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Mourning and writing in Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*

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Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking* is a memoir of her experiences during the year following the sudden death of her husband, John Gregory Dunne. He died of a heart attack on December 30, 2003. She began the memoir on October 4, 2004 (6). It is not a narrative of "emotion recollected in tranquillity." Didion exposes the patterns of thought she has been experiencing during this year of grief, and she identifies the shift by which she relinquishes modes of irrational behavior for the acquiescences of mourning. Early in the memoir, she asserts that there has been an invisibility imposed upon death in contemporary American life (60). There has been strong appreciation of this memoir in book reviews, however, and in the granting of the National Book Award for 2005, in large printings by the publisher (350,000 in the first months), and in the plans for a one-woman dramatization on Broadway in 2007 starring Vanessa Redgrave. It may be that Didion's memoir speaks to an American need to accept loss and achieve mourning. In her "Forward" to the collection of essays *Political Fictions* (2001), for example, Didion asserts that "reactive angers... had driven American politics since the 1960's" (16). Perhaps Didion's exploration of her entrapments in grief and guilt can enhance awareness of cultural irrationalities emerging from the inability to accept loss.

The memoir reveals both Didion's personal fantasy that "information is control" (94) and her lifelong commitment to "read, learn, work it up, go to the literature" (44).

She quotes from the *Merck Manual*, from medical and psychoanalytic sources including Freud and Melanie Klein, and from numerous poets (including Auden, Eliot, E.E. Cummings, Delmore Schwartz, and Gerard Manley Hopkins), from Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* as well as from John Gregory Dunne's writings and her own; she even consults the log kept by the elevator operator at their apartment, and the autopsy report indicating the time and cause of her husband's death. These citations identify her respect for language and literature in comprehending her emotional experiences, but they also seem to indicate Didion's attempts to displace her emotions and impose intellectual control.

She quotes a long passage from an article by Vamik D. Volkan, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Virginia, on the treatment of "pathological mourners" (55). After a page of outraged scoffing at his abstract generalizations, she notes that she is "directing anger toward the entirely unknown"

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psychiatrist" (57). Such behavior, she realizes, is one of the characteristics of the pathological mourner discussed by Volker.

One reviewer has suggested that the structure of the narrative itself provides a glimpse of Didion's desire to control the reader. The reviewer notes that we only learn "in the second half of the memoir" that Dunne had a long history of heart problems (Kramer). Didion does, however, identify a Medtronic card with the date of the implanting of a pacemaker (3 June, 2003) among the items the hospital gives her from the contents of his pockets. Nevertheless, Didion herself acknowledges that personal issues determine her literary structure. She says, "The way I write is who I am" (7). It might be appropriate, in these terms, to say that she is only able to discuss Dunne's cardiac problems *after* she has recognized that her unwillingness to acknowledge these dangers had created barriers in their communication.

The "Magical Thinking" in the title of the memoir refers to the numerous instances of denial in Didion's responses to her husband's death. These denials are, in fact, attempts to rescue him from the cardiac failure which has already ended his life. Early in the memoir, Didion quotes from a *New York Times* article on the behavior of the mother of a nineteen-year-old who had been killed by a bomb in Kirkuk. When an official comes to inform the woman of her son's death, she refuses to open the door. She believes that she can prevent her son from dying by not admitting the messenger (13). Didion read this article eleven months after her husband's death. She recognizes that the mother's irrational behavior is a parallel to her own. She had delayed calling family members in California because she thought John might not have died *there* yet. She felt that she must stay at home because John would need her to be there in order to return. She cannot discard a pair of his shoes or move the stack of books he was reading because he will need them in order to return. Even in consenting to an autopsy, she believes the doctors may discover that his death resulted from a minor problem that could still be fixed (37). She states that she was "in no way prepared to accept [the] news [of his death] as final" (32). There is an echo of this intense desire for the power to "reverse his death" late in the memoir (184). It seems to emerge from the period when she has begun the work of mourning. She reflects upon a moment when she might have chosen 'to say one small thing that made him happy." She asks, "If I had said it in time, would it have worked?" (146). Would it have kept him alive? This flicker of guilt seems to identify the significance of guilt in the denials and the desperate desires of Didion's "magical thinking." Freud observes that the "loss of a love object constitutes an excellent opportunity for the ambivalence in a love relationship to make itself felt" (132). Behind the guilt, unseen angers flicker.

