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Hello to All That

In an interview with Sarah Davidson about her writing, Joan Didion discusses her belief that most writers' styles are influenced by the people they read before they turn twenty. Of her own influences, she names Hemingway, Conrad, and James. She says, "You would never know it from reading me, but I was very influenced by Hemingway.... I learned a lot about how sentences worked. How a short sentence worked in a paragraph, how a long sentence worked. Where the commas worked," (qtd. Davidson 18). It is precisely this love of and attention to the written word at the sentence level that makes Didion's essays—some of the finest in literary craftsmanship—shine. Her hallmark style is evident even in the very first paragraph of "Goodbye to All That":

When I first saw New York I was twenty, and it was summertime, and I got off a DC-7 at the old Idlewild temporary terminal in a new dress which had seemed very smart in Sacramento but seemed less smart already, even in the old Idlewild temporary terminal, and the warm air smelled of mildew and some instinct, programmed by all the movies I had ever seen and all the songs I had ever heard sung and all the stories I had ever read about New York, informed me that it would never be quite the same again. In fact it never was (168).

There is much here that a copy editor might strike in order to streamline the sentence, but to do so would wreck the rhythm and the nuanced description. For example, the repetition of "Idlewild temporary terminal" is instantly noticeable and calls attention to the word "temporary" as if to

hint at the idea that this terminal and this period in New York—and even the author’s life—are temporary.

Similarly, Didion’s purposeful use of the conjunction “and” instead of the less obtrusive comma encourages the reader to move forward in a rush. Sentences like this are meant to make the reader breathless. The effect this movement of information has is that the information itself becomes fluid and alive. The reader is caught up in the stream of the narrative as it careens around bends, rushes through straightaways, and cascades over the small details with no opportunity to stop and reflect over a particularly gorgeous detail. It is unclear where the story will lead—other than a vague sense that “it would never be quite the same again” (168)—but the current tugs and pulls until finally the reader must give in to it and be carried there, wherever *there* might be. To have this level of control over a reader—wherein the reader is committed to the journey and trusts the writer to lead him or her to some place sublime—is something writers aspire to, thus making Didion’s prose both a satisfying read and a worthy text to study.

Like the authors she cites as having influenced her style, Didion knows how to punctuate this breathlessness as well. Often, a short, perfunctory sentence comes at the end of one of these catalogs of scene, as if to offer the reader a moment to rest before the next wave of description will start tugging forward. In the earlier example, the final line after she asserts that even when she first arrived she suspected her sense of New York would never be the same—“In fact it never was” (168)—acts as a temporary dam, stopping the flow of images long enough for the reader to catch her breath before moving on to the next single sentence description that goes on for six lines. The punctuation of “In fact it never was” also acts as a sort of thesis statement, indicating that though this will be a rush of memories, ultimately, the point of it all is to demonstrate the before and after sense of the place, of any place, because nothing stays the same. The shortness and heaviness of that single sentence gives readers a sense of the narrator as wise. It seems she is

about to impart some noble truth from which we can learn. Of course the real trick here for a writer is finding the right, rare moment when such a note can and should be struck. In this instance, Didion has found that moment.

Throughout the piece, the second person pronoun is used as a sort of verbal comma, giving readers another opportunity to collect themselves and possibly to call them to be observer-detectives who are meant to be as invested in understanding Didion's experience as she is herself. It is an interesting choice in that she wants to enlist readers' help but simultaneously does not quite trust them to draw their own conclusions. For instance, she describes those first few days in the city when she is trapped in a frigid hotel room and suffering from a cold, but she is so uncertain about how much to tip a rescuer who might come to fix the temperature in the room that she opts instead to suffer alone without calling the concierge for assistance. She asks, "...was anyone ever so young?" and then as if she doesn't have faith that the reader will realize this is a rhetorical question, she says, "I am here to tell you that someone was" (169). Later, when she is beginning to explain her shift in attitude towards the city, she asks readers, "That is what it was all about, wasn't it? Promises?" (173) but readers understand implicitly that nothing is expected, that Didion herself will provide the answers and tell them exactly what to think, though she does them the favor of pretending that they are included in this examination. Ultimately, a writer will recognize here the power that some use of direct address can have on readers: they begin to feel that they are sitting at the feet of a sage who tells them not only how this time period was for her and others like her, but a little something about the disappointing secrets of life in general.

