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On Two Published Versions of Joan Didion's "Marrying Absurd"

Published on May 10, 1968, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, Joan Didion's second book (and the one that would establish her reputation as a major American writer) included twenty essays that had first appeared as reportage, column, or casual in some of the era's most important magazines. Most of *Slouching* was written from 1965-1967, the majority of the pieces penned for the *Saturday Evening Post*, a general-interest magazine that had several million readers at the time. The stories that Didion had pursued were typically of her own choosing, and the pieces that would be included in *Slouching* were meant to embody her Farrar, Straus and Giroux editor Henry Robbins' view of a book that showed "a native daughter's confrontation with California: her reevaluation of youthful romance, her wonder and dismay at the changes time had forced" (Daugherty 257). While this guiding principle would help give the book unity, Didion, unhappy with the editing that had been imposed on her lines by magazine editors, pored over the tearsheets and insisted on typing the *Slouching* manuscript from scratch. She outlined the process in a September 9, 1967, letter to Robbins, saying that she would first write a preface, and that she would take until November 1st to pull the manuscript together. She was adding pieces to *Slouching* even as she typed; an October 2nd letter to Robbins mentions her wanting to add the Comrade Lasky piece, which was published in the *Post's* November 18th issue. "Marrying Absurd," the last *Post* piece included in *Slouching*, appeared in the December 16th issue.

Slouching would put on display a different kind of nonfiction, where the writer bares her background and biases not to occlude, but to enhance a story's objectivity. As Didion herself claimed in a

Post column that did not make its way into the book, objectivity is not possible unless a reader knows “the writer’s particular bias” (“Alicia and the Underground Press” 14). *Slouching* shows a writer who is quite capable of mining her personal history to help us understand the story (e.g., “John Wayne: A Love Song”); of putting herself at the center when she makes the story (e.g., “Goodbye to All That”); and of staying off the page if her presence would get in the way of the story (e.g., “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream”). While Didion claims in her Preface to *Slouching* that she is “bad at interviewing people” (xvi), some pieces show that she’s quite adept at the task (see “Where the Kissing Never Stops,” her portrait of Joan Baez, to catch one of her interviewees referring to Didion as “darling” as he responds to her questions about counterculture politics [53]).

The five features and eight Points West columns from the *Saturday Evening Post* that make up the bulk of *Slouching* show only minor editing from magazine to book—a few lines or clauses cut or added, a word or two replaced, a comma taken away, a paragraph break gone, a title changed. In each case, their original through-line remains intact. There are, however, two exceptions: a 1965 *Post* feature on Helen Gurley Brown is reduced to just a few lines of the radio call-in show devoted to Brown’s book, which became the second section of “Los Angeles Notebook.” (The Brown piece, “Bosses Make Lousy Lovers,” is uncredited in Didion’s Acknowledgments; it brings the number of *Post* pieces used to make *Slouching* to fourteen.)

The other exception, “Marrying Absurd,” on the thriving, predatorial marriage industry of Las Vegas, undertakes a far more interesting transformation from column in the *Post* to evocative essay in *Slouching*. The book does not include the sixth and final *Post* paragraph—which lambastes a pregnant, underaged bride for thinking that her five-minute Vegas wedding ceremony has somehow absolved her of both poor judgment and poor taste—and it adds to the middle of the fourth paragraph a masterful sentence that serves as both pivot and thesis: “But Las Vegas offers something other than convenience; it is merchandising ‘niceness,’ the facsimile of proper ritual, to children who do not know how else to find it,

how to make arrangements, how to do it ‘right.’” Thus, six months after its publication in the *Post*, “Marrying Absurd” appears to make an about-face, shifting its attack from those who marry in Las Vegas to the wedding industry that lures them.