Many of Didion's earlier writings indicate that she has had life-long literary engagement with loss and anxiety. In an early essay entitled "Why I Write," for example, she recalls that she began "writing things down" when she was five years old." She observes that children who "[keep] private notebooks are lonely and resistant rearrangers of things, anxious malcontents, children afflicted apparently at birth with some presentiment of loss" (*Bethlehem* 136-7). This childhood desire to protect herself from loss by rearranging things in words parallels the "magical thinking" of her grief. There are similar issues of loss in "Goodbye to All That" (1967), her essay on moving from New York City to California (*Bethlehem* 224-36). Even her essay on encountering a variety of changes during a visit to her family home in California concludes with a quotation from a Gerard Manly Hopkins' poem on the projections of grief: "Margaret are you grieving/ Over goldengrove unleaving?" The poem ends with Hopkins' analytical interpretation: "It is the blight man was born for/ It is Margaret you mourn for." Didion includes a quotation from this very Hopkins' poem in this memoir on the death of her husband. The poem is cited late in the memoir, and it enables her to acknowledge that her mourning of Dunn expresses a mourning for herself (*Bethlehem* 187; *Year* 197-8). Such correlations between her earlier writings on loss and fear and *The Year of Magical Thinking* suggest that important elements in Didion's grief at her husband's death are reflections of unacknowledged anxieties that extend back to her childhood.

There is a startling instance of Didion's sharing of her personal psychological history in *The White Album* (1979). The title essay of the collection, linking her personal voice to cultural history, identifies her as a participant in the "New Journalism" which emerged in the 1960's. After she notes that the cultural changes of the 1960's and early 70's had led her "to doubt the premises of all the stories" she had told herself to make life comprehensible, she quotes from a psychiatric evaluation of her illness

which was made at St. John's Hospital in Santa Monica, California. A brief portion of the psychiatric report indicates Didion's symptoms and her emotional fragility:

> In June of this year, patient experienced an attack of vertigo, nausea, and a feeling that she was going to pass out.... [B]asic affective controls... are insecurely and tenuously maintained by... defense mechanisms including intellectualization, obsessive compulsive devices, projection, reaction formation, and somatization (14-5).

These symptoms developed during a period in which she "felt the necessity to revise the circuitry of [her] mind" (see 44). The issues in the psychitrist's report clearly parallel the disorientations that she experiences in her grief after the death of her husband. *The Year of Magical Thinking* is, in fact, a report upon "revising the circuitry of her mind." An editor, in introducing Didion's essays for an anthology, says that two of her novels, *Play it as it Lays* (1968) and *A Book of Common Prayer* (1977), both "portray women who attempt to survive a catastrophic life" (Smart, 311).

Didion's life during the *Year of Magical Thinking* was, in fact, catastrophic beyond the sudden death of her husband. Five days before John's fatal heart attack, their only child, Quintana, had gone into the hospital with flu-like symptoms that quickly developed into a severe, life-threatening sepsis. In fact, Joan and John had just returned from visiting their daughter in the Intensive Care Unit at the hospital when Dunne suddenly died of heart failure.

In responding to her daughter's illness, Didion's desire for control confronts the limits of her power in the disheartening "morphing" of the symptoms of the intractable illness. She introduces information from her research into discussions with the doctors, resists the removal of the EEC wires and the tracheotomy tube for no reason, and at one point nearly goes to the hospital wearing green scrubs. She says that she was "trying like a sheepdog to herd the doctors" (127-6). She learns, however, that her anxious questionings and suggestions "made no difference" (100). Quintana is still alive at the end of the period of this memoir (though she died shortly after). Experiences with Quintana's mysterious illness seem to contribute to Didion's developing capacity for accepting the limits of her "managerial skills" (98) and her responsibility.

In describing her struggle with grief following John's death, Didion reports on experiences that she entitles the "vortex effect." The opposite of the "magical thinking" by which she tries to *deny* the death of her husband, the "vortex effect" whirls her back into remembered moments of emotional resonance. Certain Los Angeles streets, an image of the California sea coast on a television advertisement, and even a ride on an escalator in Boston are among the events that trigger a "sharp memory" and an uncontrollable rush of associations, tears and a sense of powerlessness. By the midpoint of the memoir, the "vortex" experiences include swarming images that impel her return to emotionally difficult moments in her life with Quintana as well as with John.

"Would I need to relive every mistake?" Didion asks. She notes that the "vortex" leads from something neutral or harmless toward events in which, for example, "one of us had said the wrong thing. Or stopped speaking. Or imagined the other had stopped speaking." At this point, she includes a sustained quotation from Freud's essay on "Mourning and Melancholia":

> Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it.... It is remarkable that this painful unpleasure is taken as a matter of course by us.

