-rooted moralism held its purity by a rigorous attention to rhetoric, so Didion sees the purity of the "moral imagination" connected to the inherent exigencies of good fiction. This purity is compromised by activist feminists who, blinded by ideology, practice literary criticism without knowing what fiction is all about: "the idea that fiction has certain irreducible ambiguities seemed never to occur to these women, nor should it have, for fiction is in most ways hostile to ideology" (112). Orwell claimed that Stalinism produces bad art; Didion claims that the Stalinist thinking of the feminists produces bad criticism. One senses more strongly here than in the moral hauteur of Didion's claims for the generation of the 1950s
the almost antisocial enthusiasm that springs from a romance with
the love of truth—she surely goes further than Orwell would have.
Yet she seems less pessimistic delivering this precisely targeted
(and stronger) polemic than in the sweeping skepticism toward all
political action; at least in "The Women's Movement," she is
defending the integrity of certain ideas: the gravity of de
Beauvoir, heterosexuality, the catholicity of fiction.

Didion's criticism of Doris Lessing is an extension of her
views of 1960s activism and of strident feminism. For her taste,
Lessing is too enamored of ideas, and this makes her a deliberate
deliberate style, of "writing well." Ms. Lessing writes "a torrent
of fiction that increasingly seems conceived in a stubborn rage
against the very idea of fiction" (119). Her impulse is not so
much toward art, but toward "final solutions," an impulse which is
"the guiding delusion of her time" (125). More and more, as we
follow this theme of politics and the English language in these
essays, we begin to sense that we are in fact getting a defense of
the historically irrelevant and quiescent 1950s generation. Moral
integrity is not to be found in causes; artistic integrity is not
to be achieved by "collaring" an idea and "worrying it with
Victorian doggedness," as Lessing does (119). (Didion is careful,
however, not to accuse Lessing of any sort of incompetence. Rather, Lessing is too much a product of her time—that is, of the present time. She is admirable in her tenacity, but on the wrong track, looking for those final solutions.)

The irony in all this is that the novel toward which Didion's fascination with politics and language leads—*Democracy*—resembles Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* in its interruptions of narrative line. Technically—and we shall examine this novel at length in Chapter 6—the breakdown of narrative in *Democracy* is more severe, more "symptomatic" (to use Didion's term) and in that sense less artistic than in the Lessing novel. Both *Democracy* and *The Golden Notebook* are books about self-knowledge, and both use the idea of narrative to explore this theme, but *The Golden Notebook* does so more successfully.

The seeds of *Democracy* lie in *The White Album*'s partial shift away from romantic symbols for spiritual experience—nature and home—and toward politics as both subject and symbol (although politics does not actually become symbolic until we get to *A Book of Common Prayer*). It is a subject that interests Didion as a writer, yet one toward which she feels some revulsion. It becomes clear, in essays such as "Bureaucrats," "Good Citizens," and "The
Women's Movement," that politics is the realm of the incompetent, the dishonest, the intellectually slipshod, and the morally irresponsible. Tens of millions of dollars are spent on programs that increase freeway accidents. Political ideas are couched in "borrowed rhetoric" and "reduced to choices between the good (equality is good) and the bad (genocide is bad)" (86)—Orwellian echoes here. Frequent examples of the absurd language of public relations foreshadow similar satirical elements in Democracy: "Fake the nip," a cameraman tells Nancy Reagan at her rhododendron bush in Sacramento, during her husband's tenure as governor—this is only the funniest example.

Adding to these intimations of Didion's distaste for political life, there is her association of the idea of "democracy" with mediocrity, plebeian bad taste, and even with something menacing. The new governor's mansion outside Sacramento, built at taxpayer expense by Governor Reagan but never lived in, is "... a monument not to colossal ego but to a weird absence of ego, a case study in the architecture of limited possibilities, insistently and malevolently 'democratic,' flattened out, mediocre and 'open' and as devoid of privacy or personal eccentricity as the lobby area in a Ramada Inn. It is the architecture of 'background music,'
decorators, 'good taste'" (see "Many Mansions," 69). The "malevolence" has to be seen as arising from the new mansion's contrast to the old one on H Street, which is much more appealing to the literary imagination, particularly the Victorian literary imagination:

The bedrooms are big and private and high-ceilinged and they do not open on the swimming pool and one can imagine reading in one of them, or writing a book, or closing the door and crying until dinner. The bathrooms are big and airy and they do not have bidets but they do have room for hampers, and dressy tables, and chairs on which to sit and read a story to a child in the bathtub. There are hallways wide and narrow, stairs front and back, sewing rooms, ironing rooms, secret rooms. On the gilt mirror in the library there is worked a bust of Shakespeare, a pretty fancy for a hardware merchant in a California farm town in 1877. In the kitchen there is no trash compactor and there is no "island" with the appliances built in but there are two pantries, and a nice old table with a marble top for rolling out pastry and making divinity fudge and chocolate leaves.

--72.

It is this Victorian world of divinity fudge and secret rooms that is threatened by modern "democracy."

Didion's attitude in "Many Mansions" is uncharacteristically forthright. (Explicit and simply-expressed opinions are something Didion did not pick up from Orwell.) Of the new mansion, the one
that replaces the fine old example of "eccentric domestic architecture" described above, Didion writes this as her final sentence: "I have seldom seen a house so evocative of the unspeakable" (73). It is a sentence that attaches itself somewhat loosely to its paragraph, one that does not sound like Didion. Yet it does sound like a Victorian matron's disapproval.

The next essay in the collection, "The Getty," is somewhat more characteristically ambiguous. It describes a wide trench of aesthetic disagreement between "elitist" critics of the museum on the one hand (the adjective is J. Paul Getty's) and an unlikely coalition of "the very rich and the people who distrust them least" on the other—and leaves us wondering with whom our sympathies are supposed to lie. "On the whole," Didion writes, "'the critics' subscribe to the romantic view of man's possibilities, but 'the public' does not" (78). Thus, the Getty museum's likeness to an ancient monument in its pre-antiquated stage is a debunking of the nobility of our cultural past which the public can accept, while the critics seem not only romantic, but irrelevant—in short, the way Didion is wont to describe herself in other essays, not that she is siding with the critics here. At the same time, she tells us that the museum, as an "illustrated lesson in classical doubt,"
is "a profoundly unpopular political statement" (76), at least in the dining rooms of the nouveau-riche. "To mention this museum in the more enlightened of those very dining rooms it is said to resemble is to invite a kind of nervous derision, as if the place were a local hoax, a perverse and deliberate affront to the understated good taste and general class of everyone at the table" (74). Whatever Didion may think, one wonders whether the sneering nouveau-riche are worse than the gawking crowds who have no sense of the museum's supposed tackiness and who care not a whit for a romantic conception of the nobility of mankind. The emphasis in the essay seems almost too subtle. Or perhaps we are so pre-conditioned, as humanists in a political age, to interpret as pejorative phrases such as "the very rich and the people who distrust them least" that we are prevented from seeing what may otherwise be obvious: that Didion (in this essay, at least) has a feudal mind. In that case, she is anti-intellectual here, siding with the very rich and the people against the "elitists." But if this is so, then "democracy" is not malevolent, as it was in "Many Mansions." Here, the masses enjoy the right kind of period piece, whereas they did not in "Many Mansions"; there, it is the romantic elite who rightly prefer stairways and closed doors, while the
masses seemed (how prophetic!) to be waiting to line up behind
Nancy Reagan in matters of taste. Consider this passage from "Many
Mansions":

. . . the house [new governor's mansion] is not Jerry
Brown's style, not Mary McGrory's style, not our
style--and it is a point which presents a certain
problem, since the house so clearly is the style not only
of Jerry Brown's predecessor but of millions of Jerry
Brown's constituents.
. . . I have seldom seen a house so evocative of the
unspeakable. [italics mine]
--73.

It is not necessary, of course, for a writer of magazine
articles to take care that her views are consistent in every detail
from one article to the next. And therefore, when such articles
are collected into a book, we are perhaps being unreasonable to
look for such consistency. It is not consistency qua consistency
that should interest us, but some sort of coherent feeling or
stance toward the themes that increasingly come into play in
Didion's work: political and public life in America, and a sense
of "the way we live now". The cracks in Democracy should concern
us, not the hairline fractures in The White Album. For my taste,
Didion can do little wrong when she is writing non-fiction. But
if, by her own analysis, our age is hostile to the modes of
thinking and writing in which she feels most comfortable, if the bureaucratic zombies who run our world are immune to morality and have successfully demolished the value of narrative, then the question for Didion is: what is the best response? I do not think Democracy is the best response.

Perhaps Didion's pervasive sense of her own irrelevance, and her increasing sense of the irrelevance of (especially) fictional narrative, are indeed the feelings of a Victorian novelist trapped in the nuclear age, the political age. But if this means that she must become a caustic critic of the nuclear age, the fact is that her criticisms come off much better in the form of report and commentary than in frustrated fiction. It is more honest and more purgative to plainly state that "writing has not...helped me to see what it means" (48) than to write a novel that hates itself for being a novel. It would be silly to propose that a novelist of Didion's talent confine herself to non-fiction, but, at least in my view, Salvador is a better book than either of her two most recent novels.

The Success of Narrative in Salvador

Salvador, published in 1983, is a book with the inherently limited interest of all topical journalism, as well as the great
advantage of having at its center the most compelling narrative voice and "character" Didion has ever used (up until Democracy, when the voice and character fail), namely her own voice and herself. The book's prose is characteristically dense, its concentration on subject is unfltering; there are no unconvincing details such as the minor but unnecessary moment in "The White Album" when Didion drives across the Carquinez Straits with her eyes closed. The predicament in El Salvador is so grave and so apparently hopeless that Didion's occasional tic of enthusiasm for her own despair is not so sharply thrown into relief. Here at last is a subject equal to her own penchant for apocalypse.

This fact affects the theme of narrative's irrelevance. In The White Album we are told and periodically reminded that the ordering principle inherent in narrative is no longer valid because in our time "disorder is its own point." One cannot judiciously cull meaning from experience when the meaning of experience is that there is no meaning. So one becomes an ironist, an observer of absurdities. But in El Salvador, the presence of constant mortal danger makes even irony irrelevant. The idea of narrative's outdatedness is, after all, only an idea, and ideas begin to seem trivial in a landscape where all one's alertness must be reserved
for not making any wrong moves. Thus, after Didion has described
San Salvador's Metrocenter, "Central America's Largest Shopping
Mall," complete with Muzak and shoppers in Sergio Valente jeans,
she senses and rejects the flavor of cleverness in her own
observations:

This was a shopping center that embodied the future
for which El Salvador was presumably being saved, and I
wrote it down dutifully, this being the kind of "color" I
knew how to interpret, the kind of inductive irony, the
detail that was supposed to illuminate the story. As I
wrote it down I realized that I was no longer much
interested in this kind of irony, that this was a story
that would perhaps not be illuminated at all, that this
was perhaps even less a "story" than a true noche
obscuro. As I waited to cross back over the Boulevard de
los Heroes to the Camino Real I noticed soldiers herding
a young civilian into a van, their guns at the boy's
back, and I walked straight ahead, not wanting to see
anything at all.

--Salvador⁶

One can't help but feel that Didion did the only thing she could do
in ignoring the apparently doomed civilian, in walking straight
ahead and pretending not to see; it is this kind of necessary
attention to self-preservation, moreover, that makes "inductive
irony" seem a kind of unfunny joke. And this realization has the
beneficial effect of eliminating Didion's tendency toward artistic
self-consciousness. Normally, her self-consciousness is
interesting, as it often is in the work of a good writer, but here it would be inappropriate. And without it, Didion succeeds in producing a book which effectively uses narrative to make a political and moral statement—a fact which belies the despair concerning all three.

Judging from her career up to Salvador, it is clear that Didion is peculiarly qualified to write this account. El Salvador is, one might say, the country that Didion has imagined in the more nightmarish of her previous writings (including A Book of Common Prayer). It is a truly phantasmagoric place, where the only thing one can count on is death and mutilation. It creates a pervasive sense of menace, with no sanctuary. There is much more missing here than simply the values of psychological home (although I do want to discuss that issue in a moment). Didion accounts precisely for what is missing in this country, and we get a clear sense of what she calls the "exact mechanism of terror" (21).