“Marrying Absurd” is one of the densest, most information-packed essays in *Slouching*. In its first four paragraphs, Didion explains lax marriage laws operating in Clark County, Nevada, and then takes readers on a ride across the desert to the city of Las Vegas, quoting signs along the highway (“GETTING MARRIED? Free License Information First Strip Exit”). She dryly notes that the industry probably reached peak performance on the last day in 1965 that a young man could beat the draft for Vietnam by getting married, and she quotes a Justice of the Peace who brags about the scores of young couples he married on that day, getting the ceremony down from five minutes to three to squeeze all of them in. Didion also takes us through casinos and hotel bars and past ladies’ room attendants bearing poppers, just to give readers a feel for the city and its primary reason for existence, and she includes a drive-by of the Strip, where young couples in full wedding regalia mill about the sidewalk and crosswalks on grimy streets. She quotes more than a dozen advertisements for the chapels (e.g., “Sincere and Dignified Since 1954”); inside one, a sign on the chapel door, “One Moment Please—Wedding,” goes up and down as couples wait in line to be wed. “Marrying Absurd” draws from a range of sources—historical fact, legal stipulation, careful observation, and the good fortune by Didion to cross the path of a newly wed showgirl and shady groom on the street one night. They speak in the snappy patter of crime films, Didion reproducing their drunken conversation in quick, skillful lines. They are Didion’s example of those who wed in Vegas Strip chapels out of mere “convenience” (the bride, wearing “masses of flame-colored hair” and an “orange minidress,” tells her new husband she needs to pick up her kids from the sitter before he takes her to her midnight show).

By the time readers arrive at this point in *Slouching*, they know enough about Didion and her beliefs (her biases, essentially) to realize that the Vegas wedding industry—nothing less than a travesty—is taking

its toll on her. Readers also understand that Didion is far less concerned about the appalling few who marry for convenience than she is about the young couples who have come to Las Vegas in search of a meaningful ceremony. Such couples have earned Didion's pity; they are misguided, naïve. *Time Magazine's* insightful review of *Slouching* noted that "what captivates the reader is the fascination of discovering how her brittle sensibilities and flamboyant neuroses react to events" ("Melancholia, U.S.A." 86). Indeed, Didion had a highly developed sense of right and wrong; in 1977 she told an interviewer for the *New York Times* that "In order to maintain a semblance of purposeful behavior on this earth you have to believe that things are right or wrong" (Davidson 27). Even a table, Didion said during that interview, "can be right or wrong." It's easy for a reader of *Slouching* to believe that when Didion wrote "Marrying Absurd" she had the range of acceptable wedding practices and venues ingrained in her consciousness, every wedding ceremony that she had ever attended—those of cousins and friends and acquaintances—having coalesced into a shimmering image of perfection. Every wedding chapel along the Las Vegas Strip, of course, would be well beyond Didion's frame.

A reader coming across "Marrying Absurd" in the *Saturday Evening Post* in mid December of 1967, however, might be disinclined to accept Didion's biases as warmly as the anonymous reviewer for *Time*. As just one more column from a writer they may or may not remember from earlier issues, a mere page in almost a hundred of them, a reader gets a very different feel going from busy magazine cover to advertisements for cameras, cars, and pipes to Table of Contents and a word from the editor about the current issue to a couple of letters, more ads, etc. The first four paragraphs of "Marrying Absurd" appeared in the *Post* as described above; here are the fifth and sixth paragraphs, which show a heightened eye and ear, not to mention a striking rhythm, and then a surprising turn of mind:

I sat next to one such wedding party in a Strip restaurant the last time I was in Las Vegas. The marriage had just taken place; the bride still wore her wedding dress, the mother her corsage. A bored waiter poured out a few swallows of pink champagne ("on the house") for everyone but

the bride, who was too young to be served. “You’ll need something with more kick than that,” the bride’s father said with heavy jocularly to his new son-in-law; the ritual jokes about the wedding night had a certain Panglossian character, since the bride was clearly several months pregnant. Shrimp cocktails, the New York Steak Special. Another round of pink champagne, this time not on the house, and the bride began to cry. “It was just as nice,” she sobbed, “as I hoped and dreamed it would be.”

