



Daniel Nester

## Joan Didion and Aldous Huxley's Three Poles

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When Joan Didion died the day before Christmas Eve last year, I had just turned in my grades after another rough pandemic semester teaching writing. Despite the many obstacles and distractions, the upper-level creative nonfiction class was particularly successful. As I read student portfolios of memoir pieces and essays that worked from writing models, I was reminded again how Joan Didion had provided models for the forms in which we were writing, which I continue to find to be miraculous.

I say miraculous because my classes, by and large, are composed of first generation students, many still firmly inside their family's belief systems. These are students who will go on to work as elementary and high school teachers, as New York State employees, and as nonprofit administrators. These are not students who, like Didion, worked at *Vogue*, lived in a doorman building in the East 70s, or posed for *Time* magazine photographer in front of a Corvette in a long-sleeve t-shirt dress. Since her passing, there have been plenty of essays and Twitter threads that cover Didion's so-called privilege, and that is a needed reassessment. But what is miraculous about great writing is its alterity, its ability to translate across time, across demographics.

In our upper-level creative nonfiction classes, one of the culminating assignments is something I call "Make Your Own 'White Album'." There are lots of moving parts to this assignment, and it covers a good chunk of any given semester. It involves the class reading Didion's "The White Album," watching [a YouTube playlist](#) to deepen our sense of the many cultural references in the essay, and writing our own version of "The White Album" using our own lives. The results are almost always successful and often

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amazing. The assignment was included in the [\*Now Write! Nonfiction\*](#), published in 2009 if anyone wants to check it out.

Another Didion essay I bring into just about every class is “Goodbye To All That,” Didion’s 1967 essay about leaving New York City. I don’t assign per se; instead, I put it up on the projector and I tell the story of how, when I was writing my own essay about leaving New York City, I obsessed over this Didion essay for years. I wanted to know what made it successful, how it seemed to be universal and specific at the same time. So I broke it down, sentence by sentence, often diagramming the more important sentences on the board. It’s all a bit of professor theater, of course. The larger point is to model the kind of slow reading and re-reading that gets lost in classes where hundreds of pages need to be covered each week.

What I show on the projector isn’t just the essay. It’s the essay, pasted into Word and color-coded according to writer Aldous Huxley’s idea of the essay’s “three-poled frame of reference,” which he describes in the preface to his *Collected Essays*, published in 1960. I first encountered this idea in *The Essay: Theory and Pedagogy for an Active Form*, Paul Heilker’s 1996 study published by the National Council of Teachers of English. Sitting in a chapter on “Twentieth-Century Theories of the Essay” beside heady sections on Adorno and Lukács is a gloss over a rather straightforward, and eminently teachable, idea about essays. Here’s the Huxley passage:

Essays belong to a literary species whose extreme variability can be studied most effectively within a three-poled frame of reference. There is the pole of the personal and the autobiographical; there is the pole of the objective, the factual, the concrete-particular; and there is the pole of the abstract-universal. Most essayists are at home and at their best in the neighborhood of only one of the essay’s three poles, or at the most only in the neighborhood of two of them.

The most richly satisfying essays are those which make the best not of one, not of two, but of all the three worlds in which it is possible for the essay to exist. Freely, effortlessly, thought and feeling move in these consummate works of art, hither and thither between the essay’s three poles

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—from the personal to the universal, from the abstract back to the concrete, from the objective datum to the inner experience.

For anyone in need of a clear-eyed theory of what makes essays tick, I recommend the entire preface. Huxley’s description of “predominantly personal essayists” is especially useful when trying to distinguish among essay, memoir, personal essay, which is a question that comes up quite often in a survey of different nonfiction modes. That Huxley includes the “predominantly objective essayists who do not speak directly of themselves, but turn their attention outward to some literary or scientific or political theme” is also useful for students who wonder just what it is they are writing in many of their “non-creative” writing classes. Huxley says that “[t]heir art consists in setting forth, passing judgment upon, and drawing general conclusions from, the relevant data.” Including the objective essayist is also especially helpful for any creative writing instructor who stresses the need for outer data, for research to be placed into the mix—something many creative writing students dread or dismiss or both. When Huxley covers the “personal-autobiographical,” we talk about how in so much creative nonfiction we dig into our personal histories and material and craft them into true stories. And then we get to what to my mind is the hardest part to teach, the “abstract-universal.” “And how splendid, how truly oracular are the utterances of the great generalizers!” Huxley writes of the essays who lean abstract-universal, quoting Francis Bacon, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Baltasar Gracian, and others.