The exact mechanism of terror ultimately involves the total breakdown of cultural values, including linguistic values. The absence of such things as Salvadoran cultural heroes, definite meanings of words, history (or at least one other than la matanza), native crafts, a safe church, intellectual life—the absence of all
these things, together with the presence of American advertising
diction and American and Salvadoran officials with various Catch-22
policies, resembles the kind of insane and doomed superimposition
of one culture upon another that we have seen in earlier
anti-colonial literature by British writers: Heart of Darkness, A
Passage to India, Orwell's "Shooting An Elephant." The greatest
horror of the situation is reminiscent of the great irony of
Kurtz's last words in the Congo, because it is that El Salvador, as
it really is, is incomprehensible to (North) Americans. Those
Americans, like former ambassador Robert White, who try to tell
what they have seen will be speaking what is "untranslatable"
(103). White's words "continued to fall upon the ears of his
auditors [in Congress] as signals from space, unthinkable,
inconceivable, dim impulses from a black hole" (102).

A question that follows from this line of inquiry is why
narrative, moralism, and political statement should succeed for
Didion in Salvador when they are so problematical in other works,
particularly Democracy. The most obvious reason is that the reader
brings different (and usually fewer) expectations to non-fiction
than to fiction. I am not sure that the point gets lost in
Democracy, but then I am not so sure what the "point" is in that
novel. I know that my feelings for a story are frustrated when I read it. With Salvador, I do not expect a "story," only facts, details to fill in a context which is already in place from my having followed news stories. And Didion is always good with details, particularly physical details.

So a ready-made context helps to explain why moral and political statement succeed in Salvador. The success of narrative is related to the success of moral and political statement, (which will be discussed shortly) but there is also the matter that I have referred to above as Didion's self-consciousness. As I have tried to show, Salvador is unique in presenting a situation in which the stakes for the author converge with those of the main character. (And this does not have to be true simply because author and main character happen to be the same person. I am not so sure it is true inMailer's Armies of the Night, for example.) The total concentration required to stay alive, while it is not an absence of self (Didion was very conscious of what she said and did in life-threatening situations), is a form of total seriousness. The restraint on one's tendency to comment, to over-emphasize the ironic detail, comes from this sense of seriousness in the presence of mortal (and moral) danger.
Also, narrative holds up in Salvador because it is still a method and not a metaphor. In the essay "The White Album" and in Democracy, narrative is presented as a device relying on a belief in cause and effect and which does not work because there are no causal relations. Thus, narrative is a metaphor for order, the way "home" is a metaphor for one's values. Both represent the center that does not hold. But in Salvador some things (such as the "exact mechanism of terror") are analyzed so that one can see causal connections. The narrative style, too, suffers no frequent and bumpy interruptions, as it does in Democracy and in the essay "The White Album." Didion uses long paragraphs of mellifluous prose in this book. Even though language has gone to seed in El Salvador and in Washington, D.C., Didion has not yet given up on her own ability to use narrative prose to describe that process. Nevertheless, there is a metaphor for an implacable unreason. This metaphor is the setting.

The Heart of Darkness

In the general absence of tourists these hotels have since been abandoned, ghost resorts on the empty Pacific beaches, and to land at this airport built to service them is to plunge directly into a state in which no ground is solid, no depth of field reliable, no perception so definite that it might not dissolve into its reverse.

The only logic is that of acquiescence.

--13.
June was wet. The Rio Seco seemed doubtful. Everything about the day ahead, on the morning I started for Cotera, seemed doubtful, and that I set out on such a venture with a real lightening of the spirit suggests to me now how powerfully I wanted to get out of San Salvador, to spend a day free of its ambiguous tension, its overcast, its mood of wary somnambulism.

---40.

The metaphorical element in these descriptions is implied by such images as an unsolid ground, a perception dissolving into its reverse, or a wary somnambulist. The mood of the place and even the country's physical details represent the doubt and fear of the observer, the impossibility of certainty and meaning for her while there. In the following passage, an actual shift in visual perspective nearly becomes a trope (my italics show where) as Didion leaves San Salvador in an airplane.

---41.

Once in the air I was struck, as always in Salvador, by the miniature aspect of the country, an entire republic smaller than some California counties... the very circumstance that has encouraged the illusion that the place can be managed, salvaged, a kind of pilot project, like TVA. There below us in a twenty-five-minute flight lay half the country, a landscape already densely green from the rains that had begun in May, intensely cultivated, deceptively rich, the coffee spreading down every ravine, the volcanic ranges looming abruptly and then receding. I watched the slopes of the mountains for signs of fighting but saw none. I watched for the hydroelectric works on the Lempa but saw only the blown bridge.
Looking at the country from a height conveys the illusion of manageable\-\-\-ility. The last two sentences seem to contradict one another as that manageable\-\-\-ility appears possible, then doubtful. Both sentences show Didion’s mind searching for meaning in external signs.

Allusions to Conrad also suggest the validity of place as metaphor. Didion uses a passage from Heart of Darkness as an epigraph, the one describing Kurtz’s report for the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs. In this passage, Marlow refers to Kurtz’s "unbounded power of eloquence," and his "burning noble words":

...There were no practical hints to interrupt the magic current of phrases, unless a kind of note at the foot of the last page, scrawled evidently much later, in an unsteady hand, may be regarded as the exposition of a method. It was very simple, and at the end of that moving appeal to every altruistic sentiment it blazed at you, luminous and terrifying, like a flash of lightning in a serene sky: "Exterminate all the brutes!"

The passage itself actually has more to do with language than place, but it helps to create a context of El Salvador as a metaphor for the dark heart of man. This context is reinforced by allusions to Heart of Darkness in the text:
This was one of those occasional windows that open onto the heart of El Salvador and then close, a glimpse of the impenetrable interior.

--49.

In many ways race remains the ineffable element at the heart of this particular darkness...

--74.

In other ways, the metaphor of place in Salvador has connections to Didion's interest in frontier history generally:

...El Salvador had always been a frontier, even before the Spaniards arrived. The great Mesoamerican cultures penetrated this far south only shallowly. The great South American cultures thrust this far north only sporadically. There is a sense in which the place remains marked by the meanness and discontinuity of all frontier history, by a certain frontier proximity to the cultural zero.

--73.

The similarity of the last sentence of this description to her earlier description of the San Bernardino valley in "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream" is not a fluke. Didion is habitually drawn to the unstable and unsettled locale, the "frontier," where the combination of human ambition and lack of cultural values produce nightmarish realities. Her description of El Salvador's history as "a record of insensate ambitions and their accidental consequences"
might equally apply to some of her essays about her home state in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*. Earthquakes are another fact of life in El Salvador that is reminiscent of North America's west coast:

For the several hours that preceded the earthquake I had been seized by the kind of amorphous bad mood that my grandmother believed an adjunct of what is called in California "earthquake weather," a sultriness, a stillness, an unnatural light; the jitters. In fact there was no particular prescience about my bad mood, since it is always earthquake weather in San Salvador, and the jitters are endemic.

--52.

The point, however, is not that El Salvador is like California, but that instability is the element Didion sees in both places, and which she then makes seem a part of the physical geography of each place.

**The Impossibility of Psychological Home**

In other ways, it is clear that Salvador is not like California, or any place in North America. Didion (or any North American with basic human values) could never feel at home in El Salvador. We have mentioned El Salvador's cultural shortcomings, among which is the lack of any sort of ennobling traditions or
history. The "insensate ambitions" referred to above and the lines on frontier history are quotations from a passage in which we learn that "the country's history as a republic seems devoid of shared purpose or unifying event" and "its three centuries as a colony seem blanker still" (72). The idea we will encounter in A Book of Common Prayer, that history in Central America is something shaped by individuals for their own purposes, is found also in Salvador, to some extent. That we are given the history of la matanza, the massacre of 1932, by the grandson of the dictator responsible for it ("The general had been, he said, sometimes misunderstood" p. 55) shows a definite lack of scholarly consensus and objectivity. History, like language itself is more malleable than we would like. ("La verdad" as used by female supporters of ARENA, the right-wing party, means "the truth according to Roberto D'Aubuisson.") Language and history go together, of course, and current events are no more certain than bygone historical events.

In the absence of information (and the presence, often, of disinformation) even the most apparently straightforward event takes on, in El Salvador, elusive shadows, like a fragment of retrieved legend.

—67.
Part of the reason for the absence of information is that the truth is dangerous. Uncertain intrigues make it dangerous even for the President of El Salvador to try to get information about a helicopter crash from the pilot of the helicopter, as Didion learns:

Where exactly had the helicopter crashed? "I didn't ask him." I looked at President Magana, and he shrugged. "This is very delicate," he said. "I have a problem there. I'm supposed to be the commander-in-chief, so if I ask him, he should tell me. But he might say he's not going to tell me, then I would have to arrest him. So I don't ask."

--69.

If history is defined by interested individuals, and if tomorrow is uncertain, it is not surprising that the national memory in El Salvador is short.

... time itself tends to contract to the here and now. History is la matanza, and then current events, which recede even as they happen... "We think in five-year horizons," the economic officer at the American embassy told me one day. "Anything beyond that is evolution." He was talking about not having what he called "the luxury of the long view," but there is a real sense in which the five-year horizons of the American embassy constitute the longest view taken in El Salvador, either forward or back.

--71-72.

Clearly, there is no worthwhile link to the past for the people of El Salvador, and the idea that one might feel close to
nature there seems absurd to someone reading this account. There
is no way to get away from the bodies, whether in town or in rural
areas. They are dropped in lakes and fields. Bodies, or pieces of
them, "turn up. . . everywhere," and vultures appear to suggest
their presence. Here is part of Didion's description of Puerta del
Diablo, a view site near a park which, according to the magazine of
El Salvador's national airline, offers "excellent subjects for
color photography":

Puerta del Diablo is a "view site" in an older and
distinctly literary tradition, nature as lesson, an
immense cleft rock through which half of El Salvador
seems framed, a site so romantic and "mystical," so
theatrically sacrificial in aspect, that it might be a
cosmic parody of nineteenth-century landscape painting.
The place presents itself as pathetic fallacy: the sky
"broods," the stones "weep," a constant seepage of water
weighting the ferns and moss. The foliage is thick and
slick with moisture. The only sound is a steady buzz, I
believe of cicadas.

--20.

Puerta del Diablo is an execution site and body dump.

Didion does not go into great detail about family life, but it
is clear that families are threatened, whether their members are
close or not. "To be related to someone killed in El Salvador is a
prima facie death warrant, and families tend to vanish," she writes
(46). The extermination of the indigenous population is, in a way,
an attack on a family and on a tradition—perhaps even on an element of nature, if one wanted to stretch a point. La matanza of 1932 was, in fact, largely genocidal in nature. An entire generation of Indians in several villages was lost.

Political and Moral Assessment

In conversation about this book, and in reviews of it, one sometimes encounters the view that Didion has failed to come through with a strong-enough indictment of American policy in El Salvador. But if Salvador disappoints some readers, it is because they expect Didion to provide a political solution without also taking into account the ineffable qualities of the country she is dealing with. Didion's moral view cannot confine itself to what she would consider a simplistic political prescription. Moreover, her assessment of the problem is probably more accurate than that of someone with a political axe to grind: she sees America's involvement in Salvador as arising out of profound ignorance, rather than malevolence:

At the heart of the American effort there was something of the familiar ineffable, as if it were taking place not in El Salvador but in a mirage of El Salvador, the mirage of a society not unlike our own but "sick," a temporarily fevered republic in which the antibodies of democracy needed only to be encouraged, in which words had stable
meanings north and south. . . and in which there existed, waiting to be tapped by our support, some latent good will.

--96.