She meant of course that it had been Sincere. It had been Dignified. She had it on a phonograph record to prove it. All the fears and recriminations and knots in the stomach of the past few months were gone. Smoothed into respectability. She was a girl, and perhaps many of them were, those Las Vegas brides in the detachable modified trains, for whom the sexual revolution was a newspaper phrase, quite without meaning. (*Post* 18)

The fifth paragraph would be the final one in *Slouching*, though “wedding” would be absent from “wedding dress,” and the fragment naming the food would be gone. It’s hard to believe that Didion ever wrote the sixth paragraph, which goes badly astray in spirit if not phrasing. The first three sentences are direct references to earlier portions of the piece, where signs from chapels had been reproduced, but the use of capital letters in this last paragraph comes across not as quotation but as sarcasm. The paragraph’s last three sentences ratchet up that tone to imply that more than one young bride in Vegas that evening is pregnant; the reference to the sexual revolution is both vague and gratuitous. Bear in mind that the *Post* column did not have the pivotal sentence quoted earlier; that sentence went a long way toward clarifying Didion’s intention. With it, it’s easy to read the tone of the fifth paragraph as pitying, but minus that sentence, its tone becomes less certain. The sixth paragraph, which would not make its way into *Slouching*, reads like a very cheap, extremely derisive shot.

It also makes a peculiar, un-Didion-like move: it purports to know the thoughts of the young bride seated near her in a Strip restaurant, whose words and actions Didion has documented in that heart-

breakingly beautiful fifth paragraph. Aside from this portion of “Marrying Absurd,” Didion’s writing for the *Post* (or any magazine, for that matter, in the mid 1960s) stuck to facts, the surface (as Scott F. Parker notes, “She focuses on surfaces because surfaces are available to her” [xi]); when thoughts were included, they were Didion’s own, not her subjects’ (which, in fairness, could probably never be as interesting as Didion’s). Given the timing of both the Points West column, with its December 16, 1967, publication date, and the essay version in Didion’s book manuscript, which she had promised to get to Robbins by November 1, 1967, Didion was likely working with both editors simultaneously on this piece. With the placement of “Marrying Absurd” in the first part (of three) of the paginated book manuscript she sent to Robbins, Didion had surely typed it early rather than late in the process, indicating that her intention was for it to end exactly as it ends in *Slouching*, with the bride commenting on her hopes and dreams for her wedding ceremony (Typescript). Clearly, as well, the skillful and highly illuminating compound-complex sentence that Didion inserts into the fourth paragraph of *Slouching*’s version was added in its proofing stage, on the cusp of the new year—the sentence is typed by typewriter at the bottom of a typeset page, with editorial marks showing where the new sentence should be inserted (Galley). Though she could also have included the *Post*’s sixth paragraph, she did not.

One way of explaining the two versions of “Marrying Absurd” is to think that Didion knew the piece as originally conceived (i.e., the version in the typescript of *Slouching*) needed something more, so she experimented. Another way is simply to point to editorial intervention. Perhaps the *Post* column needed more words to meet a page requirement, or perhaps her editor there, Michael Congdon, thought it needed commentary at the end to emphasize the sordidness of Las Vegas weddings. He once told an interviewer for *Cosmopolitan* that Didion “required little editing but that ‘if you’re right about something and you put it well, you can probably get her to make the change’” (Aronson 116). Juggling deadlines for the *Post* and FSG might have resulted in hasty writing for the magazine, but Didion would know she could get the essay right for her book.