Her evocation of the city and her own world in that city is peculiar and perfect in that in every description she manages not only to create an expected image of peering into a brownstone,

of views of the bridges, of trudging through the city in the rain, but she also captures in those descriptions a hint of all the ways the city will eventually disappoint her and render itself unlivable. As her image of the city shifts, so does her attention to detail. She manages to create scenes with minimal words, but the images are vibrant and haunting: “That first night I opened my window on the bus into town and watched for the skyline, but all I could see were the wastes of Queens and the big signs that said MIDTOWN TUNNEL THIS LANE . . .” (169) and “All I ever did to that apartment was hang fifty yards of yellow theatrical silk across the bedroom windows, because I had some idea that the gold light would make me feel better, but I did not bother to weight the curtains correctly and all that summer the long panels of transparent golden silk would blow out the windows and get tangled and drenched in the afternoon thunderstorms” (173). In these short descriptions there is both the exciting sense of the city and the young person striking out, but also there is a sort of foreboding, wherein the reader can already pick up on how the city will begin to grate on the nerves and ultimately disappoint. She sets up this dichotomy of innocence vs. experience early on: “In retrospect it seems to me that those days before I knew the names of all the bridges were happier than the ones that came later, but perhaps you will see that as we go along” (169). She then admits that what she wants to tell us in part is what it was like to be young in New York City, but she also wants to explain why she ultimately has to escape New York. A sort of death knell permeates the entire essay as if she wants to remind us, *Don’t get too wrapped up in this, in this life, because it’s all going to end, you know. And you will too.*

In her geographical and physical descriptions, the reader learns as much about Didion as she does the city. Even in the opening image when Didion describes the musty temporary terminal, the image that stands out is not of the terminal itself but of the new dress she is wearing “which had seemed very smart in Sacramento but seemed less smart already” (168). From this, readers get a sense of both the young woman who carefully planned how she would look when she arrived at

her new life and also of a woman introspective and self-critical enough to instantly recognize that she is in a new a world, and what was “smart” at home, is not so here. It is this introspection and self-criticism that makes Didion’s work a good study for an apprentice of memoir. By exposing her own missteps, readers begin to trust the narrator more as an honest, clear-sighted one, who will not lead them astray.

She is not ashamed to illustrate her own naiveté. During her first days in New York City, she speaks to her boyfriend back home and describes her surroundings: “All I could do during those three days was talk long-distance to the boy I already knew I would never marry in the spring. I would stay in New York, I told him, just six months, and I could see the Brooklyn Bridge from my window. As it turned out the bridge was the Triborough, and I stayed eight years” (169). An even richer description that lets the reader inside her head and that illustrates her movement from innocence to experience, comes later when she is just beginning to understand the financial (and thus emotional) hardship of living in New York:

And except on a certain kind of winter evening—six-thirty in the Seventies, say, already dark and bitter with a wind off the river, when I would be walking very fast toward a bus and would look in the bright windows of brownstones and see cooks working in the clean kitchens and imagine women lighting candles on the floor above and beautiful children being bathed on the floor above that—except on nights like those, I never felt poor; I had the feeling that if I needed money I could always get it. I could write a syndicated column for teenagers under the name “Debbi Lynn” or I could smuggle gold into India, or I could become a \$100 call girl, and none of it would matter. (171)

With this description, the reader is both on the street with Didion, looking into the lives of the people in the brownstones, but also looking into Didion herself, and how her view of the possibilities of the city might have easily affected her ability to make a permanent sort of life there.

While it is possible to peer into the brownstones with her, what the reader focuses on instead is the feeling of longing and of being out of place.

Though she gives us glimpses into her psyche, Didion is not a writer who offers unlimited access into her life. There are elements she sweeps over, as if they are unimportant. For instance, “And when I left the apartment in the Nineties (that was when I was leaving everything, when it was all breaking up) I left everything in it, even my winter clothes . . .” (172). This causes the reader to wonder about “everything” she was leaving and what “it” was that was “all breaking up.” If the *everything* and the *it* are enough to lead to her departure from the city, surely it is worthy of mentioning in some detail. During a description of the apartment where she did nothing but hang yellow silk across the windows, she says, “That was the year, my twenty-eighth, when I was discovering that not all of the promises would be kept, that some things are in fact irrevocable and that it had counted after all, every evasion and every procrastination, every mistake, every word, all of it” (173). In terms of personal narrative, these are considerable holes to leave open for the reader to try to fill. My paper-marking hand itches to write (and underline in the margins): *More here!* What evasions and procrastinations and mistakes? Though she willingly offers the facts—“I hurt the people I cared about, and insulted those I did not. I cut myself off from the one person who was closer to me than any other” (176)—she does not give us the details that would paint the full picture of this period of her life. She has told us this is the truth and we have no reason to doubt it, but because she has not offered up how she has hurt people or whom she has hurt, it is a sort of rough outline instead of fully developed event in the essay. This is, perhaps, the element that many readers find the most perplexing and even frustrating, especially younger readers. Whereas with other authors, specific details are not given because they are not needed (it is enough to know there was abuse without getting the specific details, for example, in Nuala O’Faolain’s memoir *Are You Somebody?: The Accidental Memoir of a Dublin Woman*), with Didion, there is a sense