Surely there is some truth to this view that our policy is wrong, doomed because of our inveterate ethnocentrism, our failure to take into account the deep cultural differences between El Salvador and our own country, our belief that the disease will go away if we only provide the right amount of vaccine for it. Didion's view is political in the sense that it clearly opposes the nature (primarily military) of current U.S. involvement. But finally her view is more moral than political. For this reason, she ends the book with a description of her meeting with a young evangelical missionary. He is one of several student missionaries which her Miami-bound airplane picks up on a stopover in Belize--"sallow children from the piney woods of Georgia and Alabama who had been teaching the people of Belize . . . to know Jesus as their personal savior" (106). The missionary is "perhaps twenty, with three hundred years of American hill stock in his features . . . This was la solucion not from Washington or Panama or Mexico but from Belize, and the piney woods of Georgia" (107). This episode represents Didion's awareness of the cultural roots of morality,
and of the tendency of human beings to believe that their own culture is the only one that matters. Everything that we know of Didion's attitude toward politics and morality is consistent with this sort of conclusion. And she could hardly be expected to believe in a political "solution," faced with such implacable truths about morality and human nature as these.
Chapter 5. A Book of Common Prayer

Point of View and Setting

The point of view in A Book of Common Prayer has a relationship not only to Didion's concerns about the validity of narrative but to the novel's setting. Furthermore, there are two relationships to place represented by Grace Strasser-Mendana and Charlotte Douglas, and it will help clarify those relationships to first explain the narrative relationship between the two women.

A Book of Common Prayer is about Grace's attempt to understand Charlotte's life by narrating it. Allusions aside, it is a "common prayer" because the story depicts both Charlotte's attempt to be faithful to a maternal ideal, and Grace's attempt to be a good "witness" for Charlotte. "I will be her witness," Grace says1, a declaration with a religious connotation. And the image of Charlotte calling out Marin's name at her death also has a
religious quality to it, because we are told that she did this rather than calling out to God (276). As readers, we are concerned with both "prayers," but Grace's narration distances us emotionally from Charlotte's story. We do not identify with Charlotte because, according to Grace, she is deluded (see p. 4). Our identification is with Grace, and thus our concern is with the success or failure of Grace's attempt to understand Charlotte: whether or not Grace "succeeds" in understanding her, we expect to learn something from, or be entertained by, the attempt.

Mark Royden Winchell has identified this novel's point of view as "typical Conradian," a term borrowed from Scholes and Kellogg. This classification is appropriate, since Grace is sometimes an eyewitness, sometimes a receiver of hearsay accounts, and is someone who extrapolates and speculates, much like Conrad's Marlow, and with the same capacity for suspect judgments. Grace, however, is much less sure of herself than Marlow often is, less willing to philosophize; she judges, but is skeptical of her own judgments, like Joan Didion.

If Grace sounds like Didion, it is no coincidence. In an interview for the New York Times Book Review, Didion said of Common Prayer: "I had not intended there to be a narrator. I was going to
be the female author's voice. I the author was going to tell you the reader the story. But the 'I' became so strong that it became a character..." In other words, Didion began *A Book of Common Prayer* by intending to use the point of view she eventually does use in *Democracy*, but because the narrator "became so strong," she became Grace, a character-narrator--the point of view became Conradian. We want to understand what it means to say that the "I" became so strong that it became a character. To this end, we might want to cast ahead momentarily to *Democracy*, because in that novel Didion--the-author does in fact tell us--the-readers the story. So the "Joan Didion of Welbeck Street" who narrates *Democracy* will be "weaker" somehow than Grace is. We find, in fact, that the function of the point of view in *Democracy* is neither clearly to make the narrator part of the traditional dramatic convention of "let's pretend," nor to consistently focus the reader's attention on the problems of constructing a narrative. Sometimes the narrator enacts the author with literary hammer and nails in hand, as when she says, "nothing in this situation encourages the basic narrative assumption, which is that the past is prologue to the present...". And at other times the author enacts the role of character and eyewitness narrator, as, for example, when she
mentions having worked on the staff of *Vogue* in 1960 with her protagonist, Inez Victor. This narrator is a character, yet not so much of a character that she must be fleshed out. Both she and Grace, however, are eyewitness narrators who try to figure things out and who fail to do so. But Grace perceives the nature of her failure as a failure of judgment regarding Charlotte's character and her own. She comes to feel that she (Grace), and not Charlotte, was the deluded one. The "Joan Didion" of *Democracy*, on the other hand, fails in not being able to make a story out of Inez's life—a fact which she blames on Inez's life, rather than on her own storytelling ability or on her own judgment in choosing to write about Inez in the first place. So, on the one hand, Grace has what we might call "full character status," requiring the fleshing out of her background and character—her relationship to the dictators of Boca Grande, her pancreatic cancer and so on—and on the other, her errors in judgment are part of the story; they help us to understand the nature of delusion. Neither of these two conditions applies to the narrator of *Democracy*.

Consider next a couple of other statements of intention regarding point of view in *A Book of Common Prayer*: in "Making Up Stories," Didion's Hopwood Lecture at the University of Michigan,
she said that A Book of Common Prayer's point of view began as a "flat third person" and changed to a first person point of view." And in the interview cited earlier, she said of Prayer's beginnings: "I wanted to do a deceptive surface that appeared to be one thing and turned color as you looked through it." Unfortunately, we do not know for certain which of the several intentions for A Book of Common Prayer came first and what the progression was after that, but it seems plausible to assume that the progression might have been as follows: first, the desire to do a deceptive surface, then the attempt to do it in a "flat third person." Next, the realization that the "deceptive surface" virtually requires an unreliable narrator, someone whom we come to doubt or who is herself deceived. This narrator will be the author, who, in order to establish her capability for error, must not be merely an omniscient voice, but a limited person, an "I" who tries to figure things out and fails. But an author who presents herself as the author need have no such limitations on her knowledge—the refusal of omniscience would seem arbitrary—and so this "I" must inhabit the same world as her characters, must be in the role of eyewitness rather than creator. From this point, it seems only logical to give this narrating "I" a fictional name, and
certain bit-parts in the action of the main story. (Didion fails
to take this last step in Democracy, and problems result.) The
"strength" of this character-narrator derives from the invention of
details of personality or background for her (such as Grace's
pancreatic cancer) which help to convey her status as a character,
and thus add to the plausibility of her capacity for error. An
eyewitness cannot control the events of the story—only the author
can do that. When an author claims she cannot control the events
of the story because she is merely an eyewitness, she seems to us
to be playing fast-and-loose with the rules—to be redefining the
nature of the author for no clear purpose. But when an eyewitness
learns she has misinterpreted the story, then misinterpretation is
part of the meaning of the story. Grace is "strong" in that she is
a believable character, but her believability as a character is
part of her unreliability as a narrator. Grace's decidedly
difficult attempts to get at the truth emphasize the fact that
surfaces are deceptive, and to the extent that Grace is deceived by
them, so are we, for there is no implied reliability to be attained
by mistrusting Grace's views, as there is by mistrusting the views
of, let us say, the narrator of Ring Lardner's story, "Haircut."
We identify with Grace, and Didion intends for us to be deceived
along with her and to come to the same conclusions about our self-deception that she does.

At this point, the relationship of the point of view to the setting comes into play. Here are two quotations from the Davidson interview which begin to suggest that relationship:

Q. Did you have a technical intention for this book?
A. Yes, I wrote it down on the map of Central America. "Surface like rainbow slick, shifting, fall, thrown away, iridescent." I wanted to do a deceptive surface that appeared to be one thing and turned color as you looked through it.

--Davidson, 36.

One of the things that worried me about this book was that there were several kinds of weather. It took place in San Francisco, the American South and Central America. This sounds silly, but I was afraid that the narrative wouldn't carry if the weather changed. You wouldn't walk away from the book remembering one thing. The thing I wanted you to walk away remembering was the Central American weather.

--Davidson, 37.

The first quotation demonstrates the metaphoric quality that weather carries in Didion's mind. The "rainbow slick" becomes a Conradian point of view; the shifting meanings of the planned novel are thought of as changes in color; the iridescence is an iridescence of meaning. So when Didion says, in the second
quotation, that she wants her reader to walk away remembering the Central American weather, it does not mean that her sole purpose for working up a complex plot involving international intrigue and deception, and for framing it in the words of an unreliable narrator, is to convey an idea of what Central American weather is like. It means that this weather-image will carry with it a sense of uncertainty, of shifting meaning—an enigmatic and ineffable quality that Didion sometimes associates with nature.

Both the point of view and the Central American weather, therefore, are associated in Didion's mind with what we might call the theme of self-delusion. And while delusion requires human beings, there is a quality of illusion in the weather itself. The choice of an imaginary Central American setting is consistent with these ideas as well, but there are other reasons why an imaginary setting is useful, and these reasons involve the relationship of the characters to the setting, as well as our own relationships to real places.

Setting and the Impulse Toward Allegory

In the Hopwood lecture referred to earlier, Didion said that A Book of Common Prayer was originally to have been set entirely in
motel rooms, and to be "without event." We know by now about the significance of motel rooms, and it seems at least plausible to assume that an eventless novel is a demonstration of some kind; it would not use an energetic plot (one based on causally related events) but it might employ symbolism or be some sort of modern allegory. This part of the plan, the eventlessness, did not come to pass. A Book of Common Prayer is very tightly-plotted and contains many events. Nevertheless, the novel achieves a symbolic, even an allegorical, effect, chiefly and initially through the use of the imaginary setting.

It seems reasonable to assume that an author chooses an imaginary setting because she does not wish to be limited to realism, or to literal readings of every event in her novel. She also wants to be freed from the reader's prior knowledge of a real place and the expectations that arise from it. At the very least, a more dreamlike quality is evoked by the use of an imaginary setting, whether the setting is the Forest of Arden, the Land of Faerie, or Winesburg, Ohio. But, because Boca Grande is in Central America, it can play on both our pre-conceived idea of a real Central America and our willingness to dream an imaginary country.
For example, look at Didion's use of names. One of the ousted leaders of Boca Grande has the same first name (Anastasio) as the dictator of Nicaragua who was to be overthrown by the Sandinistas in 1979. And, like Salvador, "Boca Grande is the name of the country and . . . also the name of the city, as if the place defeated the imagination of even its first settler" (6). In these two cases, Didion is playing with our sense of a real Central American context. But the name Boca Grande itself is chosen for its symbolic value: the English translation of either "big mouth" or "big bay" fails to convey (and it should fail to convey) the sense of impersonal, natural, even animistic menace. Here, the name of an actual Central American country would work against Didion's impulse toward suggestion and mental association.

The image called up by the name Boca Grande is female, and this makes sense because A Book of Common Prayer is largely a novel about mothers and daughters. In Chapter 2 of Book 5, we learn that Charlotte sees Boca Grande as "the cervix of the world, the place through which a child lost to history must eventually pass." The distraught quality of Charlotte's mind is evident here. She does "not literally believe" Marin will turn up there, yet she "never really doubt[s]" it (199). I take this to mean that Charlotte
hopes somehow to regain Marín psychologically or spiritually—not "literally"—and she eventually does so. "I don't have to see Marín because I have her in my mind," she says (263). Adding to the theme of a search for a (spiritual) daughter is the idea that by telling Charlotte's story, by "creating" her in this way, Grace is the spiritual mother of Charlotte. This is not only a function of the narrative frame, but is made part of the story as well; it is foreshadowed in Part One, Chapter 2, when Grace speaks of sharing with Charlotte the experience of having lost a child. Her son, Gerardo, is "lost to her," but not literally. (She disapproves of his behavior; he has become an "acquaintance" to her.) This suggests the need that we see "fulfilled" in a climactic scene, after Charlotte describes having discovered Antonio and Carmen destroying the crates of Lederle vaccine in the streets of that ironically-named town, Progreso. Grace claims to love Charlotte "as a parent loves the child who has just fallen from a bicycle, met a pervert, lost a prize, come up in any way against the hardness of the world." She is furious with Charlotte for being wrong, "again like a parent," and then, in a slightly epiphanic moment wonders: "What had Charlotte been wrong about exactly . . . Who was wrong here" (243).
Part of the meaning of this last question comes from the emblematic functions of Charlotte and Grace, which in turn are made possible by Didion's having prepared us for allegorical suggestion by placing us in the imaginary cervix of the world. Charlotte to some extent represents passion, and Grace to some extent represents science—we even have an expressionistic scene of Grace in her laboratory with her test tubes (212)—and science at first feels that passion is a delusion (4). But in the vaccine scene, Grace senses that Charlotte's moral feelings are right (her passion is related to compassion, at bottom); and eventually she comes to believe that the "delusion" is her own, as she learns the extent to which Charlotte really did control her own life, suicidal as she seems to have been. There is an almost Hawthornian quality here in which neither the heart (passion) nor the head (science) seems adequate by itself, although the author's sympathies seem suddenly but designedly to swing from head to heart.