Three issues after the “Marrying Absurd” column appeared, a reader of the *Post*, from Barstow, California, about 90 minutes northeast of LA on the road to Las Vegas, wrote in to ask where Joan Didion “get[s] off running down Las Vegas weddings,” adding that she was married in the Vegas courthouse by a Justice of the Peace, that she and her husband are “still happily married and the parents of three great kids,” and that “Not everyone who marries in Vegas is drunk, pregnant, mini-skirted or multi-married. Most are average people like us who don’t care for the expense, the show, the planning and waiting for a traditional church wedding” (Schwartz 4). I wonder if the woman would have been as offended by the *Slouching* version, which did not include the most insulting portion and shifted the blame. I also wonder if Didion was surprised by the complaint. She always kept in mind an audience for her nonfiction, and she was writing for the *Post*, about which the *Los Angeles Times*, in the wake of the *Post*’s demise two years later (they went broke), said of its better days, “The magazine was solid, middle-class, prosperous but never flamboyant, optimistic, steady, kindly, more attuned perhaps to [small towns] than to the metropoli of the world, but always with a serene confidence in the perfectibility of man and his works” (Champlin). That same article mentions something about the *Post* in more recent times having shoved its readers away (“The readers didn’t desert; they had to be driven away with sticks, rejected in humiliating terms for being insufficiently urban, young and affluent”), and it goes on to acknowledge that the *Post*’s original “vision was something less than the whole vision of America.” Didion, of course, was focused on finding the cracks and seams that undercut any such nostalgia, even if she herself preferred the idyll.

Brides received prominent treatment in an earlier piece of Didion’s for the *Post*, in “How Can I Tell Them There’s Nothing Left” (May 7, 1966), which, after undergoing a title change, became the lead essay in *Slouching*, “Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream”—the very essay that Robbins thought should start the book (Daugherty 257). This one found its story in the San Bernadino Valley, many miles east of LA, where “a belief in the literal interpretation of Genesis has slipped imperceptibly into a [“the” in the *Post*] literal interpretation of *Double Indemnity*, the country of the teased hair and the Capris and the girls for

whom all life's promise comes down to a waltz-length white wedding dress and the birth of a Kimberly or a Sherry or a Debbi and a Tijuana divorce and a return to hairdressers' school" ("Some Dreamers" 4). With class distinctions and social striving as backdrop, the essay centers around a husband's murder, a drugged dentist left to die in a burning Volkswagen late in the night on a deserted road. The *Post* title is a quote from a police report, the dentist's wife wondering aloud what she can tell her children about the charred remains of their father. Both the essay in *Slouching* and the piece in the *Post* conclude with the lover of the dentist's wife marrying the pretty young governess of his children: "The bride wore a long white *peau de soie* dress and carried a shower bouquet of sweetheart roses with stephanotis streamers. A coronet of seed pearls held her illusion veil" ("Some Dreamers" 28).

The summer before she graduated from Berkeley, Didion wrote wedding announcements for the *Sacramento Union* (Chronology 915). She would refine her eye for formal dress at *Vogue*, where she was employed the eight years she lived in New York, just prior to her stint with the *Post*. Didion's own wedding in January 1964 appears to have been a tasteful affair. Though she and John Gregory Dunne still lived in New York at the time, they married in California, at the San Juan Bautista mission church, partway between Los Angeles and Sacramento. Daugherty describes the wedding dress she purchased in San Francisco at Ransohoff's as "backless, white, short, made of silk" (141). He also notes that the church Didion and Dunne chose is the same one Hitchcock used in *Vertigo*, the bell tower of which Kim Novak leaps from. Two black and white photographs of the wedding are shown during the fourteenth minute of Griffin Dunne's Netflix documentary on his Aunt Joan, *The Center Will Not Hold* (2017), which takes its title (more or less) from the same Yeats poem that Didion used as an epigraph for her most important book. In the first of the photos, we see Didion and Dunne only from the back, but in the second, outdoors apparently, they're facing the camera. He, in a dark suit with a white carnation, is smiling happily, while she, in huge sunglasses, her veil pushed back, is looking pensively in the direction of the camera. Flanked by her husband and the priest who performed the ceremony, Didion has the look of a fashionable

movie star years before the great photographer Julian Wasser would seal her celebrity. That the bride in that photograph would find Las Vegas to be a tawdry place in which to take one's vows is no surprise. While the letter writer from Barstow may have spoken for a large portion of America when she complained about the piece that appeared in the *Post*, Didion committed to posterity a version of "Marrying Absurd" that is far more reflective, and sympathetic, for having added a crucial sentence and having kept out the column's final lines.

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