It’s in an upper-level creative nonfiction course where we might talk about Vivian Gornick’s ideas of *situation* and *story*, and how it’s important to spell out our own wisdom, and how sometimes we will teach readers why a certain personal story might be useful or enriching. We can do that not so much by hand-holding or “telling,” by just speaking our wisdom, our truths. In a composition course or a 200-level writing class, it’s more about modeling ways of deep reading, or reading as writers, as opposed to as scholars or a casual reader.

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I also confess to my students a triangle freak. I have a slide show called “Triangles, Triangles Triangles” with rhetoric’s “ethos/logos/pathos,” composition studies triad of “say/mean/matter” to the story of Goldilocks and the Three Bears and comedy writing’s trinity of set-up- build-up, and punchline. Student reactions range from “wow, that’s very intense” to “I’m so glad to see someone else so obsessive over something they love” (both are actual quotes from a recent semester’s online discussion board).

What I found about “Goodbye to All That” was that Didion’s essay is that rare essay specimen that includes all three of Huxley’s poles—the personal-autobiographical; the objective, factual, and concrete-particular; and the abstract-universal. And I discovered this, as many obsessive nerds do, with our tools of the trade: colored highlighter markers. Re-typing Didion's essay into Word, I then set up a color-code for Huxley’s poles: yellow for “personal and autobiographical”; purple for “objective, factual, concrete-particular”; and green for “abstract-universal.”

What I learned runs counter to a lot of what we learn in the classroom about what makes an effective paragraph, let alone what makes a great essay. Begin right off the bat with something completely general, as Didion does, with “It is easy to see the beginnings of things, and hard to see the ends”? Sprinkle factual nuggets and nest them mid-paragraph, like veins of an arm, as Didion does? And what is it about Didion’s writing that leans heavily personal, in my reading yellowed with autobiographical details, and yet I come out of it feeling like I have learned something about being human and leaving a place like New York? It’s the balancing act on those three poles that makes this essay work. What I draw from this essay isn’t that Didion lived a completely glamorous lifestyle in New York and went to fabulous parties—although, to be honest, that does hold my interest. It’s that Didion has learned something about life and New York, “a city only for the very young.”

Another part of what makes the abstract-universal passages pop is that Didion lets us in on how she is writing it, what Chris Anderson calls the “rhetoric of process.” “Part of what I want to tell you,” Didion writes, and then goes on to compare her time in the city in cinematic terms. At another point she

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asks “[W]as anyone ever so young? I am here to say someone was.” This idea, of letting the reader in on the labor of getting the writing done, resonates with students, no matter the level. Whether it’s making an argument or writing about our own lives, bread-crumbing our struggle as we go along is not only an honest gesture to the reader—it’s a way of having them see your point of view or understanding their story.

When students look at the color-coded Didion essay, what we notice is that the abstract-universal sections aren’t placed where one might expect in, say, a five-paragraph essay (intro and conclusion) or in a traditional academic paragraph (the summative final sentence). Didion might lead off a paragraph with an abstract sentence, or nest it inside a paragraph. A student pointed out that one abstract-universal section that sits inside a parenthetical, one that begins “It strikes me now that the people I knew in New York all had curious and self-defeating sidelines.” She called it a “hidden truth bomb.” I really liked that.

What comes up after these discussions, besides a show-and-tell about their instructor’s obsessiveness, is that students can see if they can work with all three poles of reference—personal, objective, and universal—in their drafts. The more personal one student’s piece, for example, the less inclined a writer might be to make universal claims, which is exactly what might make a draft resonate. Introducing Huxley’s idea of the three-poled frame of reference, and including my own challenges in figuring out how to do that, makes for a fruitful min-lecture and discussion.

Of course, there is also the magic of the words Didion wrote, her style, those sentences, ah those sentences, which can’t be color-coded. (I started diagramming her sentences, too, which is another post, maybe.) Long story short: she was a master, I tried to etherize her writing on a table and color-code it, and I failed to solve the mystery of why Didion’s essay was so great, but I also model for my students the kind of work that might go into reading something you really love.

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## Goodbye to All That

by Joan Didion

personal and autobiographical

objective, factual, concrete-particular

abstract-universal

How many miles to Babylon?  
Three score miles and ten—  
Can I get there by candlelight?  
Yes, and back again—  
If your feet are nimble and light  
You can get there by candlelight.