Perhaps it is going too far to say that the other characters in the novel are also emblematic, but there is an occasional attempt to give them this sort of significance:
Gerardo embodies many of the failings of this part of the world, the rather wishful machismo, the defeating touchiness, the conviction that his heritage must be aristocratic.

---13-14.

Whether or not one accepts Gerardo's characteristics (and those of the other characters) as emblematic, the characters often seem more like walking concepts than human beings—although the concepts may be complicated, as in Gerardo's case. There are the cunning, concupiscent Latin Americans on one hand, and on the other there are the North Americans like Tuck and Ardis Bradley, who convey the sense of a respectable official presence that is ultimately vapid and indifferent. (Tuck Bradley seems little more than a facade for the C.I.A. men, Kasindorf and Riley—they are our rattlesnakes lurking underneath the rocks in this novel.) Warren Bogart, with his picaresque qualities, seems more realistic, but he is virtually alone in that respect. (Charlotte's case is complicated, as we shall see shortly.) It is not just that the other characters are underdeveloped, but that their thematic functions outweigh their mimetic ones. One has the sense of reading a political and moral fable—like Animal Farm, but less obvious and less strictly allegorical. (Beast fables are of course at the extreme end of the allegorical spectrum.)
Homelessness

Although Didion did not set the novel entirely in motel rooms, there are a great many motel or hotel rooms in it, and her continual scene-jumping produces the same effect of homelessness, a frenetic, on-the-run quality—which helps, by the way, to keep a sense of Marin in our minds, in the absence of Marin herself. Even when the scenes take place in people's homes, the homes convey no sense of sanctuary. Warren's Southern "friends"—the men anyway—are always understandably eager for him to end his visits; Charlotte's sister-in-law Linda offers Charlotte the use of her swimming pool, but does not really want to talk to her; even the Douglas home in San Francisco is referred to flatly as "the house on California Street." As one might expect, there is a concomitant theme of the absence of family permanence, and the absence of history. The idea of nature (the third ingredient, after these two, of psychological home) will be supplanted by the image of the Central American weather, the opaque light and the shimmering surfaces that Didion wishes her reader to walk away remembering.

The absence of history is conveyed by the setting in more than one way. That Boca Grande is a place without history is, for the
city's librarian, something like "a catechistic point of national pride" (7); but it is also a feeling one gets from the place.

"Every time the sun falls on a day in Boca Grande that day appears to vanish from local memory, to be reinvented if necessary but never recalled" (6). The "equatorial view" which (according, always, to Grace) Charlotte is incapable of taking, is one which denies the human importance of things, which denies (as Grace says) that a banana palm is more important than its rot.

Everything here changes and nothing appears to. There is no perceptible wheeling of the stars in their courses, no seasonal wane in the length of the days or the temperature of air or earth or water, only the amniotic stillness in which transformations are constant.

---157.

Any sort of convenient revisionism is possible in a place like this. The political instability of Boca Grande has to be seen in this "equatorial" light; that is, revolutions will be not only inevitable, but inconstant in meaning. But inconstancy of meaning is what Charlotte does not understand. She defines everything from her own human point of view: her attachments to Marin, Victor, Gerardo, and to her husbands, in one sense have fixed meanings in her own mind. She does not feel "attached" to the Latins, and she
does feel attached to the ideal of the nuclear family—"personal crap" (in the words of an actress at a Beverly Hills party, 129) that one does not encounter in "enlightened" places like Hanoi. It is because Charlotte believes in ideals, but defines them totally in terms of her wishes and desires, that she is unable (or unwilling) to see herself as carrying dangerous political freight when the revolution comes. She insists she is "not interested in any causes or issues." "Neither is anyone here," Grace tells her, but Charlotte either misses or ignores Grace's point (240).

This self-serving quality of Charlotte's psychology has consequences in terms of reader sympathy, consequences other than those apparently intended. The shift of sympathy at the end of the book (from head to heart, or from Grace to Charlotte) is not as effective as it should be, because Charlotte still seems a little demented to us. Are we, for example, to understand that she betrays Leonard Douglas and returns to her first husband because of a need to re-create the family to which she feels Marin belongs? It seems more like merely a vacillation of affection. And if she finds Warren so irresistible, why did she leave him in the first place? And if he is so hard to live with (as he certainly appears
to be, with his violence, his love of group sex and his habit of seducing the wives and sisters of his friends) why should she go back to him out of love? If her motive is to lure Marin back into the fold, why does Charlotte deliberately conceive her hydrocephalic baby in an attempt to create a bond with Leonard Douglas which will shield her against Warren's attractions? The problem with Charlotte is inconstancy, which derives from the lack of a moral center, an insufficient ego. Grace's description of the difficulty Charlotte has in walking across a room containing two of her lovers shows her difficulty maintaining a coherent sense of self amid the competing moral and emotional claims made on her. And Charlotte's attraction for airports demonstrates her homelessness, the futile wandering of someone who feels pulled in several directions at once. Her suicidal decision to remain in Boca Grande to "see what happens" is intended to be a somewhat triumphant exertion of self-control by someone who has hitherto been incapable of it. Defending Charlotte against a hypothetical charge of being passive and purposeless, Didion says in the Davidson interview that "Charlotte is very much in control there in Boca Grande when everyone else is running out." "The book," she also says, explaining Charlotte's lack of a "center," "finds her at
a crisis." Moreover, "it is a problem for all of us [not just Charlotte and not just women] to find something at the center."  

Subjective Realities

Let us try to be fair about these claims. On behalf of the skeptics, it must be admitted that Didion has a tendency toward the self-serving comment in her interviews. For example, her description, quoted in Chapter 2 of this study, of Sacramento's weather as "extreme" sounds plausible only if one has not experienced Sacramento's weather. In fact, Sacramento has some of the mildest weather in the United States: no tornadoes, no hurricanes, extremely infrequent and inordinately mild thunderstorms, a winter climate too warm for snow, a summer heat mitigated by its dryness, much less of a flooding problem than Didion would have us believe—and it is also one of the two major California cities with no earthquake faults running through it. (The other is San Diego.) Similarly, Didion's remarks about Charlotte may seem like half-truths to some readers: Charlotte is in control—in a way. It is a problem for all of us to find a center—but not that much of a problem.
Still, Didion has a case. "Charlotte finds her center in Boca Grande," she says. "She finds her life by leaving it." Didion is echoing Jesus here, and the echo is appropriate. Even though her work is essentially pagan in most respects (and I shall explain this point in my concluding chapter) Charlotte is in fact Christlike insofar as she comes to define reality totally in terms of the inner life. She is unlike Jesus in that she is incontinent, given to profanity, and, as we said, often psychologically weak. But being powerless to affect external reality, she exerts "control" over her own will to believe. This conclusion will be unconvincing or unsatisfactory to those who think "Marin" has anything to do with the girl who runs away to join the revolutionaries. And if we are to believe that Charlotte's inconstancy is the result of a crisis, as Didion claims, and is not simply characteristic behavior, then the flesh-and-blood daughter must precipitate the crisis. She does precipitate it. But Charlotte's final act is one of relinquishment, and it appears that the flesh-and-blood Marin is the chief part of what is relinquished. The spiritual "Marin" is not relinquished. This sort of thinking is never popular. Ultimately, though, we are asked not so much to sympathize with Charlotte as to be unsure that she was deluded. Our sympathy remains with Grace, and Grace says:
Marin has no interest in the past.  
I still do, but understand it no better.  
All I know is that when I think of Charlotte Douglas  
walking in the hot night wind toward the lights at the  
Capilla del Mar I am less and less certain that this  
story has been one of delusion.  
Unless the delusion was mine.  
--280.

I would venture to guess that most readers who have not been  
exasperated or bored by the novel up to this point will be  
sympathetic to Grace's affirmation of belief in the past, and  
puzzled by her feeling of having been herself deluded. But Grace's  
conclusion is plausible here when we consider that she has made  
certain wrong assumptions about Charlotte and about the nature of  
reality. Let us examine some of these assumptions.

One is that human emotions and realities are  
physically-defined. They are not defined in terms of "observable  
activity" but in terms of cell structure. That is why Grace gives  
up anthropology and becomes a biochemist.

I am interested [she says] in learning that such a  
"personality" trait as fear of the dark exists irrelative  
to patterns of child-rearing in the Matto Grosso or in  
Denver, Colorado. . . . Fear of the dark is a protein.  
I once diagrammed this protein for Charlotte. "I don't  
quite see why calling it a protein makes it any  
different," Charlotte said . . .  
--5.
Charlotte has a point here, just as Grace has a point when she debunks all the factual errors in Charlotte's "letters from Central America" in Chapter 1 of Part One. Grace assumes that she does not dream her own life because she "makes enough distinctions," but as this passage shows, the ability to make analytical distinctions does not always make the necessary difference between dream and reality; one knows fear of the dark, but one has to imagine a protein, even though it may exist. The mistakenness of Grace's assumption here serves the allegorical tendency of the novel.

But the mistakenness of her other assumptions—that Charlotte's behavior can be made sense of and that she (Charlotte) must want to preserve her life, for example—does not serve any such tendency. Charlotte's personality is finally not reducible to the demands of an allegory. She is, moreover, neurotic. There is no "reason" for her love of Warren, for example: he is a selfish man who beats her and uses her, who gets his sexual notions from outlaw biker movies, who bewails the disloyalties of other people while he seduces everyone's niece, who can dismiss his daughter with a four-letter word (although we are perhaps sympathetic to this), and who finds his own roguish behavior charming. His final wishes are for nobody to attend his funeral, at which somebody will
sing "Didn't I Ramble." This is funny, but cynical. Warren is a homeless man, someone who lives in motel rooms and other people's houses. He is not a sympathetic character, and Charlotte's love for him is not ennobling. And so with Charlotte's affections and behavior in general: she does not make much sense. Her anger over the destruction of the vaccine is understandable as an expression of frustrated idealism, and it reminds us of the naive American attitude toward Central America described in Salvador. But as someone who demonstrates the futility of scientific rationality, she is not convincing, because she is too irrational, and we don't admire her.

The two ironies of Didion's anti-intellectualism in this novel are that it is so ingenious, and that the reader is distanced from Grace's self-doubt at the end because some things can be rationally understood, most notably the final political power play in Boca Grande. Didion's plot--unlike the attempt to make Charlotte an emblem of admirable passion--does serve the allegorical tendency. As walking concepts in the political intrigue, Charlotte, Marin, and Warren work: Charlotte as deluded idealist, Marin as deluded leftist revolutionary, and Warren as the type of American who does not give a damn about anything except having a good time. The
final power play in Boca Grande is a brilliant stroke in which Antonio and Gerardo are both outplayed by an unknown hand— with Leonard Douglas supplying the tip-off.

Perceptions of place reveal a significant difference between Grace and Charlotte. Grace sees Boca Grande as ineffable yet objective, beyond human definition ("Boca Grande is."); while Charlotte sees it as the place where one plants the seed of one's desire. Again, Charlotte defines everything subjectively, and in terms of desire. The shifting meanings, the changing colors of A Book of Common Prayer may seem at first to be the conflicts between public and private realities, but they are really conflicts between subjective realities. Marin is a child "lost to history"—what does it mean? In one sense, she is lost to Charlotte and claimed by history: by political, social, economic movements. In another sense, she is a child with no history: rejecting the past, rejecting her family, and so on. We could choose to see this as a conflict between public and private history, but Marin's reality is as private and "subjective" as Charlotte's. Then there is the contention by each member of Charlotte's original nuclear family that the other members are wrong. Marin believes her middle-class parents are wrong; Charlotte believes Marin's failure to go to her
father's funeral (Marin's rejection of the idea of family) is wrong; Warren says Charlotte and Marin were "both wrong but it's all the same in the end"--a cynical truth which nonetheless has a ring of authorial endorsement to it, although one can not be sure. And then, of course, there are the conflicting ambitions of the political situation.