that she has intentionally dangled this tidbit and is smirking a little that the reader is over-interested in her life. Where a writer like O’Faolain seems to be saying somewhat gently, “This is really all the information that you need. Trust me,” Didion withholds information necessary to understand the story. Perhaps this is nothing more than an intentional play to create a certain air of celebrity. When considering those instances where she addresses the reader directly, this is perhaps not an unwarranted leap. At one point when describing an encounter with a friend who is jaded about the possibility of new experiences or meeting new people, Didion seems to recognize in retrospect that she spent longer than necessary committed to the notion that anything could happen in New York. She says, “You will have perceived by now that I was not one to profit by the experience of others, that it was a very long time indeed before I stopped believing in new faces and began to understand the lesson in that story, which was that it is distinctly possible to stay too long at the Fair” (175). Her belief that the reader will find her a worthy person to expend energy figuring out that mystique is unwavering. Though the benefits from this are easy to see—readers are intrigued, will want to read more work to see if they can uncover some of her mysteries, etc.—it is this quality that led to my own naïve early conclusion that Didion’s work had an illusion of depth rather than substance.

What Didion does state clearly, however, and the thing that becomes central to the essay, is the notion of being an outsider. It is this sense of not quite belonging—“Someone who lives with a plane schedule in the drawer lives on a slightly different calendar” (171)— that makes this essay work. Just as her new dress is instantly out of place, so is Didion herself, and the reason for that, she believes, is because of her geography of origin. Using the example of the Christmas holiday, she illustrates:

Other people could take it in stride, going to Stowe or abroad or going for the day to their mothers’ places in Connecticut; those of us who believed that we lived somewhere

else would spend it making and canceling airline reservations, waiting for weatherbound flights as if for the last plane out of Lisbon in 1940, and finally comforting one another, those of us who were left, with the oranges and mementos and smoked-oyster stuffings of childhood, gathering close, colonials in a far country. (172)

The use of the word “colonials” stands out, particularly when followed with the punctuation of the opening sentence of the next paragraph: “Which is precisely what we were” (172). Creating this image of the “colonizer”, far from home at a time of year typically reserved for family and belonging, she illustrates the nature of feeling “other” in a city that is supposed to erase all such distinctions. The premise that she is different and that there are others like her who cannot embrace New York as home is central to the essay. She says, “I am not sure that it is possible for anyone brought up in the East to appreciate entirely what New York, the idea of New York, means to those of us who came out of the West and the South” (172). She then describes how to the native Easterner, New York is a reality of buildings and events, but to the non-native, “New York was no mere city. It was instead an infinitely romantic notion, the mysterious nexus of all love and money and power, the shining and perishable dream itself. To think of ‘living’ there was to reduce the miraculous to the mundane; one does not ‘live’ at Xanadu” (172). In fact, she confesses that she finds it difficult “to understand those young women for whom New York was not simply an ephemeral Estoril but a real place, girls who bought toasters and installed new cabinets in their apartments and committed themselves to some reasonable future. I never bought any furniture in New York” (172). Didion’s understanding that she can never own New York, can never completely call it home—nor would she want to because to do so would rob the place of its magic—is refreshing. New York (even before September 11th) has always been a city that many Americans seem to believe is theirs, whether they have actually lived there or even have visited there. It is, perhaps, because it permeates the culture: movies and novels are set there, news comes from there,

and a sense of our immigrant ancestors seems to focus on that port of entry, even if the reality is an immigration center in Boston or San Francisco. She is not sharing this story for other New Yorkers. It is for those of us who haven't come to the party but for whom the party lives in our heads. Didion not only dismisses this notion that the city belongs to everyone who wants it, but goes even further and claims that only an outsider can understand what the city represents. As one who often feels (wrongly, perhaps) that I must be an expert on a subject before writing about it, this position seems like a moment of genius. Being the outsider and offering that perspective on the place and on herself becomes her expertise. Her vantage point on both the city and on the inner sanctum of the 1950s New York literary scene is always as someone who is not in or of it, but *near* it. She can only watch and record her experience.

In the end, that is all anyone can do.

Didion's choice to move between physical and philosophical descriptions is one that writers should take note of because it does the double duty of rooting the reader in the setting she's presented while pointing to bigger questions to be pondered. In this description of a single day, Didion's ability to shift seamlessly between these two worlds is on display:

I remember one day when someone who did have the West Village number came to pick me up for lunch there, and we both had hangovers, and I cut my finger opening him a beer and burst into tears, and we walked to a Spanish restaurant and drank Bloody Marys and *gazpacho* until we felt better. I was not then guilt-ridden about spending afternoons that way, because I still had all the afternoons in the world. (175)

Here in one sentence, the reader is treated to an entire day, rich with specific detail and corporeal description, followed quickly by the statement that will hang in the air like the last note of a tolling clock and force the reader to contemplate the time-richness of youth.

Were there only a single thing for young writers to glean from this essay, that is it: the unimportant events are sometimes our best stories. When we fall into or out of love or when a family member dies or when we change jobs, there is a clear line between *before* and *after*. Didion artfully lets us know from the first two sentences that this will not be one of those stories.

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