It is easy to see the beginnings of things, and harder to see the ends. I can remember now, with a clarity that makes the nerves in the back of my neck constrict, when New York began for me, but I cannot lay my finger upon the moment it ended, can never cut through the ambiguities and second starts and broken resolves to the exact place on the page where the heroine is no longer as optimistic as she once was. 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 read about New York, informed me that it would never be quite the same again. In fact it never was. Some time later there was a song in the jukeboxes on the Upper East Side that went “but where is the schoolgirl who used to be me,” and if it was late enough at night I used to wonder that. I know now that almost everyone wonders something like that, sooner or later and no matter what he or she is doing, but one of the mixed blessings of being twenty and twenty-one and even twenty-three is the conviction that nothing like this, all evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, has ever happened to anyone before.

Of course it might have been some other city, had circumstances been different and the time been different and had I been different, might have been Paris or Chicago or even San Francisco, but because I am talking about myself I am talking here about New York. 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 big signs that said MIDTOWN TUNNEL THIS LANE and then a flood of summer rain (even that seemed remarkable and exotic, for I had come out of the West where there was no summer rain), and for the next three days I sat wrapped in blankets in a hotel room air conditioned to 35 degrees and tried to get over a cold and a high fever. It did not occur to me to call a doctor, because I knew none, and although it did occur to me to call the desk and ask that the air conditioner be turned off, I never called, because I did not know how much to tip

whoever might come—was anyone ever so young? I am here to tell you that someone was. All I could do during those years 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.

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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. Part of what I want to tell you is what it is like to be young in New York, how six months can become eight years with the deceptive ease of a film dissolve, for that is how those years appear to me now, in a long sequence of sentimental dissolves and old-fashioned trick shots—the Seagram Building fountains dissolve into snowflakes, I enter a revolving door at twenty and come out a good deal older, and on a different street. But most particularly I want to explain to you, and in the process perhaps to myself, why I no longer live in New York. It is often said that New York is a city for only the very rich and the very poor. It is less often said that New York is also, at least for those of us who came there from somewhere else, a city only for the very young.

I remember once, one cold bright December evening in New York, suggesting a friend who complained of having been around too long that he come with me to a party where there would be, I assured him with the bright resourcefulness of twenty-three, “new faces.” He laughed literally until he choked, and I had to roll down the taxi window and hit him on the back. “New faces,” he said finally, “don’t tell me about new faces.” It seemed that the last time he had gone to a party where he had been promised “new faces,” there had been fifteen people in the room, and he had already spelt with five of the women and owed money to all but two of the men. I laughed with him, but the first snow had just begun to fall and the big Christmas trees glittered yellow and white as far as I could see up Park Avenue and I had a new dress and it would be a long while before I would come to understand the particular moral of the story.

It would be a long while because, quite simply, I was in love with New York. I do not mean “love” in any colloquial way, I mean that I was in love with the city, the way you love the first person who ever touches you and you never love anyone quite that way again. I remember walking across Sixty-second Street one twilight that first spring, or the second spring, they were all alike for a while. I was late to meet someone but I stopped at Lexington Avenue and bought a peach and stood on the corner eating it and knew that I had come out out of the West and reached the mirage. I could taste the peach and feel the soft air blowing from a subway grating on my legs and I could smell lilac and garbage and expensive perfume and I knew that it would cost something sooner or later—because I did not belong there, did not come from there—but when you are twenty-two or twenty-three, you figure that later you will have a high emotional balance, and be able to pay whatever it costs. I still believed in possibilities then, still had the sense, so peculiar to New York, that something extraordinary would happen any minute, any day, any month. I was making only \$65 or \$70 then a week then (“Put yourself in Hattie Carnegie’s

hands," I was advised without the slightest trace of irony by an editor of the magazine for which I worked), so little money that some weeks I had to charge food at Bloomingdale's gourmet shop in order to eat, a fact which went unmentioned in the letters I wrote to California. I never told my father that I needed money because then he would have sent it, and I would never know if I could do it by myself. At that time making a living seemed a game to me, with arbitrary but quite inflexible rules. 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 clean kitchens and 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 would matter.

Nothing was irrevocable; everything was within reach. Just around every corner lay something curious and interesting, something I had never before seen or done or known about. I could go to a party and meet someone who called himself Mr. Emotional Appeal and ran The Emotional Appeal Institute or Tina Onassis Blandford or a Florida cracker who was then a regular on what they called "the Big C," the Southampton-El Morocco circuit ("I'm well connected on the Big C, honey," he would tell me over collard greens on his vast borrowed terrace), or the widow of the celery king of the Harlem market or a piano salesman from Bonne Terre, Missouri, or someone who had already made and lost two fortunes in Midland, Texas. I could make promises to myself and to other people and there would be all the time in the world to keep them. I could stay up all night and make mistakes, and none of them would count.