Charlotte's consciousness of the subjectiveness of all reality is not as impressive as it apparently is supposed to be, however. This is for reasons already described. But we should pay attention to that consciousness, if we are going to criticize it. There is Charlotte's "non-literal" belief that Marin must eventually pass through the cervix of the world, which demonstrates her awareness of the constant transformation possible within Boca Grande's "amniotic stillness." And the emerald she mails to Grace on the evening of her arrest suggests that she expected to die, and was thus not totally deluded about the consequences of remaining in Boca Grande. But the fact that she never expects a real flesh-and-blood Marin to appear, while it also demonstrates some degree of clear-headedness, shows that the transformation she is interested in will be subjectively, psychologically defined. Apparently, she plans to martyr herself to her belief in Marin, and
perhaps she hopes that the memento of the emerald and her story will help convince Marin that she (Marin) is 'wrong.' And Marin does break down when Grace confronts her with the memory of the Tivoli Gardens (Part Five, Chapter 17).

Ironically, even this memory, for Charlotte, was one of those revised histories by means of which Charlotte tries to achieve a sense of fixed family attachments. We are never sure what actually happened at Tivoli, because Charlotte is not as interested in facts as she is in the idea of the emotional inseparability of mother and daughter. In Part One, Chapter 7, she gives Grace two different versions of her trip to the Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen with Marin. The first is one of Charlotte's "lyrical" memories in which mother and daughter see all the sights—puppet shows, windmills, and so on. The second has Charlotte and Marin cooped up in the hotel, as Marin runs a fever and rain falls all weekend. Thus, they never see the gardens together. "One of two things was true"—writes Grace—"either Charlotte had gone with Marin to the Tivoli Gardens or Charlotte had wanted to go with Marin to the Tivoli Gardens" (43). Grace's tendency to refer to Charlotte as "demented" (42) or delusional is thus related to her perception that Charlotte is someone who dreams her life. She herself, with her scientific
mind, is above this sort of thing: "Unlike Charlotte I do not dream
my life. I try to make enough distinctions" (14). But Grace
learns at the end that she did not even know her husband as well as
she had thought, because the emerald was Edgar's gift to Charlotte,
to be delivered via Leonard, who possibly runs guns in Central
America, and . . . it is all a bit hard to keep track of.

Ultimately, A Book of Common Prayer seems to want to stand for
compassion—poor Charlotte is gunned down damning the warring
factions for destroying the vaccine, and calling out the name of
the daughter who has deserted her for grandiose political ideas.
Grace, meanwhile, has lost faith in cell structure theories, and
knows only that she is told things. All interpretation, for Grace,
comes from authority, and authority is suspect. There is no way to
be right, except to believe in the daughter one creates in one's
mind, and to be faithful to this belief, to learn to say "Goddamn
you all" to those who do not have a belief which can make them
compassionate, and to stand firm, alone, passive, doomed, but right
in one's own way. This theme does not work in the novel because we
feel less for Charlotte than we should; but the plot is
well-designed and the point of view keeps us interested. This
conclusion, in any case, reminds us of Didion's early interest in heroines with "doomed commitments." Such an interest, in A Book of Common Prayer, comes off as slightly sentimental, and as a step on the road to a decidedly less successful novel, which will be the subject of the next chapter.
Chapter 6. Democracy

"We shall grow to be wax images, 
and our talk will be like the 
squeaking of toy dolls."
---Henry Adams, Democracy.

Certain accomplished novelists have a habit of 
giving themselves away which must often bring tears to 
the eyes of people who take their fiction seriously. 
I was lately struck, in reading over many pages of 
Anthony Trollope, with his want of discretion in this 
particular.

---from "The Art of Fiction" by Henry James

Call me the author. 
Let the reader be introduced to Joan Didion, upon 
whose character and doings much will depend of 
whatever interest these pages may have, as she sits at 
hers writing table in her own room in her own house on 
Walbeck Street.

So Trollope might begin this novel.
---from Chapter 2 of Democracy by Joan Didion

Let us begin this chapter with person—a person of 
consciously Trollopian indiscretion—and work our way back (or 
forward) to place.
It is a fairly common claim that there is only one "right" point of view for any given story. It is also commonly claimed that a change in the point of view of a story produces a different story. These two claims seem chicken-and-egglike. Which comes first, the story that determines its one and only appropriate point of view, or the point of view that determines its one and only possible story? Or is it possible to write the same story from different points of view?

Let us assume that Joan Didion wants to write the story of a woman who comes to see that the events of her life are insignificant, that her ego is insignificant or wrong-headed. It is not so much that this woman has been unlucky or unwise in her life choices, but that she has been mistaken in thinking that this or that choice is all that better or worse, in the long view, than another. There is a "democracy," an equality of human significance or insignificance in the face of death, a "democracy" of relative insignificance in man's place vis a vis the universe. Or, to put it another way, perhaps the peace that passeth understanding is Wallace Stevens's palm:
The palm at the end of the mind,
Beyond the last thought, rises
In the bronze distance,
A gold-feathered bird
Sings in the palm, without human meaning,
Without human feeling, a foreign song.

Didion asks us to consider these lines from Stevens' "Of Mere Being" in her Trollopian "introduction;" she wants, presumably, to write a story without human meaning, even perhaps without human feeling, a foreign song. She asks us to consider her protagonist's "fullest explanation of why she stayed on in Kuala Lumpur," assisting refugees rather than returning to her husband and his world of politics, power, and public relations: "Colors, moisture, heat, enough blue in the air" (16). This is an explanation without human meaning or feeling, unlike the profane adjective of Billy Dillon's with which Inez mocks him in the thirteen-word letter in which this "explanation" appears. So then, given that Didion wants to tell this woman's story, what is the one and only "right" point of view in which to tell it? Has Didion chosen it?

Assuming for the sake of argument that the intention I have hypothesized is correct, what might the reasons be for choosing
to write this story from the point of view of "the author, Joan Didion." who inhabits the same world as Inez Christian Victor, Jack Lovett, Harry Victor and the rest, who interviews Billy Dillon, is invited to Kuala Lumpur by Inez, and so on, but who is also "giving herself away" in James's sense by regularly talking about her narrative line, or by casting herself in the role of Trollope's Lady Carbury?

One reason for putting oneself, as "author," on the same level as one's characters is presumably to make the characters seem more real. This story really happened to some people the author knows; the people are as real as the author is; the author used to work with Inez Victor on the staff of Vogue in 1960, and so on. Fictional characters are imagined as real people.

Another reason is to suggest that the "author" is as fictional as the people in this difficult narrative line. If we are to see that Inez Victor is right about her ego, then we ought also to see that she is right about our own; but if her story is a set of significant choices made by the author's ego, then the author's experience belies Inez's truth. If, on the other hand, the "author" is a fictional being imagining and
living alongside other fictional beings, then her choices have only the significance she chooses or we choose to give them, since fiction is a malleable, created thing. And if she chooses to say, through her story, that man's life is a fiction, who among the fictional beings that are her readers can or would bother to say that she is wrong, since she is only a fiction who says so in the first place?

This line of questioning keeps begetting additional philosophical questions (Can fiction be contradicted? Is fiction "truth" or is "truth" fiction?) without addressing the aesthetic felicity of the point of view we are discussing—so let us drop the suprahuman or man-as-fiction slant for the moment and try to judge the purely artistic merits of narrator-as-author-in-character's-world. What are the limitations of this point of view? Are those limitations artistically pleasing or not? Again, do they follow organically from the story being told, or does the story necessarily follow from the point of view?

First, the limitations. Since Didion's is a first-person point of view (not a third-person omniscient voice who occasionally uses the word "I"), the narrator cannot
automatically know what happens to the characters in her absence, without the testimony of eyewitnesses; nor can she see into the minds of the characters: she must always speculate based on circumstantial evidence or testimony. In fact, the only real difference between this first-person point of view and the traditional first-person point of view (told by one of the characters in the story) is the narrator's identification of herself as Joan Didion, the author, and the discussions of narrative that go along with it. It seems strange that Didion should choose this tactic, because the effect of using her own name and of occasionally discussing problems with the narrative—which is to call attention to authorial technique—is undercut by the pretense that Inez and company are real acquaintances of Joan Didion, author. In other words, yes, Didion says, "Call me the author," but she does not add, "and these are only characters I have made up." Instead, she is the author of a "true" story. Also, if one is familiar with Trollope's The Way We Live Now, one knows that it is not himself that Trollope situates in Welbeck Street but Lady Carbury (Didion lifts the paragraph verbatim, except for the name)—a character described as a "female literary charlatan," one who
wants less to write a good book than to manipulate critics to say good things about the books she does write. The effect of the allusion is to further make this "Joan Didion" seem fictional, and to make her judgments suspect—to make her the same kind of narrator Grace Strasser-Mendana was. But the use of her own name makes Didion's choice seem an affectation, unless we are to understand that she truly considers herself a charlatan, in which case we should probably not read the book. Both the allusion, however—which is really not all that important—and the invitation to be aware of technique are ultimately overshadowed by the convention that narrator and characters inhabit the same plane of existence. "Joan Didion," teller of Inez Victor's story, is really a character in the fiction, except in a few notable places, and she has the same sort of empirical limitations as other first-person narrators.

Another limitation, which follows from the first but seems unnecessarily compounded by the authorial reporter's virtually complete absence from the scene of significant events, is the psychological remove at which these events occur—what is sometimes called psychic distance, or what is sometimes described as a tension between telling and showing. Democracy
creates great psychic distances between the reader and the events of the narrative; much is told, but little is shown. And this effect is deliberate. Here are three examples:

She did not really expect to see him but she never got off a plane in certain parts of the world without wondering where he was, how he was, what he might be doing.
And once in a while he was there.
For example in Jakarta in 1969.
I learned this from her.
--92.

As a reader you are ahead of the narrative here.
As a reader you already know that Inez Victor and Jack Lovett left Honolulu together that spring. One reason you know it is because I said so, early on. Had I not said so you would have known it anyway: you would have guessed it, most readers being rather quicker than most narratives, or perhaps you would even have remembered it, from the stories that appeared in the newspapers and on television when Jack Lovett's operation was falling apart.
--160.

Jessie is the crazy eight in this narrative.
I plan to address Jessie presently, but I wanted to issue this warning first: like Jack Lovett and (as it turned out) Inez Victor, I no longer have time for the playing out.
Call that a travel advisory.
A narrative alert.
--164.
These three examples represent three different psychic distances. In the first example, we are within what one might call the standard range of psychic distances for a realistic story. A certain aloofness results from the diction ("certain parts of the world." "For example"), and we are reminded that it comes from a narrator whose knowledge is second-hand ("I learned this from her."). There is a slowing-up of the fictional dream which we recognize and accept as coming from the first-person convention. The second example is much more distant. Only the reference to the reader's having followed the activities of Inez and Jack in the media keeps us from imagining the events as fabrications. The reader is asked, in effect, to consider himself a character in the story (or to pretend that Jack and Inez are real people) but his emotions are locked out by the author's clinical description of his reactions. The third example is so distant as to be frigid, almost hostile. The "narrative alert" does not seem to be part of the game, not even a metafictional one in which there is some interest to be derived from breaking the illusion. The author—not the narrator-author, but the "real" Joan Didion—seems not to care about character or reader; the reader is at first put off, then
begins to worry what might prompt such an irritable remark. (It would not be proper, however, to speculate on personal matters.) Then too, another possibility, we sense a certain fear and loathing of the critic in Democracy, about which more in the concluding chapter.