Didion concludes; "So Freud explained what he saw as the 'work' of grief, which as described sounded suspiciously like the vortex" (132-3). Didion's research into texts concerning the issues of her emotional experience leads to this moment of recognition. This insight does not altogether end the "vortex" experiences reported in the memoir, but it seems to be a part of a turn toward accepting loss, toward mourning.

Just as she suppresses the issue of John's cardiac condition, Didion also witholds his age (71) at the time of his death. She does mention several times that they had been married for 40 years, and she notes that, for John, she seemed always to be at the age she was at the time of their marriage. She says

in that regard: "Marriage is not only time: it is also, paradoxically, the denial of time" (197). The suppression of John's age in the memoir seems to provide another glimpse of Didion's sustained denials of the encroaching possibility of death. John himself had a clearer awareness of the threat posed by his heart condition. In the autumn before his death, they had disagreed about his wish to visit Paris. He had said, finally, that "he had a sense that if he didn't go to Paris in November he would never again go to Paris." She felt this was a form of "blackmail" (80). They made the trip. A snippet of a representative conversation indicates her recognition of a recurring pattern of evasion:

> *When something happens to me*, he would frequently say.
> *Nothing will happen to you*, I would say
> *But if it does* (196).

Didion includes numerous instances of even more explicit warnings. After learning of his heart condition, Dunne reminds her of his own father's death in his 50's (41), and he addresses his heart condition in his own writing. In the memoir, Didion discusses her rereading of his narrative, *Harp* as "less sunny" than she had remembered it (154). Her comments on this rereading hesitates and circles around a friend's funeral on a day in August, 1987 when John had been to see his doctor. There is an intertwining of the narrative of the funeral with "something else" that happened: John had learned of the severity of his heart condition. We don't hear what he might have said to Joan. We learn that John, the narrator in *Harp*, tells his wife that he learned he "was a candidate for a catastrophic cardiac event.... [and he] started to cry." Didion says, "I had not remembered this or I had determinedly chosen not to remember this" (155). Later, when another doctor diagnoses the significance of John's ventricular fibrillation with an unmistakably vivid image, John shares the report with her: "We call it the widow-maker, pal," the doctor had dryly observed (157). There is, in fact, a series of references to "omens and messages" that she had missed (152). There is even a kind of refrain in the memoir taken from her reading of Phillip Aries' *The Hour of our Death*. Gawain in the *Song of Roland* knows more than his doctor and his priests about his forthcoming death: "*I tell you that I shall not live two days*" (see: 16, 153, 219). Until the last instance of this refrain, Didion prints it in italics. The hero's uncanny awareness becomes, typographically, an accepted reality. This recognition that John was aware of his impending death seems to be a valuable element in Didion's movement into mourning. Such recognition frees her from responsibility for his death and from her need for the desperations of magical thinking.

Didion begins to express a sense of irrecoverable loss and to submit to her own limitations. There is, for example, the recognition that she had "*not sufficiently appreciated*" some of the moments which characterized their marriage. They had worked together as writers, sharing projects and providing editorial readings, but numerous gestures had not been recognized. He had dedicated his book *True Confessions* to his mother and to Joan and Quintana, for example, with the added word: "Generations" (154). It affirms their lives in connection to his family. She had not sufficiently appreciated it. She recalls that when they began an airplane journey, he always took he hand. When she reads in John's college yearbook that Adlai Stephenson had spoken to the class, she realizes that he had never mentioned the event. She reaches a point of asserting that "we knew not the smallest fraction of what there was to know" of each other (196). These glimpses of omissions and lost opportunities are presented without any expression of a need to recover or repeat or correct those incidents in their lives.

More significant, perhaps, is Didion's recognition that her need to be right has created impossible demands and blocked her in making important admissions (see 141 for example). Her immersion in the loss of understanding and control has returned her to a recognition of the vast geological patterns, beyond human control that were her childhood reference points in considering the changes in the world: "some of the islands that were there then would now be gone, just shallows" (227). She says that she achieved no "clarity" or "resolution" as a result of writing this memoir (225), but she concludes by recalling that while swimming with John in the tide on the California coast he was not afraid to feel the swell change and ride its "swiftness and power" (227).

He was not afraid to let go.

Didion's psychoanalytically informed memoir gives a valuable visibility to the emotional expe-

riences provoked by unexpected death. In addition to reporting her personal disorientations following John Gregory Dunne's heart attack, Didion provides a vivid supplement to her earlier works on narrative-writing and the fragility of identity.

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