You see I was in a curious position in New York: it never occurred to me that I was living a real life there. In my imagination I was always there for just another few months, just until Christmas or Easter or the first warm day in May. For that reason I was most comfortable with the company of Southerners. They seemed to be in New York as I was, on some indefinitely extended leave from wherever they belonged, disciplined to consider the future, temporary exiles who always knew when the flights left for New Orleans or Memphis or Richmond or, in my case, California. Someone who lives with a plane schedule in the drawer lives on a slightly different calendar. Christmas, for example, was a difficult season. Other people could take it in stride, going to Stowe or going 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 oranges and mementos and smoked-oyster stuffings of childhood, gathering close, colonials in a far country.

Which is precisely what we were. 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. To an Eastern child, particularly a

child who has always has an uncle on Wall Street and who has spent several hundred Saturdays first at F.A.O. Schwarz and being fitted for shoes at Best's and then waiting under the Biltmore clock and dancing to Lester Lanin, New York is just a city, albeit the city, a plausible place for people to live, But to those of us who came from places where no one had heard of Lester Lanin and Grand Central Station was a Saturday radio program, where Wall Street and Fifth Avenue and Madison Avenue were not places at all but abstractions ("Money," and "High Fashion," and "The Hucksters"), 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.

In fact it was difficult in the extreme for me 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 furniture. I never bought any furniture in New York. For a year or so I lived in other people's apartments; after that I lived in the Nineties in an apartment furnished entirely with things taken from storage by a friend whose wife had moved away. 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 and the map of Sacramento County I had hung on the bedroom wall to remind me who I was, and I moved into a monastic four-room floor-through on Seventy-fifth Street. "Monastic" is perhaps misleading here, implying some chic severity; until after I was married and my husband moved some furniture in, there was nothing at all in those four rooms except a cheap double mattress and box springs, ordered by telephone the day I decided to move, and two French garden chairs lent me by a friend who imported them. (It strikes me now that the people I knew in New York all had curious and self-defeating sidelines. They imported garden chairs which did not sell very well at Hammacher Schlemmer or they tried to market hair straighteners in Harlem or they ghosted exposés of Murder Incorporated for Sunday supplements. I think that perhaps none of us was very serious, engagé only about our most private lives.)

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 afternoon thunderstorms. That was the year, my twenty-eight, 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 ever procrastination, every word, all of it.

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That is what it was all about, wasn't it? Promises? Now when New York comes back to me it comes in hallucinatory flashes, so clinically detailed that I sometimes wish that memory would effect the distortion with which it is commonly credited. For a lot of the time I was in New York I used a perfume called Fleurs de Rocaille, and then L'Air du

Temps, and now the slightest trace of either can short-circuit my connections for the rest of the day. Nor can I smell Henri Bendel jasmine soap without falling back into the past, or the particular mixture of spices used for boiling crabs. There were barrels of crab boil in a Czech place in the Eighties where I once shopped. Smells, of course, are notorious memory stimuli, but there are other things which affect me the same way. Blue-and-white striped sheets. Vermouth cassis. Some faded nightgowns which were new in 1959 or 1960, and some chiffon scarves I bought about the same time.

I suppose that a lot of us who have been very young in New York have the same scenes in our home screens. I remember sitting in a lot of apartments with a slight headache about five o'clock in the morning. I had a friend who could not sleep, and he knew a few other people who had the same trouble, and we would watch the sky lighten and have a last drink with no ice and then go home in the early morning, when the streets were clean and wet (had it rained in the night? we never knew) and the few cruising taxis still had their headlights on and the only color was the red and green of traffic signals. The White Rose bars opened very early in the morning; I recall waiting in one of them to watch an astronaut go into space, waiting so long that at the moment it actually happened I had my eyes not on the television screen but on a cockroach on the tile floor. I liked the bleak branches above Washington Square at dawn, and the monochromatic flatness of Second Avenue, the fire escapes and the grilled storefronts peculiar and empty in their perspective.