It will be clear by now that I consider the point of view in Democracy an artistic flaw. If it is true that Didion really did not have time for the "playing out," for whatever reason, it is doubly regrettable, because there is material in the novel for a good, traditionally told story. As Gardner says, "In great fiction, we are moved by characters and events, not by the emotion of the person who happens to be telling the story".² and while this may not be true in all cases, it is certainly true that whatever residue of emotional impact comes through in Democracy does so in spite of the filters put on the characters and events, not because of them.

On the other hand, this may be the point. The technique is too ingenious to work, but remember that the idea, as we imagined it, was to go beyond human meaning and emotion, to become better aware of the ego as a vain phantasm. Emotional residue from Jack Lovett's sacrifice is beside the point.
Characters and events do not matter. The point is "colors, moisture, enough blue in the air," the foreign song. Democracy would then be an intellectual demonstration, or a meditation, in an effort to find a sanctuary away from oneself as a character in the fiction that is life—as well as a satire on modern American speech patterns, politics, and lifestyles, with direct or indirect allusions to Henry Adams and James Jones, and so on. A book more to be analyzed than read.

Didion's doubt about the significance or workability of narrative is related to her choice of point of view as well as to the theme of the ego. When one considers "Of Mere Being" or Inez's reply to Billy Dillon about colors, moisture, heat, or Didion's tropical dreams full of color, one realizes "that they tend to deny the relevance not only of personality but of narrative, which makes them seem less than ideal images with which to begin a novel, but we go with what we have." Didion writes: "I began thinking about Inez Victor and Jack Lovett at a point in my life when I lacked certainty, lacked even that minimum level of ego which all writers recognize as essential to the writing of novels, lacked conviction, lacked patience with the past and interest in memory; lacked faith even in my own
technique" (17). She then goes on to describe an assignment in a composition textbook, one based on an essay of hers and which seems to dishearten her. Conviction, memory, faith in one's technique: surely Didion is right that these vital elements of the writer's craft belong also to her or his ego; so then, if her faith in them is shaken, why does she write a novel, rather than an essay, or nothing at all? Why go with what you have, if it is the wrong thing?

Looking back at the canon, one can see what has happened in Democracy: geographical home was removed, psychological home founded, narrative art tried to hold things together but it too was atomized—and the self is no longer to be found. What remains is a faint, vague yearning from the unconscious toward some vision of Edenic nature, but the vision sees its own fragility and demise:

I have the dream, recurrent, in which my entire field of vision fills with rainbow, in which I open a door onto a growth of tropical green (I believe this to be a banana grove, the big glossy fronds heavy with rain, but since no bananas are seen on the palms symbolists may relax) and watch the spectrum separate into pure color.

—16-17.
The most arresting images in this flawed book are, like the image in Didion's recurrent dream, images vaguely suggesting the dissolution of nature. The pink dawns during the atomic bomb tests in the Pacific that open the novel stay in one's mind, as does the image that closes the novel, of islands that have sunk beneath the shallows amid dense tropical greens and translucent blues. This view of dissolution should not be interpreted as a mere expression of despair, however, for Didion tells us that "as the granddaughter of a geologist I learned early to anticipate the absolute mutability of hills and waterfalls and even islands. When a hill slumps into the ocean I see the order in it. When a 5.2 on the Richter scale wrenches the writing table in my own room in my own house in my own particular Welbeck Street I keep on typing. A hill is a transitional accommodation to stress, and ego may be a similar accommodation. A waterfall is a self-correcting maladjustment of stream to structure, and so, for all I know, is technique" (18). These are beautiful, transcendental thoughts. That the fall of Saigon is grafted onto them, that another story about the self-destruction of the American family is thrown in (Carol Christian deserts her two daughters for a job and a social life,
Paul Christian shoots daughter Janet out of some mad political and racist fanaticism, Inez sells out love for power in the form of Harry Victor, Jessie takes heroin as a "consumer decision"—the family of American Christians betrays its proper values—is rather too bad, since the one mode of thought requires a religious stillness and the other a rollicking panache. We get only glimpses of the stillness, and a positive hostility to panache. Movement is the problem with us Americans, Didion seems to be saying: we can't ever be still, we can't ever see what is in front of us for asserting ourselves. A novel is a form of assertion too, but I know it, Didion seems to want to say. The story is never allowed to become important to us, but let that be an allegory. Didion's technique implies. Take, for example, the scene in which Inez feels suddenly the unimportance of her own particular family:

They were definitely connected to her but she could no longer grasp her own or their uniqueness, her own or their difference, genius, special claim. What difference did it make in the long run what she thought, or Harry thought, or Jessie or Adlai did? What difference did it make in the long run whether any one person got the word, called home, dreamed of a white Christmas? The world that night was full of people flying from place to place and fading in and out and there was no reason why she or Harry or Jessie or Adlai, or for that matter Jack Lovett or B.J. or
the woman in Vientane on whose balcony the rain now fell, should be exempted from the general movement. Just because they believed they had a home to call.
Just because they were Americans.
No.
En un mot, bye-bye. --208.

Lines in this passage echo the description of the American evacuation, and the assessment of it by officials of the Republic of [South] Viet Nam. The passage strains to suggest an American exemption from meaninglessness, to make meaninglessness the lesson of Viet Nam which must be faced. But the reader senses that Inez's indifference is an artistic failure, and knows that meaninglessness is not America's lesson, but America's excuse. The fading ego comes across here as murky moralism and a failure of nerve.

This, we can now see, is what Didion's condemnation of all political action leads to, finally: an abnegation of moral responsibility. Why, for example, do we find it difficult to sympathize with Jack Lovett, whom Didion seems to intend to portray as a kind of hard-boiled saint? It is because he has no moral feeling—awareness yes, feeling no. He sees American involvement in Southeast Asia solely as an opportunity to cash
in. And while we recognize his quintessentially American virtues—his can-do attitude, his gregarious efficaciousness, his independence, his romantic tenderness—his view of the world as an "enrichment facility" (see p. 37) never becomes a deeply moral issue as it would, say, in the fiction of Conrad. The heart of darkness is merely taken for granted by both Didion and Jack Lovett, who knows that what Americans will learn in Southeast Asia is that "a tripped claymore mine explodes straight up" (100). Jack Lovett is not a hypocrite, and he does see what is in front of him, unlike Harry Victor, who has to read everything first in The New York Times. Jack shares with Inez an emotional solitude that is the basis of their long fascination with one another, and his tough, military quality seems to be a point of attraction for her (and for Didion), but none of these qualities speaks to our moral sensitivities as readers. He is ultimately a cynical isolate, and we can not love him or even hate him. We almost feel a human sympathy for him when he pulls the plug on Jessie's adventure near Saigon, but it is a case of too little too late, and the possibility of a deep moral vision is tossed away by Didion's assertion that "nothing in this situation encourages the basic narrative
assumption, which is that the past is prologue to the present" (233). So we come to see finally that the ego, while it may indeed be a temporary accommodation to stress, is essential to the moral sense, which is an awareness of consequence, and without which there can be no deep human sympathy. It is lovely and right momentarily to become still and to transcend the awful ebb and flow of desire and fear, the pettiness of our miserable selves, but we cannot for long exist in a Kuala Lumpur of pure color and moisture without the knowledge and sorrow and delight of other human beings. "I happen to like weather, but weather is easy," Didion tells us (162). The fact is, weather is not so easy, nor are any of the other effects Didion is capable of creating, some of which this study has tried to describe. But man does not live by weather alone and neither do novels, a fact that does not change just because one knows it well beforehand.

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Chapter 7. Conclusion.
If we are to judge something, we have to make a temporary and usually quite false assumption that we stand above it. This is not very good for the human soul, though if aesthetic studies are to exist at all we must sometimes take the risk.

--Marjorie Boulton, The Anatomy of Poetry

The Western Heroine

There is not enough Nature* out there to suit Didion, and what there is of it is highly vulnerable to (once again) the encroaching waste land. Her early work gives us images of the rivers and the cottonwoods of her youth, but they are linked with ideas of

*Capitalized to refer exclusively to the external world of wild flora and fauna.
oppressive development and with a feeling of regret or nostalgia. In the later work, fleeting glimpses of lush tropical color replace these images, and in some cases are equally imperilled. Think of Amado Vazquez's hybrid orchids destroyed in a Malibu fire. (I come across these three sentences in the essay "Quiet Days in Malibu": "Amado Vazquez loved his country. Amado Vazquez loved his family. Amado Vazquez loved orchids."¹ This is the tradition-family-nature triad of psychological home.) On the other hand, the phantasmagoric tropical scenery of her later, Latin American and Pacific settings has about it the quality of resisting human endeavor and meaning, a fact at first menacing (Boca Grande and Salvador) and then later acceptable of necessity (Kuala Lumpur in Democracy). In the earlier work, Nature is linked to the idea of the self; it is central to both Didion's sense of identity and that of her fictional characters. In the later work, the tropical images replace or transcend the self. In both early and later work, these images of Nature are related to the sense of being, to the nature of one's existence and identity. The recurring dream of Ms. Joan Didion of "Welbeck Street" in which a tropical palm garden dissolves into a spectrum of color represents a subconscious sense of the dissolution of the self, of the "I."
That there is seemingly not enough of Nature to suit Didion, particularly in her last three novels, is not surprising, since she so often sets those novels in major American or international cities, or rather on a moving network that jumps from capital to capital: New York, Hollywood, Las Vegas, San Francisco, Honolulu, Hong Kong, Jakarta, London, Copenhagen, Washington, Saigon, and so on. One would not expect lush descriptions of Nature from such settings. What is curious is that one gets only the briefest of glimpses at these cities, and sometimes not even much of a glimpse. Cities do not figure as real (or at least interesting) places in Didion's fiction. The non-fiction gives us fuller depictions, usually of smaller locales, like Sacramento, Pearl Harbor, Alcatraz and so on. But in the fiction, cities are airline stops, or metaphors, or unpictured points of reference for this or that episode which could have occurred anywhere. Whereas the urban setting in Henry James might be an occasion for an elaborately-drawn image of a room in an art museum, Didion's tendency in the fiction is to drop us in New York and zoom in on the therapist's silver ankh.

It may well be that Didion likes cities. We are able to know from her writing that she has lived much or most of her life in
them. She currently resides in Los Angeles. But her fiction does not grapple with life in the city. In Didion's cities, one rents a hotel room and stays in it, or rents another.

In an article on "California's Literary Regionalism," published in 1955, Frederick Bracher points out that "the California writers [among whom are Steinbeck, Saroyan, Jeffers, Nathanael West and Van Tillburg Clark— we should except West from the statement that follows] are not primarily urban novelists... [Their] best novels show life in the small towns and surrounding countryside." It may be that a writer with non-urban instincts— such as the one who tells us, in "Notes from a Native Daughter," that the real California is to be found in the little valley towns and not in the coastal cities— does not know what to do when confronted with a newly-urbanized home turf. Los Angeles, where Didion makes her current home, is possibly the largest geographical urban sprawl in the world, and most of that sprawl was not there fifty years ago. It seems strange that the settings in Didion's work which have the most distinctive character are non-urban, whereas the cities are interchangeable, little more than names, with some exceptions. Unlike Nathanael West's vivid and unforgettable depictions of city life— unlike the Los Angeles of
The Day of the Locust, which could not possibly be mistaken for any other locale—Didion's peeks at the city seem deliberately chosen to convey the anonymity, the sameness of urban life anywhere. Even the Los Angeles freeways of Play It As It Lays, which today retain some of their horrible supremacy among freeway systems, are in their local uniqueness evocative of urban anonymity. The neurotic in Ralph's Market could be a neurotic in any K-Mart in America: it is the unlocalized, waste land touch. Didion's weather, on the other hand, is always vivid, but weather belongs to Nature, and extends over a larger region than the city. According to Bracher, California writers and their fictional characters have a sense of belonging to geographical areas larger than local ones. 3

Dislike of the city and a longing for Nature in a writer who lives in cities and sets her novels in them, might well explain the progressive vertiginous nausea one senses in Didion's fiction. In any event, one is aware of a significant separation between Didion and actual natural settings. Even in Run River, which gives the fullest sense of a non-urban place—the only fully-realized not-yet-waste land of Didion's fiction—we are aware that the scenery is obsessively remembered, that it already belongs to the writer's past. Separation between author and the thing being
written about always occurs, of course. Writers do not simply describe what is in front of them, and have even been known to write within narrow walls of confinement, relying solely on imagination and memory rather than immediate observation. But what one wants to imagine and what one is able to imagine may both be affected to some extent by what one lives with day in and day out, especially if one is writing realistic fiction. This was, after all, essentially the point Didion herself made in the interview quoted in Chapter 2 of this study. It may be that Didion's more recent preference for dreamlike tropical scenery derives from an unconscious feeling that Nature itself is dreamlike. Didion finds it necessary to live an urban life, and therefore Nature to her exists only in dreams. Is it surprising that she should dream of banana groves that shimmer and disappear? This point is speculative, but it is a fact that the romantic urge toward Oneness with Nature has remained a characteristic of her work from *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* to *Democracy*. Sometimes it has been a latent quality, as in *Play It As It Lays*, but it has been there. The difference is that in the early work, particularly *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* and *Run River*, Nature was seen as interacting with, or contributing to, the human ego or sense of self, whereas
in A Book of Common Prayer and Democracy Oneness with Nature requires the loss of human ego. In A Book of Common Prayer, Charlotte is killed asserting the truth of her "I" against the truth of the suprahuman universe, and in Democracy Inez willingly gives up her sense of self to the colors and moisture of that universe. The progression from self-creation to self-annihilation carries an element of mimesis, since it is Nature that makes us and Nature that kills us.

The idea of Oneness with the land goes by different names, although I repeatedly borrow the terminology of Mark Porter. It, or something like it, tends to recur in critical writings about Western American literature. Bracher, for example, though he does not speak of Oneness, nevertheless refers to a "romantic yearning toward the inexpressible and the ineffable." Both Bracher and Porter draw connections between the western writer's feelings toward Nature and society, and myths about, or ideas that come from, the American Indian. Porter goes more deeply into Indian folklore and religion, because of his different focus, but the idea is implicit in Bracher as it is explicit in Porter that the western American writer, unlike the Easterner, wants to break with the European cultural tradition of dominance and subjugation of Nature.
with the notion that man has a covenant with God to "have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over everything that moveth upon the earth." Like the Indian, the western American writer and character sees himself as part of Nature, rather than as the ruler of it. This, among other things, puts the western writer and his or her characters at odds with western (occidental) man’s institutions. Sometimes this opposition is expressed in the strongest terms, as in Porter, who sees the impulse toward Oneness as a mystical urge not even comprehensible to the civilized occidental mind. And other critics, who do not deal with mysticism, simply refer to the outsider-status of the heroes of western novels—and by "western novels" I mean both cowboy westerns and mainstream novels set in the West, which may or may not be "regional."

This distrust of civilization’s institutions is general in western American writing. To interpret and paraphrase some characteristics of this writing from an article by Max Westbrook, they include a distrust of rationalism, of book-learning, of language—especially institutional language—and of the traditional recognition of merit by institutionalized society. In regard to language, Westbrook says that "...since institutions have a prior
claim to language. The western hero has no words for what is truly important. In addition, glibness, flattery, slogans, moral dicta, propaganda, deceptive egal phraseology, parlor-room patter, grammatical snobbery, and a dozen other institutionalized misuses of language have corrupted it and marked it as something to which the western hero is fundamentally opposed. We note, in Didion's *Democracy*, that the distrust of language occurs on two levels: the satire of Billy Dillon's political patois, and Didion-the-author's own skepticism about narrative. But the very fact that Didion makes herself the chief skeptic, rather than letting Jack Lovett do the work, and the fact that she bothers at all to write about politics, makes her noticeably different from the writers described in these now-somewhat-dated essays, who are characterized by Bracher as being uninterested in politics.

There are both comparisons and contrasts to be made between Didion and the California writers of the past, and I do not mean to say that Didion is a western regionalist who fits easily into the mold. More and more, her settings become international, and there are paradoxes involving her relationship to European-American tradition and to language. But there are parallels between her work and these general characteristics of Western American literature. The
prototypical western hero that one would imagine based on Westbrook's attributes, for example, would be someone very much like Jack Lovett: a man of action, of few words, an outsider, but one whose talents are more real than a U.S. Congressman's, a man who knows what is important, and a soldier of fortune. Still, certain shocks of hybridization occur as the mind of a western writer adapts to the passage of time. Didion finds it impossible to be non-political, like the California writers that Bracher describes, just as she found it impossible to be non-urban in the same way as Steinbeck and Saroyan. And just as she moved into the city and did not respond to it creatively, she finds it impossible to discover a good use for politics, even though she engages the subject. The whole idea of having to take a stand is unpalatable. She wants to be neither pro- nor anti-establishment; rather, she finds that having dealt with political matters, she would rather have stayed home. It is better not even to be a person (or have an ego) than to be the kind of person who, like Inez Victor, has to learn to walk through airplanes for the camera; it is better not to speak at all than to have to learn the buzzwords and the fabrications that will placate the media and the public. While Didion is not a regionalist, she herself is a kind of western
heroine—a fact which has significance inasmuch as she herself is an important character in much of her work.

These "western" qualities in Didion’s work are cultural rather than literary. The idea that Nature is superior to civilization is obviously not limited to writers of the American West, and the English Romantics of the late eighteenth century are usually given credit for first giving "emotional significance to landscape" in fiction. Didion’s work—which offers less and less landscape as it progresses—is in part the response of the traditional westward-movement mind to the present American culture, in which the westward movement is over, or no longer means what it once did. Her fiction resists its own settings when they are cities, and searches for the backward and the unstable locale in which to "stretch out." Again, this is characteristic of western novels—although Didion’s work is that way because she is a westerner, not because she has read western novels. But the parallel (as opposed to the influence) is interesting: the unstable, uncivilized setting is characteristic of what Louis Hasley calls the "American literature of the westward movement." Such literature, Hasley says in his essay of the same name, "represents life or civilization in any area of the United States
as not yet having reached its own equilibrium or as striving toward an equilibrium in relation to more advanced areas." Equilibrium, says Hasley, means "settled residences, a stable society with religious and educational institutions, and an established government." Didion's own instincts toward the idea of a raw frontier cause her to take leave altogether of the continental United States in her recent books: the United States is entirely settled.

Anti-Social Individualism

"I have an aversion," Didion has said, "to social action because it usually meant social regulation. It meant interference, rules, doing what other people wanted me to do. The ethic I was raised in was specifically a Western frontier ethic. That means being left alone and leaving others alone. It is regarded by members of my family as the highest form of human endeavor." This is the voice of Didion—the-western-heroine, and yet this voice is not limited strictly to western Americans, nor are these impulses seen only in the novels of western writers. The recent dismantling of much of the federal bureaucracy is surely in part attributable to the love affair of the great majority of Americans
with the Marlboro man; and if Hemingway was right when he said that all American literature comes from Huckleberry Finn, part of what he must have had in mind is that restless urge to light out for the new territory. Anti-social individualism is an American ideal at least as old as Mark Twain, and it springs from the belief that the social system is corrupt. In our time, however, there is no new territory to light out for; there is only the Third World. So Didion lights out for it, not, however, with Huck's optimism, but with Conrad's sense of horror. She herself is not a child, though her heroines would often like to take a child by the hand and escape.

How does this desire to escape civilization's institutions fit in with Didion's desire for tradition? When we speak of the idea of tradition in the work of Joan Didion, we mean ultimately that frontier ethic, that tradition of lighting out. (Didion's early work seemed to long for something more, but never to find it.) But, again, we must make a distinction between the Huck Finns and the Jack Kerouacs, the never-grow-up boys who find enough adventure on the road to satisfy them, and a writer like Didion, who gives us also the adult looking for a home. Images of flight are common in her work, but there is always a dialectic of parent and child in
these images, in which the adult seeks stability and permanence. One could even see the flight of Warren Bogart and Charlotte Douglas this way. (Warren is much like a Kerouac character, incidentally.) As a result of physical, political, and social handicaps, respectively, the three distanced daughters of the last three novels--Kate, Marin, and Jessie--resist the efforts of their respective mothers toward the unity of home. And finally there is the pseudo-parental relationship of the narrator to her "characters," which we get in the last two novels, in which the flight of one or the other member of the "mother-daughter" pair has certain final consequences. Grace is forced to flee without Charlotte, who is then lost in her attempt to "keep" Marin; Inez flees life in America, leaving the author of her story unable to see a connection between her (Inez's) past and her present. Moreover, both Charlotte and Inez keep their footholds in primitive places in preference to returning to more "civilized" ones. (This is the daughter-aspect of their personalities; they each have a mother-aspect as well.) So the themes resulting from the tradition of the frontier ethic which we saw at work in Run River, and which are dealt with overtly in Didion's early essays, continue to operate in Didion's later work: the dialectic of flight and stasis,
the breakup of the family, the discomfort with civilization, the loss of the center.

A concomitant of the limitation of Didion's sense of tradition to frontier tradition is that her sense of family, like Martha McClellan's, is limited to the biological family. The notion that there is a "family of man" would probably not make sense to Didion. Family and tradition go together in the image, from "On Going Home," of the great-grandmother's teacups; but there is no sense that tradition could extend to the idea of a teacup itself—it has to have those hand-painted flowers on it. One imagines that such a pattern of thinking would lead away from anonymity, but to judge from Didion's work it seems rather to lead to isolation and a choice between death or loss of ego. One would think that the self should be possible if it were kept highly particularized, but somehow it is not. In the voice that doubts whether human life is possible (Maria Wysth's) and in the voice that doubts whether narrative is possible (Joan Didion's voice in The White Album and Democracy) we hear an absence of ego, the one pathetic and the other perplexed, then resigned. It is as if Didion wished to avoid the danger of Martha McClellan's obsessive need for the first person possessive, which led to her tragic
isolation. But the voice that refuses to say "mine" has norecognizable human existence, no moral life, no story. Moreover,"mine" is the word that goes with the biological family. The senseof self in Didion's work always includes the attachment tobiological family. (The metaphorical mothers, i.e. the narrators,seem less involved in the issue of the self, so formulated,although one could argue about this.) In addition, there are noselfless acts in Didion's work without an underlyingself-interest. There are no Mother Teresas, no Dinah Morrices, noreformed Scrooges in her work, only Jack Lovetts, EverettMcClellans, Charlotte Douglasses. The urge toward Oneness withNature extends toward sexual partners and offspring but not towardthe human race generally; this tendency is not condemned inDidion's work, and yet it leads inevitably to destruction.Cultural systems--social, political, or economic--endanger thebiological family; this divides the family from participation in alarger group. In Democracy, even the family and Nature becomemutually exclusive. (And author Didion does not seem to takeInez's refugee aid seriously. It is tokenism.) Man has a choice:external Nature or humanity. Inez chooses Nature.
Thought, Fiction, and the Context of the West

This essentially pagan attitude leaves one with a certain ambivalence. On one hand, an attitude toward Nature which emphasizes harmony and reverence rather than antagonism and conquest seems, in these times of massive industrialization and environmental fragility, not only attractive but necessary to survival; on the other hand, if the refusal to humanize Nature by submitting it to the sovereignty of a manlike Deity leads simply to an absolute choice between Nature and Man, the purpose of harmony is defeated, or less attractive, anyway. Of course, Didion tends to stand apart from this dialectic and to view it fictionally, rather than philosophically. It forms a design to be apprehended by the senses, and to be apprehended synthetically, if at all, by the mind. It is never quite a "clash of ideas." Thus, it makes little sense to argue that author-narrator Didion "chooses" humanity by leaving Inez Victor behind and not looking back. Didion sees Inez, admits she does not find a traditional story there, and leaves us to puzzle out the rest. Similarly, she "sees" Lily McClellan holding her husband's body on the dock, and that is enough. That is the painting.
Precisely because of this idea-resistant aesthetic in Didion's fiction—the essays are another matter altogether—it sometimes seems that we go too far in interpreting the actions of this or that character, that we concoct a too-large authorial view. One of the ways Didion does not resemble a Victorian novelist and an old-fashioned moralist is in her unwillingness to pontificate, which in itself almost becomes a sermon in *Democracy* and in some of the non-fiction. Thought is a very strong element in all of her work, but thought takes the form of ideas mainly in the essays, while in the fiction thought tries to sabotage ideas. Let me explain more precisely how this works, starting with the ideas.