It is relatively hard to fight at six-thirty or seven in the morning, without any sleep, which was perhaps one reason why we stayed up all night, and it seemed to me a pleasant time of day. The windows were shuttered in that apartment in the Nineties and I could sleep for a few hours and then go to work. I could work the on two or three hours' sleep and a container of coffee from Chock Full O' Nuts. I liked going to work, liked the soothing and satisfactory rhythm of getting out a magazine, liked the orderly progression of four-color closings and two-color closings and black-and-white closings and then The Product, no abstraction but something which looked effortlessly glossy and could be picked up on a newsstand and weighed in the hand. I liked all the minutiae of proofs and layouts, liked working late on the nights the magazines went to press, sitting and reading Variety and waiting for the copy desk to call. From my office, I could look across town to the weather signal on the Mutual of New York Building and the lights that alternately spelled TIME and LIFE above Rockefeller Plaza; that pleased me obscurely, and so did walking uptown in the mauve eight o'clocks of early summer evenings and looking at things, Lowestoft tureens in Fifty-seventh Street windows, people in evening clothes trying to get taxis, the trees just coming into full leaf, the lambent air, all the sweet promises of money and summer.

Some years passed, but I still did not lose that sense of wonder about New York. I began to cherish the loneliness of it, the sense that at any given time no one need know where I was or what I was doing. I liked walking, from the East River over to the Hudson and back on brisk days, down around the Village on warm days. A friend would leave me the key to her apartment in the West Village when she was out of town, and sometimes I would just move down there, because by that time the telephone was beginning to bother

me (the canker, you see, was already in the rose) and not many people had that number. 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.

And even that late in the game I still liked going to parties, all parties, bad parties, Saturday-afternoon parties given by recently married couples who lived in Stuyvesant Town, West Side parties given by unpublished or failed writers who served cheap red wine and talked about going to Guatalajara, Village parties where all the guests worked for advertising agencies and voted for Reform Democrats, press parties at Sardi's, the worst kind of parties. 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.

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I could not tell you when I began to understand that. All I know is that it was very bad when I was twenty-eight. Everything that was said to me I seemed to have heard before, and I could no longer listen. I could no longer sit in little bars near Grand Central and listen to someone complaining of his wife's inability to cope with the help while he missed another train to Connecticut. I no longer had any interest in hearing about the advances other people had received from their publishers, about plays which were having second-act trouble in Philadelphia, or about people I would like very much if only I would come out and meet them. I had already met them, always. There were certain parts of the city which I had to avoid. I could not bear upper Madison Avenue on weekday mornings (this was a particularly inconvenient aversion, since I then lived just fifty or sixty feet east of Madison), because I would see women walking Yorkshire terriers and shopping at Gristede's, and some Veblenesque gorge would rise in my throat. I could not go to Times Square in the afternoon, or to the New York Public Library for any reason whatsoever. One day I could not go into a Schrafft's; the next it would be the Bonwit Teller.

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. I cried until I was not even aware when I was crying and when I was not, I cried in elevators and in taxis and in Chinese laundries, and when I went to the doctor, he said only that I seemed to be depressed, and that I should see a "specialist." He wrote down a psychiatrist's name and address for me, but I did not go.

Instead I got married, which as it turned out was a very good thing to do but badly timed, since I still could not walk on upper Madison Avenue in the mornings and still could not talk to people and still cried in Chinese laundries. I had never before understood what "despair" meant, and I am not sure that I understand now, but I

understood that year. Of course I could not work. I could not even get dinner with any degree of certainty, and I would sit in the apartment on Seventy-fifth Street paralyzed until my husband would call from his office and say gently that I did not have to get dinner, that I could meet him at Michael's Pub or at Toots Shor's or at Sardi's East. And then one morning in April (we had been married in January) he called and told me that he wanted to get out of New York for a while, that he would take a six-month leave of absence, that we would go somewhere.

It was three years ago he told me that, and we have lived in Los Angeles since. Many of the people we knew in New York think this a curious aberration, and in fact tell us so. There is no possible, no adequate answer to that, and so we give certain stock answers, the answers everyone gives. I talk about how difficult it would be for us to "afford" to live in New York right now, about how much "space" we need, All I mean is that I was very young in New York, and that at some point the golden rhythm was broken, and I am not that young anymore. The last time I was in New York was in a cold January, and everyone was ill and tired. Many of the people I used to know there had moved to Dallas or had gone on Antabuse or had bought a farm in New Hampshire. We stayed ten days, and then we took an afternoon flight back to Los Angeles, and on the way home from the airport that night I could see the moon on the Pacific and smell jasmine all around and we both knew that there was no longer any point in keeping the apartment we still kept in New York. There were years when I called Los Angeles "the Coast," but they seem a long time ago.

[1967]