First, the idea of what I have called "psychological home" can be inferred in all of Didion's work, and is most readily understood by examining her early work, the essays in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, and the novel *Run River*. When we talk about "home," or "the center," or "the self" in her work, we are talking about the same thing, and we find ourselves talking about it over and over, modifying it in various ways, but never beyond recognition. We are talking about Didion's psychological home. The family, tradition, and some type of relationship to the elements are the thematic components which help to form plot, character, point of view, and a
sense of the implied author in Didion's work. They are also extra-textual elements in our concept of all of the above, arrived at through research. When you read interviews with Didion, you read about the frontier ethic, and "how I was raised," and about the rivers in the valley. I have argued that this pattern of thinking or feeling is a relationship of person to place. Let us try to pinpoint exactly what it means to say that this pattern of thinking, this "psychological home," is a relationship of person to place.

External Nature, of course, will be understood always to be directly related to a place, if we remember that Didion does not rhapsodize about Nature in the abstract, but instead always gives us a particular kind of weather, certain kinds of colors, moisture, blue in the air, phantasmagoric as it becomes in the later work. Tradition, if it means (as I have claimed it does) usually the same tradition--the frontier ethic, the "don't tread on me" of the westerner on horseback--is necessarily the tradition of a particular place, the American West. And if the concept of family necessarily comes out of this tradition--if one hears the "I'll take care of mine" of the westward settlers in it--then it, too, is a concept belonging to the West. The relationship is one of a
person to her idea, of course, but the idea of a place is inherent at all points in that idea. By contrast, the relationship of a person to a religion like Christianity, for example, would not carry with it that same sense of place in all the key points. Didion's psychological home replaces a more orthodox religious feeling, as I have tried to show.

As to the sabotaging of ideas in Didion's work: there is a kind of self-consciousness in the more recent novels which over-complicates their ideas and which weakens, and even at times kills, their emotion. Part of this quality seems like authorial shyness, a fear of being ingenuous or unmodern. Thus, in the last two novels, the protagonists (Charlotte and Inez) will not tell us what they feel. (Maria Wyeth had nothing to say either, but her silence was central to her characterization.) And another part of the recent self-conscious quality of Didion's work seems more anti-intellectual. Analysis is left to the reader, or to intellectual narrators who are wrong and in doubt. This would be fine, it would be good irony, if their mistakenness and doubt enlightened us, but it often fails to. Meanwhile, conversation among characters produces no communication, and reveals little other than the isolation of each character. One assumes that there
is something to be learned about isolation, therefore, but is it enough just to know that isolation exists? (That is all we really learn.) Explanation is omitted in order to make the point that the truth is not expressible in words. But this apparent attempt to deny the possibility of the purposeful articulation of human thought has the unintended effect of also denying human feeling, an effect that weakens A Book of Common Prayer and becomes frigidity in Democracy. In the latter novel, there is an articulate voice explaining to us that it is not possible to make sense of the story, but this is hardly "explanation" in any real sense; it does not clarify; it makes a point of not clarifying anything. It is intrusion without enlightenment, self-consciousness. The author intrudes to tell us that characters and events do not matter. According to Gardner: "The fault Longinus identified as 'frigidity' occurs in fiction whenever the author reveals by some slip or self-regarding intrusion that he is less concerned about his characters than he ought to be—less concerned, that is, than any decent human being observing the situation would naturally be." 14 Sentences such as "I no longer have time for the playing out" qualify as such self-regarding intrusions. Self-interruption ruins
a book like Democracy; in that novel, commentary and narrative are not interwoven, they are knotted and frayed.

Finally, one is reminded that fear is thought. One cannot help but notice the defensiveness against the critic in Democracy. The academic who wrote the textbook question about Didion's early essay ought never to have formulated her and stuck her wriggling like Prufrock on the head of his little pin; she ought (if I may mix metaphors) to have "dynamited her bridges" behind her. But surely this is giving too much importance to the textbook writer; and it is too possessive an attitude to take toward one's work, which is after all work for public consumption, subject to copyright laws and permission to reprint. (Admittedly, it is easy to make these kinds of hindsight judgments from the comfortable critic's chair.) The author, even so, will not give her new book to the critics. It will not be a narrative. It will not be something for words to get at. Run River, on the other hand, has something of that ineffable quality that Didion claims fiction has (in her essay on the Women's Movement). It has ideas, but is not self-conscious about them. It is not afraid of sloppiness or melodrama. Consequently, it is a little sloppy, a little melodramatic, but also emotionally powerful beyond the ability to
precisely define that power in words, or to make that power serve some idea.

That Didion's recalcitrance has a certain tradition behind it may not ultimately be of great significance in assessing the quality of her work. Frigidity in a novel is not ameliorated by conjuring up images of cowboy loners on horseback; and Didion's successes are successes because she is a good writer, not because she is a western heroine. Yet there is a benefit in seeing the context of the West in our literature, and in understanding its relationship to our American history and to whatever is left of our American ideals. There is a fascination in examining the paradoxes of the West, which are American paradoxes, and in studying the paradoxes of a writer, which are human and artistic paradoxes. The work of Joan Didion helps us to see that microcosm of our history and that macrocosm of ourselves (especially if we are westerners) which is the Western context. For better or worse, but often with startling and beautiful results, the reader of Didion comes to see that context in a personal way.

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NOTES

Introduction


Chapter 1.

1 Joan Didion, Slouching Towards Bethlehem (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1968) 174-175. All page references are to this edition.
Chapter 2.


3 Kenneth Burke observes that "The artist's means are always tending to become ends in themselves. The artist begins with his emotion, he translates this emotion into a mechanism for arousing emotion in others, and thus his interest in his own emotion transcends into his interest in the treatment." See Burke's "The Poetic Process," originally in Counter-Statement, 1931, but which I am taking from Wilbur S. Scott, Five Approaches of Literary Criticism (New York: Collier Books, 1962) 83-84. I would add, after having read a number of interviews with authors and poets, that the writer need not even begin with an emotion. Hemingway
supposedly often began with a sentence, and Paulkner claimed that an image of a little girl's muddy drawers as she climbed a tree led to The Sound and the Fury.

4 Joan Didion, Run River (New York: Pocket Books, 1963) 5. All page references are to this edition.


6 Porter, 80.

7 Porter, 88, 90, 91.

8 We learn about the brand of love not in Run River, but in Part Two, Chapter 7 of A Book of Common Prayer: "I recall once telling Charlotte about a village on the Orinoco where female children were ritually cut on the inner thigh by their first sexual partners, the point being to scar the female with the male's totem."

9 from Peck's 1837 New Guide to the West, quoted by Didion as an epigraph to the novel.

10 Henderson, 60.

11 See Chapter 19, p. 191, for descriptions of the bedtime habits of the McClellan siblings.

12 Henderson, 48.

13 Didion, in The Paris Review, refers to the "close third person" point of view of Play It As It Lays. "By a 'close third,' I mean not an omniscient third but a third very close to the mind of the character," 152.
Chapter 3.

1 Joan Didion, Play It As It Lays (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970) 3. All page references are to this edition.

Chapter 4.

1 Joan Didion, The White Album (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979) 11. Hereinafter referred to in these notes as WA. All page references are to this edition.


5 WA, 37.

6 Joan Didion, Salvador (New York: Washington Square Press, 1983) 5. All page references are to this edition.

7 Martina Ebert, for example, criticizes Didion for failing to prescribe "the role of the United States in El Salvador." Notice her reaction to Didion's indictment of American stupidity: "With acrid irony, Didion portrays a paralyzed United States government whose anti-communist paranoia makes it a toy of Salvadoran party politics: the U.S. is even willing to pretend that progress is made in the area of human rights, in order to justify paying aid to the
anti-communist government forces. In the final analysis, however, Didion suddenly produces an apology for the United States government’s political strategy in El Salvador:

"We had been drawn, both by a misapprehension of the local rhetoric and by the manipulation of our own rhetorical weaknesses, into a game we did not understand, a play of power in a political tropic alien to us . . ."

See her review in the Ohio Journal v. 8, no. 3 (1984-85): 32.

Chapter 5.


2 Mark Royden Winchell, Joan Didion (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980) 141.

3 Davidson, 37.


5 Democracy, 32.


7 Davidson, 36.

8 Martin, 239.

9 Davidson, 37.
"I came into adult life equipped with an essentially romantic ethic, holding always before me the examples of Axel Heyst in Victory and Milly Theale in The Wings of the Dove and Charlotte Rittenmayer in The Wild Palms and a few others like them, believing as they did that salvation lay in extreme and doomed commitments..." *WA*, 134.

Chapter 6.

1 It would be helpful here to give John Gardner's list of sample psychic distances. Gardner considers examples 2–5 below, which get progressively less distant, to be within the normal range of the short story or realistic novel, whereas #1, the most distant, would only be found in a tale.

   "1. It was winter of the year 1853. A large man stepped out of a doorway.

   2. Henry J. Warburton had never cared much for snowstorms.

   3. Henry hated snowstorms.

   4. God how he hated these damn snowstorms.

   5. Snow. Under your collar, down inside your shoes, freezing and plugging up your miserable soul..."


2 Gardner, 116.

Chapter 7.

1 *WA*, 221.

"California writers seem to have a feeling for geographic features larger than the merely local." Bracher, 279.

David J. Generin, in an article on Play It As It Lays, makes two statements to which I would like to add the idea of causal connection. Post hoc ergo propter hoc is, I think, ruled out by the preponderance of evidence. He says, first, about Maria's freeway-driving, that "ironically, the only source of the rhythm of life is mechanical; nature, the normal source of natural rhythms, is depicted as polluted, sterile and lifeless." He then points out, using a term of R. D. Laing's, that Maria suffers from "ontological insecurity"—"a condition in which the individual lacks a firm sense of his own identity in a world which seems to be threatening him at all times." See Geherin's "Nothingness and Beyond: Joan Didion's Play It As It Lays," in Critique v. 16 no. 1 (1974): 67 & 70.

Bracher, 283.

See Porter, 85. His point is that the Indian has not read the book of Genesis. See also Bracher's attribution of the depiction of small-town or country people to the noble savage myth, 280. One is reminded of Steinbeck's paisanos, or Saroyan's Fresno Armenians.

Porter argues that European philosophy emphasizes squareness, "geometry," whereas the mystic and the Indian prefer the circle to the square. "A square or any other angular figure does not have this sense [that the circle does] of wholeness, completeness, and perfection. An angular figure is divided by its angles and, properly speaking, can have no center." The Western mind, Porter writes, cannot measure the area or circumference of a circle. "By definition, the mystical experience is outside the realm of consideration to the rationalist, and the rational attitude is beyond the bother of a mystic." These terms of opposition—mystical and rational—are generally equated with the Indian and the white societies, respectively. "... Oneness with the land is a negation... of personality, separateness, and alienation. It is a negation of what has made white society great, the will to power. It is a negation of the possibility of manipulation and rationalistic morality..." Porter, 84-87.

3. Bracher refers to "the generally non-political bent of contemporary California writing," 280.

10. "It was not until the rise of the romantic movement at the close of the eighteenth century that setting began to have an important function in fiction. Ann Radcliffe was one of the first to give emotional significance to landscape." Robert D. Rhode, "Scenery and Setting: A Note on American Local Color," *College English* 13 (1951): 154.


12. Davidson, 36.

13. Huck Finn is of course quite mature in some ways. I do not want to get into that argument!


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Ebert, Martina. Review of Salvador in Ohio Journal v. 8, no. 3 (Fall/Winter, 1984-85): 31-32.


Rhode, Robert D. "Scenery and Setting: A Note on American Local Color." College English 13 (D 1951): 142-146.

